

AN MM ROMANCE
ANTHOLOGY

Anti- Valentine

ANDI JAXON . ASHLEY JAMES . ASHLYN DREWEK
BAILEY NICOLE . BECCA STEELE . BETHANY WINTERS
C. LYMARI . CE RICCI . HAYDEN HALL
ISABEL LUCERO . J.R. GRAY . JESSIE WALKER
MISTY WALKER . NICOLE DYKES
RILEY NASH . T. ASHLEIGH

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS...

This Valentine's Day...the bad boys come out to play...

Get ready for an anti-Valentine to remember in this limited release M/M romance anthology. Seventeen authors have come together to bring you a collection of brand-new short stories with a combination of dark, enemies to lovers, and bully themes.

PLEASE NOTE: As this anthology contains darker themes, stories may contain triggers consistent with the dark romance genre.

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PROM KING

ANDI JAXON

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JONAH

I t's messed up how sexy Roman King is in a tux. I look like I'm pretending to be an adult while he looks like a damn model. It's not fair. At. All. That perfect blond hair that only exists in TV shows, piercing blue eyes that devour me every time he looks at me, and a jawline that could cut glass. No one should be that good looking. Meanwhile, my lanky ass looks like I'm out here serving hors d'oeuvres.

If he doesn't have sex with me while wearing that damn tux, I'm going to be pissed. Make me suck his dick, bend me over the bathroom sink, I don't care.

The gym is decked out with streamers and balloons; the overhead lights are off, but a disco ball is spinning overhead, and music is pumping through the speakers. The middle of the room is clear for dancing, with round tables covered in blue tablecloths placed around the edges. It's loud and crowded, and there are some girls on the dance floor.

Roman leads our little group, with Taylor behind me. Some football players that sit at the lunch table with Roman and Taylor are crowded around a few tables, but I'm surprised when Roman leads us away from them. In the darkest corner of the room, Roman sits with his back to the wall, I sit next to him, and Taylor takes his other side. They chat about football, and I zone out as I look around the space, my hands clasped between my thighs with one of my knees bouncing.

While it's been months since I was the victim of bullying, this is a new situation with the same assholes present, and I never know who's going to try something to win cool points or whatever. Kenton, Kentucky, is not known

for its inclusive roots.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Roman. As much as he hates hiding our relationship, he's in his element in public. He likes being around people, while I'm perfectly happy to be left the hell alone.

He turns his head to peek at me from the corner of his eye, then reaches for me blindly. I grab his hand, and he pulls me closer to him. My stomach tightens uncomfortably, being this close to him where anyone can see us.

"What the hell are you doing?" I whisper-yell in his ear.

His hand lands high on my thigh, and I clench my legs together. "I'm feeling up my date. Isn't that what happens at prom?" He drags his lip between his teeth and looks me up and down.

"What, you into guys who serve appetizers? I don't have a stuffed mushroom in my pocket or anything." I scoff, glancing quickly around to make sure no one is watching us.

"I'll stuff your fucking mushroom . . .," he mumbles at me with a smirk.

"Uck." I roll my eyes at him.

His fingers dig into the muscle of my leg just inches from my dick. The pressure and promise of pain makes me suck in a gasp. His hot breath fans across my neck as he speaks into my ear.

"Are you saying you don't want me to fuck you in this tux?" He bites the lobe of my ear hard for just a second, enough for the sting of pain to make my dick hard. Bastard.

"I hate you," I grumble as he sits back.

He smirks that damn smile at me that sets my blood on fire and makes me want to punch him in the face. "Keep telling yourself that. Maybe one day you'll believe it."

Anna pops up at our table in a crimson red dress, her dark hair twisted up on her head in some complicated curly do. Her smile is huge as she comes around the table and grabs my arm.

Roman's hand slides off my leg as she pulls on me, yelling, "Come on!"

I lock my eyes on his as I'm led to the dance floor.

"I can't dance!" I holler over the music.

"Just move your body!" she yells back over a Katy Perry song.

My cheeks heat as I look around at the people dancing. I can't dance. It's bad when I do.

Anna laughs at my lack of movement, grabs my arms, and starts moving them in the air like one of those inflatable tube men you see outside of car

dealerships. Taking a deep breath, I follow her movements and let her lead my body around. Roman will never let me live this down. Ever.

I dance, horribly, with Anna for a few minutes through the upbeat songs, and more people crowd onto the dance floor. After four or five songs, I'm hot and sweaty.

"I need a drink!" I yell into her ear and push my way through the crowd. On my way to the drink table, I see Roman, sans jacket, leaning against a table closer to the crowd, talking to some jocks and their stupid cheerleader girlfriends. He winks at me and rises to his full height. I pull on the collar of my shirt and reach for a plastic cup on the table full of fruit punch and soda.

"Here," Taylor says, handing me a cup of fruit punch. I notice he's removed his jacket, too, as I chug the drink.

The burn of alcohol makes me cough. "What the hell, dude?"

Taylor tosses his head back and laughs. "Nothing like some Maker's Mark to liven up a party."

"That's awful." I grab a can of soda and pop the top to take a big drink. "Who the hell brought bourbon?"

Taylor's warm brown eyes sparkle with amusement. "Who do you think?"

I sigh. *Damn it, Roman.*

Taylor joins the group of jocks, and I head to our table in the back, pulling my jacket off and hanging it on the back of a chair. It's too hot in this damn gym, and the alcohol isn't helping.

Making my way to the bathroom, I look around and relax when there's no one else in here. Since Roman likes to corner me in bathrooms, it makes me nervous walking into one alone. I never know what his crazy ass is going to do.

I step in front of a sink and turn on the cold water, cupping it in my hand and carefully splashing it on my face to avoid making a huge mess of my shirt. While my eyes are covered, the bathroom door opens, and I tense.

"Oh, Bible Boy," Roman's exaggerated sigh echoes off the tiles, and I quickly drop my hands so I can track his movements. "You make it so easy." The click of the lock on the door has a rock dropping into my stomach. Fuck.

"No." The word is harsh as it leaves my mouth, taking even me by surprise. Roman lifts an eyebrow and stalks toward me, pinning me against the counter. My heart races, and my breath flutters in my chest at the close contact. I should be used to him. How am I still *this* affected by his presence?

“No? That’s cute. When has that ever stopped me before?” His growl in my ear has shivers shooting down my spine. Roman grabs my hands and presses them to the mirror. “Watch.”

“We are not doing anything in here. Anyone can walk in at any time.” My voice is weak as he takes control of my body. I don’t know how he does it, turning me into putty in his hands with a simple touch or look or word. It’s not fair how much control he has over me.

“The door is locked,” he says flippantly, like it doesn’t matter.

His hands dig into my hips through my pants, his eyes locked on mine in the mirror as he leans in and nuzzles the sensitive spot behind my ear.

“Because that’s not suspicious. You can’t fuck me without leaving marks. How am I going to explain that?” My arguments are quickly getting harder to remember. His hands on me make me stupid.

“That sounds like future Jonah’s problem, not mine.”

“Not in here, please.” My eyes flutter closed when his teeth scrape along my neck.

“You’re too clean. I’m going to dirty you up,” he teases, grinding his dick against my ass.

With herculean strength, I push off the mirror and force Roman to take a step back. When I have a fraction of space, I turn to face him, squaring my shoulders and meeting his gaze. He’ll listen if I really put my foot down since I don’t do it often, and I choose my battles very carefully.

“Not. In. Here.”

Roman grips my throat and pulls me against him with a smirk that promises retribution. He drops his lips to almost touch mine, but holds back. I want his lips on mine, but I don’t try to close the gap. It won’t work. His reflexes are faster than mine.

“You’re going to be filled with my cum before we leave this dance.” He flicks the tip of his tongue over the center of my upper lip, his breath fanning across my mouth. I’m painfully hard, and my skin is hot with arousal, knowing he’s going to take what he wants from me. My stomach tightens with tension. What the hell is he going to do? “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper. He takes my mouth in a harsh, hungry kiss for only a second before he adjusts his dick and leaves the bathroom without a backward glance. My face heats when he pulls the door open, and Taylor is standing in the hallway with a knowing smirk on his face.

I tuck my hard-on into the waistband of my pants and leave the bathroom,

ignoring Taylor's smile. Needing time away from Roman to calm my body, I make my way to the outside area the chaperones have set up for us to cool off. It's warmer than I expected it to be. If I was still in Washington, it would probably rain, but it's comfortable out here without a jacket.

Leaning back against the cool stucco of the building, I close my eyes and inhale deeply. It feels so good out here. My skin chills as the sweat dries. It's peaceful out here.

A hand slams over my mouth as I'm spun around to face the wall. My heart pounds in my chest with the fear of being assaulted slithering up my spine. A hard chest is pressed against my back, a forearm pushing against the back of my neck as the familiar scent of Roman's cologne hits my nose.

"There you are." Roman's irritated growl in my ear makes my body sag in relief.

"It was too hot in there, and being around you wasn't helping." I push back and turn to face him.

"You disappeared, and I couldn't find you." He crowds me again until I stand upright. He looks around quickly, then grabs my arm and pulls me past the roped-off area and around the side of the building.

"Stop," I whisper sharply at him, pulling my arm from his grip. "I'm fine. I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm fine. I just needed a minute."

Roman pushes me against the building, into the shadows, then crashes his mouth to mine. He grabs the back of my neck, crushing my body against him. A needy whimper barely escapes my throat at his onslaught. This beautiful, broken boy needs me. My hands tangle in his hair, keeping his mouth on mine. His free hand slides down my stomach and unbuttons my pants, shoving his hand inside to stroke me. I can't hold back the groan that rumbles in my chest at the contact.

"Be quiet before someone hears you," Roman growls in my ear, his teeth nipping at the skin he can reach, never breaking the rhythm of his stroke on my cock.

"Fuck," I moan as my orgasm builds. I'm so fucking close. The threat of getting caught makes this so much hotter.

"Don't come." The command has my brain skidding to a halt.

"What? Why?" My words are filled with frustration at him leaving me hanging. Damn it.

"I'll suck you off later," he smirks at me. I damn near cry at the orgasm he's stealing from me. Damn it. I want to cum.

I'm spun around while I try not to groan at the injustice. The rough plaster of the wall bites into my palms and cheek as Roman pulls my pants down.

"Hands above your head. Arch for me. Gimmie that ass." He smacks my bare skin, and I hear the tear of some kind of package, hoping he brought lube.

The slick head of Roman's cock brushes against my hole and pushes in with no prep.

Shit.

I tighten, lifting onto my toes as I hiss at the burning pain. The lube he applied helping the glide but the stretch is still intense. "Fuck, wait a second."

"You can take it," Roman growls, pulling my shoulders to get better leverage. He doesn't stop or slow down, just fucks into me as deep and strong as he can. My dick leaks at the pain/pleasure combination. I'm going to be sore after this, but the orgasm will be explosive, if he lets me have it.

Moans and grunts are pouring from my mouth. I just can't stop them. Roman slaps a hand over my mouth.

"Do you want to get caught? You want everyone to know how much the good little Bible Boy likes getting his ass fucked?"

All I can do is shake my head as he pounds into me, my knees threatening to give out.

"Are you gonna be a good boy and hush, or does it feel too good when I fuck you to keep quiet?" The patronizing tone does nothing to dim the lust licking my body. Every muscle needs him to let me cum. His hand loosens on my mouth, and I bite my lip to keep quiet, but a groan escapes me anyway.

Roman kicks my feet apart farther, changing the angle, and even I can hear the higher pitch of my whine. My ass clenches around him. I'm desperate to cum, for him to finish, so we can go back inside before someone finds us.

His thrusts become harder and faster for a few seconds before I feel the heat of his orgasm fill me. I'm still leaking precum, hard as a fucking rock, my balls drawn up and ready to explode. Tears run down my face in frustration, while Roman bites my shoulder to muffle his sounds.

"Fuck, your ass feels good." He gives me a lazy thrust.

Roman kisses my neck and the side of my jaw and slips his hand from my mouth. I'm sure there's an imprint of his fingers on my face, but I don't care right now.

He presses against my back and slides his hand down my chest, past my dick to my nuts. I drop my head back on his shoulder and damn near sob through the tears, "Please."

"I love when you beg."

Roman fondles my balls, strokes my dick once, then taps my sac.

"I hate you."

Roman chuckles, biting the back of my neck hard enough to leave a mark. "If only that were true."

Roman pulls out and fixes his pants, sliding his fingers through the cum dripping out of me, then slides his fingers into me. I can't take any more.

Spinning around, I lean back against the wall so he's forced to pull his fingers from me. My cheeks are still damp as I attempt to calm my racing heartbeat. The evil glint in my boyfriend's eyes should scare me, but there's not much he can do to make this worse.

Catching me off-guard, he drops to his knees and takes my dick to the back of his throat. A loud gasp escapes me while my hips jerk forward. Just as quickly as he deep-throats me, he stands and rights my clothes, shoving my angry dick back behind my zipper.

I collapse against the wall, the urge to sob so heavy on my chest it's almost hard to breathe.

"Later, I promise." Roman wipes the tears from my face, then wraps his arms around me until my abused body stops shaking. He kisses my temple and rubs my back.

When my breathing returns to normal, I stand up, checking my clothes to make sure they're straight and that there's no cum showing. Roman lifts my face and kisses me once more, long, deep, and consoling.

"If you don't stop, I'm going to get hard again, and we'll be out here all night," I say with a huff. I hate him.

He smiles at me and laces his fingers through mine, pulling me back toward the dance. Right before we walk into the light, he turns and kisses me again, quickly this time, and drops my hand. We head back toward the gym like nothing happened. Like he isn't my entire world. Like my ass isn't full of his cum.

JONAH

I'm combing my hair with my hands, just for something to do, when two people step outside. I stop short, confused when Mary turns to face me. She's in a pale-yellow dress that's fitted on top and poofy on the bottom. It reminds me of a simple Cinderella dress. Not a lot of frills but perfect for her. Her curly hair is pinned up with some random pieces down to frame her face. She looks beautiful.

"What are you doing here?" I drop my hands from my hair and slide them in my pockets. Taylor stands next to Mary, his eyes flitting back and forth between Roman and me with a look that clearly says *I know what you were doing out here*.

Mary gives me a once-over, shaking her head. Shit.

"I told Mom and Dad I was going to a friend's house to study. Taylor's mom took me dress shopping not long ago and hid it for me at her house. She helped me get ready after you guys left." The smile on her face is huge.

I look at Taylor, who now has an arm around my sister's shoulders. "Did you know about this?"

"Yup."

Roman straightens and steps toward them, shoving Taylor's arms off Mary. "Hands off my girl."

My heart sinks at his words. I know we have to play this game to protect ourselves, but I hate it. He's mine, but I can't say that in public. When we're out of the house, he's Mary's, and I'm the awkward third wheel.

There's movement in the doorway behind Taylor, and I look to see Jared, an obnoxious sophomore who thinks he's a big deal, but he's not.

“Gangbang on the preacher’s daughter?” He smirks, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed, giving Mary a once-over that pisses me off. “Pretty sure I’ve seen that one.”

Everyone turns to look at him, Roman instantly switching from easy going to fight mode; his body tensing, practically vibrating with angry energy as he watches Jared.

“I don’t want to get blood on this tux, but I will if you don’t get the fuck out of here.” The deadly calm tone of Roman’s voice sends a chill up my spine. He’s going to wreck this dude’s face.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Jared throws back, and Roman moves toward him, but Taylor stops him with a hand on his chest.

“Then you’re dumber than I thought,” Taylor says, standing in front of Roman. I reach for Mary and pull her behind me. Honestly, she can probably fight better than I can, but that’s not the point. I don’t want him to even look at her.

“What are you going to do, nerd?” Jared flicks his gaze over me with disdain.

“Don’t fucking talk to him,” Roman snaps out, rushing forward and around Taylor to grab Jared by the lapels of his tux jacket. “What the fuck are you even doing here?”

Jared has the audacity to scoff. “I’m a football player. You think they’re gonna tell me no?”

“You’re third string on the JV team. Not exactly something to brag about, little boy,” Taylor says, rolling his eyes and stepping from behind Roman to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him. Tension is knotting my stomach as I watch. There’s nothing I can do here. Roman and Taylor will handle it, but what version of Roman will I be left with afterward? He can’t start a fight over Jared talking down to me; it gives too much away.

“Ignore him, Roman,” I tell my very agitated boyfriend. “He’s not worth it.”

“Oh, I guarantee knocking his teeth in will be worth it.” I don’t need to see his face to know he’s wearing a terrifying smile. Jared pales a little but not enough.

“Oh nice, are we starting a sausage feast? I think being a cum dumpster will help chill the splooge nugget out.” A voice behind me has me whipping around to see the sheriff’s son, Dylan, coming toward us from the same direction Roman and I had come. Did he see us? It’s my turn to pale.

“What the fuck is a sausage feast?” Jared asks, but no one answers him. To be fair, I’m not entirely sure of the answer, and I’m terrified of what Dylan will say next.

He’s in black jeans with ripped knees and a black hoodie with a jean vest over it that has definitely seen better days; a lit cigarette hanging from his lips and his blond hair hanging in his face. The dude is a punk and gets into trouble a lot, but I think it’s because he’s bored more than anything else.

This is quickly going to become a mess. Dylan drops his cigarette on the ground and stomps it out, then looks at me as he passes, sniffing the air.

“Do I smell cum? Who was fucking and didn’t invite me?” He winks at me as my face flushes, and my heart starts to race. Fuck. This is bad. Mary sucks in a small gasp, and his eyes flick over her for just a second before turning back to the boys at the door.

Dylan smacks Taylor’s ass, and my eyes widen in surprise. What the fuck is this?

Roman looks as confused as I feel, giving Dylan a once-over. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Well hello, power top vibes.” He winks at Roman, who growls at him.

It’s all too much, and I laugh, because seriously, what the hell? What is happening?

“Excuse me, *Daddy*,” Dylan says to Roman, who lifts an eyebrow but steps back. Amusement plays on Roman’s face as he watches Jared get increasingly uncomfortable. Dylan leans into Jared’s space but doesn’t touch him.

Jared grabs Dylan’s vest and pins him against the wall. The smile on Dylan’s face says this is exactly what he was hoping for.

“What’s wrong, Jar Jar?” he mocks as we wait to see what happens next. This is weird.

“You’re a fucking freak. Stay the hell away from me,” Jared snaps.

Dylan wraps his arms around Jared’s neck and jumps to wrap his legs around his waist.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Jared pushes at Dylan, but he holds on tight.

“You don’t want people to think we’re fucking? Interesting.” He’s serious now. “You’re as useless as tits on a boar anyway. Though still fun to play with when the mood strikes.”

Jared pulls back as far as he can, but Dylan leans in and licks up the side

of Jared's face.

“Go annoy someone else before I tell everyone you suck dick better than I do.” He jumps off Jared and shoves him back toward the dance.

Roman's arms are crossed over his chest as he stares at Dylan. The punk says nothing, just gives Roman a head nod and disappears back into the darkness.

What the hell was that? The people at this school are so strange.

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JONAH

We head inside, and Roman disappears on the dance floor with my sister. After going to the bathroom to clean up and dispose of my underwear, I drop into a seat at the table we claimed earlier, and Taylor sits next to me. My ass twinges a bit at the pressure after being abused by my dickhead boyfriend. Why do I love him again?

“You have fingerprints on your cheek.”

I drop my head back with an aggravated sigh, because of course I do. Damn it, Roman. I watch, frustrated, as my boyfriend dances with my sister. They make a good show. It’s so believable that sometimes I question if I’m being played.

Will he ever be in a place where he can claim me in public, or will I be forced to live in the shadows of my damn sister for the rest of my life? The thought forms a knot in my throat, and my knee bounces under the table again.

“Do I smell?” I ask Taylor, who gives me a weird look.

“What?”

I shake my head. “Never mind.” Dylan saw us. That’s a fact that I will have to deal with, but there’s nothing I can do right now.

“Relax, man,” Taylor says, tapping my arm with the back of his hand. “You look like you’re ready to stab them. Chill out.”

“Will it ever be my turn?” I snap out the words without meaning to. This isn’t Taylor’s fault. If I had any sense of self preservation, I would date Taylor instead of Roman, but the heart wants what the heart wants. Taylor is hot, there’s no denying that, but he doesn’t call to me like Roman does. Like

he always has.

“Once you leave here, I guarantee it will be.” Taylor squeezes my shoulder, understanding what I’m going through. He’s the only out gay man in town, and he didn’t come out because he wanted to. He was forced out of the closet, and it almost cost him his life. “He loves you. I wasn’t sure that was possible.”

Roman spins Mary around so her back is to his front, and his eyes meet mine across the room. Through the flashing, colored lights, I can see the irritation for just a split second before he covers it with a smile that fools everyone but me and maybe Taylor.

Don’t get me wrong, I love Mary, and I appreciate what she’s doing for us. If it gets out, she’ll be in just as much danger as us, but it’s hard to see them together when I can’t. She gets to hold his hand in the hallway, kiss him outside of class, sit next to him at the diner. Everyone says how cute they are together, how amazing their future babies will be, while I grit my teeth. I don’t want to resent her, but I do.

A few more songs play before the happy couple grab some drinks and come take a seat at the table with Taylor and me.

Both their faces are flushed and smiling. Roman sits, and Mary drops into his lap as jealousy shoots through me, and I clench my jaw to keep my mouth shut.

“Having a good time?” Roman lifts an eyebrow at me and watches me over the rim of his cup as he takes a drink.

“Oh yeah, tons.” My words dripped with sarcasm. “Can’t you tell?”

Okay, how much of this is because my balls are so blue right now I can’t think straight? Probably a lot.

“Don’t worry, Bible Boy, I’m sure you’ll find some fun later.” He smirks at me, and Mary gags.

“I don’t want to picture whatever it is you’re insinuating.” She mimics leaning over and throwing up.

“Ladies and gents, it’s time to announce this year’s King and Queen, so I need all the couples to the stage, please,” the DJ says. Roman sighs heavily as Mary slips from his lap, and he heads to the stage. The crowd cheers and claps as the four couples find their way up to the front. Three of the couples are actually dating, and Roman and the cheerleader he’s paired with don’t even talk. I have no idea how they were put together or who signed them up for this.

I cross my arms over my chest, my knee bouncing under the table as I stare at my boyfriend on a stage with some girl he isn't even friends with in the spotlight, while I'm shoved into shadows. Mary sits next to me and bumps my shoulder with hers.

"You know he would rather have you up there with him," she whispers.

"That doesn't make this okay."

"A'right, this year's prom King and Queen are . . ." One of the teachers has the mic. The DJ plays a drum roll, and the teacher opens an envelope. "Roman King and Becca Sanders!"

A stupid crown is put on his head. She gets a silk sash and some flowers, everyone goes crazy, and the DJ announces it's time for their dance.

Some stupid love song plays, and the dance floor is lined with students watching Roman dance with Becca. She's all smiles, but he's faking his. As they turn, his eyes meet mine, and I chew on my lip to keep from screaming at the injustice of this. Why the hell am I even here? What was the point? To make me watch him pretend he's straight? I see that every damn day at school.

Movement near the door catches my attention, and I see Dylan standing in the doorway. He watches Roman, then flicks his gaze to me, then back to Roman. He's studying my boyfriend much more closely than I'm comfortable with. I shift in my seat. Should I go talk to him? Ask him what he thinks he knows?

He looks at me once more and nods, then disappears out the door again. That was weird, even for him.

The stupid song finally ends, and Roman makes his way back to us. Mary stands to give him a chair, and he pulls her down onto his lap.

"That girl never stops talking." Roman's aggravated tone makes me feel a bit better.

Taylor laughs and pulls out his phone. "My mom's here." He nods to Mary.

"Okay," she sighs and looks over at Roman, who kisses her bare shoulder. "Walk me out?"

He nods and taps her hip.

We all get up to follow her outside as Roman grabs his jacket off the back of a chair and drops it over her shoulders. He weaves his fingers through hers and leads us out to the parking lot.

Taylor's mom, Krystal, is waiting in the car near the entrance. Roman

opens the door and kisses Mary's cheek as she gets in, and she hands him the jacket. He leans down and waves at Taylor's mom.

"Thank you, Miss Krystal."

"You're welcome. Get on now. Enjoy the rest of the dance."

Roman closes the door and steps back as they drive away. Roman looks at me and shakes his head, then wraps his jacket around my shoulders. My smile is shy when I look at him, sliding my arms through the sleeves. It's a little big on me since he's got wider shoulders and a thicker chest than me, but I don't care. It smells like his cologne.

His hands slide inside the jacket and settle on my lower back, resting his body against mine for just a second. "Why do you look so good in my stuff?"

"Because you're a caveman."

He gives me a real smile, one that only I get from him. "You like it."

I sigh dramatically. "I have no idea why."

Roman kisses my forehead and steps back. "Come on, the dance will be over soon."

He leads us back inside and, even though it's warmer in here, I keep his jacket on. It's stupid, such a small thing, but it makes me feel better. We end up on the dance floor, screwing around and laughing, finally enjoying the night. Even though we're dressed up, we're still idiots.

"A'right, y'all!" the DJ says through the microphone. "It's the last song of the night, so grab your date and get on the dance floor!"

Roman grabs my arm and pulls me across the space as a slow song starts. Taylor is on my heels as I'm hustled into the hallway away from the gym.

"Where are we going?" I ask as Roman stops and pulls his phone out. I turn to look at Taylor, and he winks at me with a smile, then heads back down the hallway away from us.

"Roman?"

"If Our Love is Wrong" by Calum Scott plays from Roman's phone. His eyes meet mine as he slides it into his pocket and steps toward me. He puts his hands on my waist and starts swaying to the music.

Tears spring to my eyes and catch in my throat as I follow his movements and hook my hands behind his neck. In the dark of the hallway, he holds me, moving slowly to the song and singing quietly to me. A tear falls from my eye, but I don't swipe it away. It's a happy tear. Roman leans his forehead to rest on mine, rubbing our noses together with our eyes locked.

He sings quietly. The lyrics saying the words he can't find himself and it

takes every ounce of self-control I have not to sob.

Together, we sing parts of the song that feel right for me too. Telling him what I have with him is the most important thing to me. Neither of us are very good, but it doesn't matter. It's the fact that he knew I would want a dance, that he went to the effort to have a song picked out and planned it with Taylor. In these moments, I'm reminded why I love him and why this hiding shit is worth it. For now.

The song comes to an end, and Roman presses his lips to mine in the softest kiss I've ever had from him. It's sweet and full of love.

A loud "Cah-caw!" echoes down the hallway, and we split apart, laughing. Taylor, clearly being the lookout, cracks me up.

Roman wipes the tears from my face with his thumbs and ruffles my hair, then takes off at a run down the hallway.

"Hey!" I shout and take off after him. I turn the corner only a few seconds after Roman and see Taylor's look of amusement, and he hurries to follow like his ass is on fire. The slapping of dress shoes on the linoleum is loud, and it makes us laugh. We get back to the gym as the lights flick on.

"Come on, let's go home." Roman smacks my stomach with the back of his hand and heads to our table so we can grab our stuff. I give him his jacket back and slide into my own.

Roman wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in, lifting his phone to take a selfie. He sticks his tongue out, Taylor flips off the camera, and I just smile. Roman King is an asshole, but he's mine.

ROMAN

After the dance is over, I drop off Taylor at home and drive us to Kenton Tunnel. It's our spot, Jonah and me. The brick tunnel through the mountain holds memories of getting to know Jonah and Mary. It's one of the only places we can be together and not be constantly on guard.

I pull the bottle of Maker's Mark out of the glove box and sit back in my seat. I unscrew the cap and take a swig, hissing at the burn, and offer it to Jonah.

He looks at me like I've lost my mind but takes it.

"If you don't drink it, you know I will, then who will drive?" I smirk at him.

He rolls his eyes and takes a swallow, coughing and sputtering while I laugh. He's driven my truck before, but I don't like other people driving it.

I dig a can of Pepsi out of the center console and offer it to him.

"I hate you. Why didn't you give me that before?" Jonah takes the can and chugs it.

"Careful, that's the only one I have, and there's a lot of the bourbon left."

He looks at the bottle and frowns. "Why would I drink the whole bottle? It tastes awful."

I lift the center console and crawl toward him, opening his pants with my eyes locked on his.

"No," Jonah shifts and blocks my access to his pants.

"No? What the fuck do you mean, no?" I reach for him, but he blocks me. Again. Now I'm getting pissed. I've barely been able to touch him all goddamn night, and now that I can, he's telling me no?

Jonah puts the soda and bottle down in the cup holders and gets out of the truck, slamming the door behind him. What the actual fuck?

Gunshots sound in the distance, but I ignore them. It's not abnormal around here.

"Where the fuck are you going?" I demand, getting out of the truck to follow him into the tunnel.

"Away from you!" he shouts, shoving me away from him.

I grab his arms and swing his back against the wall covered with spray-painted graffiti and trap him with my body. "You're not going anywhere without me."

"All night, I've had to watch you with other people, pretending I mean *nothing!*" His shout echoes around us. "Why the hell did you even make me go? To torment me?"

"Because I wanted you with me!" I snap back, just as angry with the situation as he is. Does he think this shit is easy for me? That if I had the power to change where we live or the mindset of the people here, I wouldn't?

"How would you like it if I was hanging all over some girl?" he demands, shoving at my chest again. "You'd be pissed and demand I stop! It's not fair that others can touch you and I can't!"

I hate that he's right. I *would* be pissed.

"You are *mine*." I push his chin to one side and suck on his neck. Hard. I know I'll leave a dark bruise, but right now, I need it. I need both of us to see it.

"I hate you," he grits out, bucking his hips. I don't know if he's trying to rub against me or get me to let go of him, but I don't care.

"It would be easier if you did," I tell him, shoving my hand into his pants. He's hard as a fucking rock. "Your dick likes me just fine."

"My dick has terrible taste." He closes his eyes and turns his head away from me.

"Look at me," I growl. I need his eyes on me to see what I do to him.

"No."

"That word is going to get you in a world of hurt," I grit out through clenched teeth with my face pressed to his. "Or hurt so good. I'll let you choose which." I rub my face against his skin like I want to scent-mark his skin and damn the consequences.

His hips rock into my fist, trying to hurry my strokes, but I'm not giving him that. I'm angry too.

“I swear, Roman, if you edge me again, you’re not getting any for a week.” Jonah’s threats are adorable.

“Like I won’t take it while you’re asleep.” I bite along his jaw, and his cock throbs in my hand.

The crunching of leaves makes us freeze, both of us holding our breath. Who the fuck is out here right now? Releasing his dick, I step back and head toward the other end of the tunnel to see if I can find anything.

The wind carries voices from not too far away, and dread drops heavily in my stomach.

“Go get in the truck and start the engine. I’ll be right behind you.” Fear flashes over Jonah’s face in the moonlight, but he does what I say. The voices and footsteps are getting closer. The Boone brothers are coming, and we’ve got to get out of here.

They’ve already assaulted a gay couple once out here and tried to beat us up at my father’s wake when they found us in my father’s office.

Jonah’s track-running ass is faster than me, so I have no doubt he’ll be okay. I rush after him, hoping my footsteps aren’t too loud. My feet pound in the tunnel, echoing on the brick just as fast as my pounding heart.

The dress shoes I’m wearing have zero grip, and I damn near faceplant more than once. I’m a few feet away from the truck when the driver’s door swings open. Thank fuck.

I launch myself into the truck and slam the door while I’m slamming into reverse and peeling out of the parking lot. In the rearview mirror, I see the damn Boone brothers running toward us, all of them carrying shotguns. Jesus fucking Christ.

As we drive through town, I put my hand on Jonah’s inner thigh to remind myself that he’s okay. He grabs the bottle of Maker’s Mark along with the Pepsi and takes a few pulls from the bourbon, chasing it with the soda.

I know tonight was hard for him. Shit like this always is. Acting like I don’t give a shit, like nothing bothers me, is my defense. Nothing can hurt me if I don’t care, but he’s soft-hearted. He feels everything so deeply, and I don’t know how to comfort him. Fuck, I don’t know how to comfort myself, so I use sex to distract us both. I don’t know what I’m doing, and as long as we’re here, there’s nothing else I can do.

He has to watch me pretend to be happy with his sister. We both have to pretend to be straight, be careful not to touch too much or let our gazes linger.

It's dangerous around here if we're caught. What we just ran from is proof of that.

"That Dylan guy knows we had sex at the dance." Jonah's words have ice shooting through me.

"What?" My fingers tighten around the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. That punk is the son of the sheriff. The same sheriff that allows domestic violence to fly under his radar, lets people drive drunk, and as long as it's lining his pockets, doesn't care what happens around here.

"He knows." The gloom in Jonah's voice hits like a knife in my chest.

"I'll take care of it," I tell him, squeezing his leg.

He leans his forehead against the window and closes his eyes for a minute.

"I don't think he's a threat." Jonah is slurring his words as the bourbon hits him. He doesn't drink often, and he's got an empty stomach.

"I'll talk to him," I say again as I pull up to the diner and park. "Come on, let's get some food in you."

"I would rather have you in me," he grumbles, and I chuckle as I open the door and get out of the truck. When he doesn't move to open his door, I do it for him and catch him as he damn near falls out.

"Was that the Boones back there?" Jonah's serious eyes meet mine. I hate the defeat and fear in his face.

"Yeah, it was."

His shoulders slump, and he leans his head back. "Will we ever be safe?"

I step up on the running board so I'm as close to him as I can be in public.

"Just a few more months, then we'll be out of here."

He takes a deep breath and holds it for a minute before releasing it and turning to get out of the truck. But he's still buckled in, so he lets out a drunk squawk as the belt strangles him, and I laugh.

"Jesus, you gotta get your shit together." I unbuckle his seat belt, and he climbs down, stumbling when he hits the ground. I get him standing upright, and he's able to walk into the restaurant unassisted, thank God.

It's pretty busy here with the booths and tables full of students from prom, still all dressed up. There aren't many empty tables as I look around. This was a bad idea.

The girl at the hostess stand, Vicki, looks at me, then glances around the space.

"Mr. King, some of the football team is sittin' in that corner booth in the

back. Looks like they got some room. Otherwise, y'all will be waitin' a while."

I look over and see which table she's talking about. Most of the guys aren't bad, but Jared is over there, and honestly, I still want to rearrange his face. It's not the best idea, but Jonah needs to eat.

"That's fine, Miss Vicki. We'll head home instead." I nod to her and grab Jonah's arm, making him stumble as I turn him around. "Careful there, drunko."

"Roman!" I hear my name, and I sigh as I look over. We can't leave now. They're waving me over. Pulling him behind me to the table, I have Jonah sit down first, next to a girl, Sarah, from the cheerleading team. She's not too bad as cheerleaders go, but she's seen my dick, and I'm sure Jonah doesn't know that. Nor do I want to deal with it. Her light brown hair is curled over one shoulder, and she's playing with it absentmindedly. She gives Jonah an unapproving once-over but catches my glare and turns away.

"Where's Mary?" One of the guys on the other side of the table, Craig, asks me.

"She had to get home. You know how her dad is." I turn back to my menu, but Jared scoffs and mumbles something under his breath.

"What was that, Cass?" I say, my tone sharp. The table gets quiet as everyone watches to see what's going to happen. I've never liked this kid. He's always thought he was tough shit, but he has no idea who he's fucking with.

"So the preacher is worried about his daughter being out with you, but not his son?" Jared meets my eyes across the table like he thinks I won't pummel him right here in the diner.

"Jonah is eighteen and no longer has to live by his father's rules." He's been living with me for months, and most people are aware since he rides to and from school with me, but they don't know exactly why. They won't be told my father is the one who found us and called Paster Cohen, that my father beat me while I yelled at Jonah to run. They won't be told that his father found out he was gay and literally beat him with a bible before kicking him out. No one knows that Taylor's mom took us in, patched us up, and took care of us until my father wrapped his little red sports car around a tree outside the school.

"Your hair is so pretty." Jonah leans too close to Sarah. "I want to touch it."

I grab his arm and pull him against my side.

“Leave her alone.” My tone is harsher than he deserves, but I’m on edge, and the last thing he needs is for rumors to spread that he molested her.

He looks up at me with a dreamy look in his glassy eyes.

“Aww, are you jealous? You have perfect TV boyfriend hair.” Jonah reaches up and runs his fingers through my hair while I raise my eyebrow at him.

“You are so drunk.” I shake my head at him, and everyone laughs.

“It’s your fault.” His disgruntled tone is cute as fuck, but I can’t tell him that or show it. Jared is watching us, and it makes my skin crawl. I’m going to fuck him up if he doesn’t leave us alone.

The waitress brings plates of food and huffs when she notices us sitting here.

“What’ll it be, Roman?” the older woman with fake red hair wrapped into a bun on top of her head asks with a hand on her hip.

“Soup beans and cornbread!” Jonah’s head pops up excitedly. The Appalachian staple food has quickly become a favorite of my West Coast boyfriend.

“Loaded french fries and some waters, please.”

She nods and walks away.

“I’m so hungry.” Jonah drops his head onto my shoulder and rubs his stomach. “Bourbon is gross. Why did you make me drink so much?” Having him touch me in public puts me on edge, but I guess it’s better than him leaning on Sarah.

“He’s awfully friendly with you,” Jared throws my way. Everyone around us, the neighboring tables included, stops and watches.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to insinuate, but tread very carefully.” I want to hit him, to split my knuckles open on his face. Maybe that will finally get through to him.

Jonah groans on my shoulder, but I don’t look at him. I’m too busy watching this fuckstain.

“Dude is lame, and you’re over here cuddling with his drunk ass. It’s not right.” Jared sits back in the booth like he’s won something. “Everyone knows y’all are living together. People might wonder, is all.”

My blood boils, and my hands itch to cause damage. I hate this fucker.

“Start wondering what?” I don’t take my eyes off him, daring him to say it.

He lifts a shoulder but says nothing.

Our server brings our food, and Jonah perks up at the savory scent of the soup beans.

“Hey, King, you going to college this fall?” Craig asks.

“Yeah, UCLA. You?” I pick up a french fry covered in cheese and bacon and pop it into my mouth, watching Jonah eat from the corner of my eye.

“You know I can’t afford all that. I’m gonna work with my dad at the auto shop.”

Conversation flows around us, Jonah getting more animated with some food in his stomach, but Jared keeps watching us. It makes my skin prickle. We’ve been hiding our relationship for months, and I will not let this fuckhead out us because he’s jealous or something.

“Me too!” Jonah says, his eyes huge. “I’m-I’m going too. To-to UCLA.” He’s so drunk I can’t help but smile. He lifts his leg closest to me and tries to hook it over mine, but I slide a hand under the table and block him. As much as I want him all fucking over me, we can’t.

“Eat your cornbread. It’ll help soak up some of that liquor,” I tell Jonah. Luckily, when he’s drinking, he’s less likely to argue with me. He likes when I take control, force sensation onto his body, and let him be free. Later, when we get home, I’ll let him fly, but I can’t here.

We get about halfway through our food when Jonah shifts in his seat. He can’t seem to stay still, and I can’t tell what his deal is.

“Do you need to piss or something?” I finally ask after the fifth time he’s moved.

“Or something.” He wags his eyebrows at me, and I clench my teeth. “Take me home.”

That was *very* suggestive, and everyone around us heard it because he is not quiet.

Sarah’s eyes get wide. A few of the guys look at him like they aren’t sure what they heard, and Jared snorts.

“Yeah, can’t have you puking in here. Miss Vicki would tan my hide.” I stand up, pull my wallet out, drop plenty of cash on the table to cover us, and help Jonah out of the booth.

“Do you need to piss?” I ask him quietly once he’s standing. He sways a bit and nods his head.

“You gonna hold it for him too?” Jared asks as I walk away.

Don’t punch him. Don’t punch him. Don’t punch him.

Jonah stumbles his way into the empty bathroom. He turns on me, crashing his lips to mine in a hot, demanding kiss. His body is pressed against me, hands tangled in my hair. As much as I want to let this continue, I don't know how long it'll be before someone comes in and catches us.

"Hey, hey, hey." I pull my mouth from his tempting one. "Wait till we get home, and I'll wear you out."

A needy moan escapes him, and he drops a hand to rub over his obvious erection.

"Are you commando?" He should not be *that* obvious in these pants. What the fuck?

"Yeah, my asshole boyfriend fucked me without a condom and made a big mess. I did what I had to do." He rolls his eyes and turns away from me to stand in front of a urinal to take care of business. I cross my arms and lean against the wall across from him.

The door opens behind me, and Jared walks in, but stops when he sees us.

"Not holding it for him then." He smirks at me like he's got the right to fuck with me. Like I won't do anything. He's fucking wrong, and I've had it.

I get into his face, my chest bumping against his. "I'm so tired of your shit. Keep running your mouth and I'll do my best to break your fucking jaw."

"So you aren't fucking *both* of the preacher's kids?"

That's it. I'm done.

I slam my fist into his cheek. It catches him by surprise, and he stumbles back, but I'm not fucking done. He swings at me when I come for him again, and he gets my lip, probably splitting it open, but I'm so used to it I barely notice.

I hit him again, getting his nose this time. Blood gushes from it, and he cries out. He cups his nose and drops to his knees as tears fill his eyes. I shove him onto his back and sit on his chest to wail on him as he tries to block me, but he's a shit fighter and always has been. I can't let him talk shit about Jonah or Mary or me. If rumors get around that I'm fucking Jonah, I could lose him. I will die first and take out as many of these homophobic motherfuckers with me as I can.

"Roman!" My name echoes in the bathroom, but I can't stop. I have to protect Jonah.

Someone pulls on my arm, but I shove them off, not looking to see who it is, too lost in the part of my head that demands I end the threat.

My knuckles split open, smearing more blood. Jared manages to get me off him, and we stumble to our feet. He swings at me, hitting me in the back when I turn to block it. He rushes me, pinning me against the sinks, but another hit to the face has him taking a step back.

“Roman! Stop!”

Jonah’s voice pulls my attention for just a second, but it’s long enough for Jared to get a hit to my cheek. The bathroom door opens, and footsteps echo around us before we’re pulled apart.

“Hey, man. Time to go.” A guy on my offensive line, John, has an arm wrapped around my chest, backing me toward the door.

“Jonah!” I snap as I shrug out of John’s hold. Jonah rushes past me to the door, and I aim a death glare at Jared. “You’re fucking done. I’m going to make your life a living hell until I leave.”

I grab Jonah’s arm, pulling him toward the front door. I need to get him out of here.

Outside, the goddamn Boone brothers are standing next to my truck. The youngest brother, Daryl, with a shotgun in his hand. I hate this goddamn town. Jonah runs into the back of me as I’ve come to a sudden stop. How the hell did they even get here? I don’t see their truck in the lot.

“Oh, shit,” Jonah whispers into my back.

Will tonight’s bullshit never end? Everything is stacking against us tonight, and I’m running on fumes.

“Get the fuck away from my truck.” My words are clear and loud enough for everyone to hear me.

“Y’all ain’t welcome here,” Rodney, the oldest brother, says. Everything about him screams dirty. They spend more time in the bar than anywhere else, and their clothes are stained, ripped, and filthy. I can smell the body odor from here.

“I don’t want to die,” Jonah whimpers. A plan forms in my head, and I focus on my terrified boyfriend long enough to give him detailed instructions.

“I’m going to distract them. Grab the gun from under the backseat. Cock it and fire it into the air.” My voice is quiet enough that they don’t hear me. I slide my hand into my pocket and pull out my keys.

When I step toward them, I drop them for Jonah to grab.

“Why do you need three grown men to fight two teenagers?” I move to my left, so they turn away from the truck. “Y’all need to tag team Rodney’s wife to keep her satisfied too?”

That gets his attention, and he comes for me with his face reddening and his chest puffed out. Since it's clear he isn't sober, he trips over his own boots and falls face first onto the blacktop.

"You're pathetic," I sneer, backing up, goading him into following me. The middle brother, James, slides a set of brass knuckles on, then the three of them come at me full force. I have a split second to see Jonah race for the truck before I turn and take off.

Run. Run. Run.

Get them away from Jonah.

Don't get cornered.

Next to the diner is a field no one uses, so I hop the fence, falling on my ass when my shoes skid on the wet leaves. These goddamn shoes are going to get me killed. I would probably be better off barefoot! A shotgun cocks as I scramble back to my feet, telling me the Boone brothers are way closer than I expected.

Someone slams into me, forcing the wind from my lungs when they land on my back. Pain shoots up my leg when my knee hits the ground. The dumbass on me sits up and gives me way more time than I need to roll away from him. James is searching the ground for his brass knuckles when I kick him in the face. He howls in pain as Daryl trips, and his gun goes off. I drop down on instinct but when I look, Rodney is on the ground, and Daryl is yelling for him.

Holy fuck, did Daryl shoot Rodney?

Rodney's lower back is a bloody, gaping mess from the slug that hit him. Chunks of skin and muscle were sprayed at the contact, and he's bleeding out quick. He's not going to make it—the closest hospital is an hour away. I wish I could say I was sorry about that, but I'm not.

Movement in the parking lot grabs my attention. Focusing on it for a second, I can see Jonah is wide-eyed and panting, shaking like a leaf in the wind. Fuck.

I race for him, hoping Rodney is enough of a distraction to keep James and Daryl from noticing me.

When I get to Jonah, he's pale and trembling, the gun shaking in his hand but pointing toward the ground.

"Is-is-is he . . ." His voice breaks.

"He's not dead." *Yet*, I say to myself. He doesn't need to know that it's not going to take long.

Everyone from the diner is now standing around outside, watching us, which means I can't comfort Jonah the way I know he needs. I take the gun from him and turn him around.

"We need to go home," I tell him. "Let's go."

Jonah is in shock, not really seeing anything around him.

"What the fuck happened?" one of the onlookers asks.

"They tried to jump us. Daryl fell, and his gun went off, shooting Rodney." I shrug, not looking back to the field where Daryl and James are yelling. A few people take off to help them.

"And the Cass boy in the bathroom?" The onlooker lifts an eyebrow.

"He fucked around and found out," I say, giving him a pointed look. "Excuse me, I need to get him home."

I get Jonah into the passenger seat, store the gun, and start the truck. The crowd moves out of the way so I can leave. I'm not standing around and waiting for the sheriff. He's the biggest problem in this town.

ROMAN

“Time to get drunk, Bible Boy. Either on cum or booze, let’s see which one is faster.” I hold the bottle up when I close my bedroom door. There are a few shots worth left, which will be plenty for him to get wasted on.

He drops heavily on the bed and drops his head to hands, the shock still riding him hard. I need to break through it, and it’s this or orgasms. I don’t know how to comfort him in a normal, healthy way. Should I offer him a hug? What the fuck is that gonna do? At least with booze or fucking, you can forget for a while. It’s all I know, and honestly, I need to forget right now too.

Setting the bottle down on the bedside table, I unbutton my shirt and drop it to the floor with my jacket. Reaching for his chin, I lift his face so he’s looking up my body to my eyes. His face is just about eye level with my dick, which wakes it up a bit.

His eyes are shiny with unshed tears, and all I can think about is how fucking pretty he looks with tears on his cheeks and my cock down his throat. My dick hardens, and my body tightens with lust as I look at him. The look on my face must tell him exactly what I’m thinking, because his cheeks turn pink.

I pick up the bottle and hold it out to him. “As long as you’re drinking, I’ll suck. You stop, I stop.”

He whimpers but takes the bottle and lifts it to his lips. There’s a good four or five shots worth left in that bottle, and I don’t expect him to finish it, but we’re going to see how far he’ll push himself.

“You’re all bloody and bruised.” His eyes take in my face, and I can only imagine the mess I am right now, but I don’t care. Split lip be damned. I’m fucking my boy tonight and letting myself be comforted by his body.

“Back to the headboard first,” I instruct. Jonah kicks off his shoes, pulls his pants off, and moves around the bed until he’s leaning on the pillows against the headboard. I climb on the bed, settling between his thighs, and drop my head to suck him into my mouth, and smirk when he moans. My lip smarts at the movement, but I ignore it.

“If I finish it, do I finally get to cum?” He takes a drink of the Pepsi I also brought up.

“Yup,” I say quickly before bobbing back on his dick. He’s going to cum, just not right this minute.

Faster than I expected, he finishes the bottle and drops his head back to the headboard. He groans as a bead of pre-cum forms, and I lick it away, the salty flavor assaulting my tongue. I crawl up his body, kiss his neck, then his lips.

“Such a good boy.” I bite his lower lip.

“Please,” he groans, and I stroke him harder and faster until his hips are rocking into me. He’s almost there, the red flush of his cheeks and the whimpering moans are a telltale sign he’s riding that edge of no return. Without warning, I let go of him and slide my hand down to cup his balls.

“I hate you,” he sobs, covering his eyes with his arm and sucking in some deep breaths.

“You’re gonna pass the fuck out when I let you cum and you know it.” I kiss his cheek and pepper his jaw with kisses. I’m only waiting for the alcohol to hit, then I’ll fuck him until he blacks out.

When he looks at me again, his eyes are glassy with liquor, and I smile at him.

“Drunk Jonah is my favorite fuck toy,” I say against his lips. “Drunk Jonah fucks like a whore, with no inhibitions. He’s a dirty, *dirty* boy.”

“Then fuck me,” he demands with the sexual frustration riding him hard. I’ve been edging him all fucking day just to get him to this point, ready to snap and blow a load so hard he’ll see stars. Mindless with pleasure, just the way I want him. He’s about ready to snap.

I open my pants and shove them down to my knees along with my boxer briefs. Gripping his thighs, I pull him down enough to get a good angle on his hole. I take the lube from the drawer next to the bed and make sure my dick

is coated well. Pushing one of his legs up toward his chest, I slide my dick between his cheeks to find his hole and push against it.

He groans when I push inside him, his fingers gripping the sheets as I sink into him. I lean over to kiss him while I fuck him deep.

“You’re covered in blood,” he protests, turning his mouth away from mine.

I grab his chin with my hand and crash our lips together, smearing my blood on his mouth. I barely feel the pain in my lip as I dig my fingers into his cheek to keep him still, taking his mouth in a brutal kiss. The adrenaline of the fight needs an outlet, and I’m going to make it his problem.

He’s squeezing my cock as my hips slam against his ass, and his fingers grip my arms, digging into my skin hard enough to bruise.

I pull from his lips and slide my hand down to his throat, squeezing just hard enough to make him wheeze. His eyes lock on mine, his face and chest flushed red with alcohol and arousal.

“Fuck me, break me,” he rasps. A savage smile turns my lips up. I pull out of him and lift his hip to roll over.

“Hold on to the top of the headboard.”

Jonah lifts to his knees, then grips the wood and holds on. I force his legs wider with my own and grip his hips.

“Arch.” His back curves more, offering his ass like the good boy he is. Dragging my dick through his cheeks, I find his hole and push in, setting a hard, fast pace. I need him desperate and back on the edge. To take my anger and fear and frustration out on his body. He gives me what I need.

I drag my fingers down his chest and bite at his neck, leaving marks on skin that already have them. Jonah pushes back into me, meeting my thrusts with his own. I slap his ass and grin when my handprint appears.

“You’re my slutty boy, aren’t you?” I growl in his ear.

“Yes,” he groans at the change in angle. “Pleasepleaseplease.”

I wrap an arm around his neck and pull him up to meet my chest, his back arching beautifully.

“Stroke yourself. Get there first and you can cum.”

He whimpers and starts tugging on his dick like his life depends on it. At this moment, it probably does. His balls must be so full of cum they’re sore and ready to explode.

His ass tightens around me until it’s almost painful. His groans turn into moans, and his skin heats.

“Come on, Bible Boy, cum for me.” I bite his ear and pull on it as his entire body tightens, cum shooting onto the sheets and headboard as his hand works his dick. I can almost hear his eyes rolling back into his head. Jonah holds onto my arm and drops his head back to moan into my ear.

“Fill me up,” he groans, and I’m done. My orgasm hits me with the force of a Mack truck, and I explode inside of him, breathing hard and no longer sure what year it is.

I drop to my ass, bringing Jonah with me to sit on my lap while I rest my forehead between his shoulder blades and try to breathe.

We sit that way for a few minutes, absorbing the comfort of being skin to skin, post world-altering orgasms.

“I hate that I can’t touch you in public,” Jonah says quietly.

“I know.” I kiss his back, and he lifts off me, my dick slipping out of him as he does. “But we have to be careful. It’s only two more months until graduation and we can leave.” Jonah lays down on the bed looking up at me. “If I lose you, I will die or go to prison. There’s nothing else for me.”

I get up and turn the light off, then crawl back on the bed, hooking my leg over one of his and spreading my body out over his chest.

“I love you, Bible Boy,” I say against his chest.

He sucks in a deep breath, then relaxes. “I love you too, jerk.”

If you would like to read Roman and Jonah’s full story, you can find Bully King: An MM Bully Romance here: <https://books2read.com/u/49VZjk>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andi Jaxon and is one of the most random people you will probably ever come in contact with. Her favorite accessory is rainbows (she has glasses, shoes, wardrobe, and accessories), big hoop earrings, and fake eyelashes (she only recently learned how to put them on). She always has coffee on hand so she can try to keep up with the three minions she's created.

Want to know more about Andi Jaxon? Follow her on social media or subscribe to her mailing list to receive the latest information on new releases, sales, and more!

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SAY MY NAME

ASHLEY JAMES

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TRAVIS BARNES

They say everything happens for a reason. That you're never given more than you can handle. To trust the process. Well, I don't know who *'they'* are, but *disrespectfully*, they can go fuck themselves.

Without lube.

Five years. Actually, five years and four months, to be exact.

That's how long I've spent wasting my time on someone who, at one point, I thought I'd spend my life with. And by at one point, I mean, up until three days ago. Nathaniel Perry came gliding into my life on his magic carpet of lies and deceit during our senior year of college. One public speaking class and several late nights later, he had weaved his way into my heart, holding on for dear life with his promises of a future I so desperately craved. That, and his magical tongue. He knew all the right things to say to win me over. Knew all my insecurities and how to manipulate me using them.

We moved fast; always spending the night at the other's house, weekends frequently enjoyed on the lake or in the mountains, hikes at sunrise, and getting drunk under the stars while talking about the future. When graduation came, it was a no-brainer. We combined our savings for an apartment, taking that next step in our relationship without hesitation. The mundane, everyday tasks became thrilling; grocery shopping together, adopting a dog and bringing her on walks every morning and night, holidays with each other's families.

The first time we said *I love you* was shortly after we moved in together. Neither of us cooked. We were freshly graduated twenty-three-year-old guys who had spent the last four years drinking their body weight in cheap beer

and surviving off Top Ramen and sub sandwiches. We wanted to celebrate getting our new place, so we decided to try our hand at cooking an extravagant dinner. The stove caught on fire, the sprinklers in the entire complex turned on, and the fire department was called. It was a disaster.

We ended up getting takeout, grabbed a six-pack of beer from the convenience store, and laid blankets and pillows out on our teeny-tiny back deck, eating and drinking while searching for the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt. Despite the chaos of what had just happened, nothing had ever felt more perfect. The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could even process what I was saying, and he said them back like he meant them.

And for years, I believed him. For years, I had blinders on, desperately needing and wanting a love I thought he wanted to give me.

After picking the wrong guy over and over again all throughout high school and college, being second best or someone's just for tonight, finally finding someone who picked *me* and said all the right things felt like a breath of fresh air. It felt right. So right, in fact, that I bought a ring a few weeks ago with what little money I had saved from my marketing job, and planned to surprise him with a special evening full of good food, expensive wine, and me down on one knee at the end of the night... for more reasons than one, if I had my way.

Three days ago, Nathaniel was supposed to be in an important meeting at work that would take him well into the evening, so I got off work early and headed home to set up the house—because we just bought a house together six months ago. Except when I got home, the front door was unlocked. Imagine my surprise when I run through the house thinking someone had broken in, only to find my boyfriend—the same man I was hoping would become my *fiancé* that same night—bent over *our* bed, getting railed by some strange fucking man I'd never seen in my life.

The look of shock and immediate shame that splashed Nathaniel's face, paired with the smug, arrogant air this strange man had about him while they came simultaneously with their eyes on me, was enough to make me see red.

Blood red.

I've never been much of a violent person. I'm the peace maker. The people pleaser. But when I took in the scene before me, something came over me. Something feral. I picked up the closest thing near me—a fucking antique lamp Nathaniel's grandma gave us—and threw it at them. Somehow, it missed Nathaniel entirely, but it *did* leave a pretty gnarly gash on the

stranger's head.

Not that I stayed to examine it.

Grabbing Nova, our golden retriever, and packing a quick bag of necessities, I left that house quicker than a crackhead running from the cops. Thank God my best friend from college, Xander, lived a few minutes into town and let me crash at his place. Which is where I've been since.

Haven't gone to work. Haven't showered. Haven't really done anything except sulk in Xander's spare bedroom, questioning how I seem to have the worst luck when it comes to relationships and love.

Knock, knock.

Rolling over, I tug the blankets up to my chin, knowing Xander is coming in whether I tell him to or not. The white wood door creaks as it opens, his sock-covered feet barely making a sound as he crosses the room, then the bed dips as he sits on the edge. He doesn't say anything for long moments, probably wondering how best to deal with me.

"You need to get up today. Maybe take a shower and get out of the house." There isn't an ounce of judgement woven between his words, and I love him for it. If anyone understands what it's like to always be an option, latching onto the first person who shows them the time of day, it's him. He recently went through a break-up, too. It was much more civil than mine, but still stings regardless, I'm sure.

Rolling over so I'm facing him, I groan noncommittally.

Something in his expression softens as he takes me in. "You can't let him do this to you, man." When I say nothing, looking up at the ceiling, he continues. "I love you, Trav, I do. But I think it's time I give you some tough love for your own good."

My gaze leaves the ceiling to lock with his. I don't say anything, but he knows I'm listening.

"For as long as I've known you, which at this point is close to a decade, you've always settled, accepted the bare minimum from men. You gotta fucking stop that shit, man." Letting out an exasperated sigh, he rakes his fingers through the mop of brown hair atop his head. "I don't know why you do this, or why you so clearly don't see your own worth, but it's time to stand tall, dust your damn shoulders off, and move on. And I don't mean with another temporary fix. You let Nathaniel walk all over you, and you were so in the clouds, you couldn't even see it. He'd constantly go out, stay out all hours of the night without so much as a heads-up text. He was always flirting

with people right in front of your face, then gaslighting you when you confronted him. You deserve so much better. If there's anything I've learned in the past six months, it's that maybe it's best to leave college relationships in college. Live and learn."

Swallowing around the tightness in my throat, I listen to him tell me everything I should already know. "*You're a catch.*" "*The right man will treat you with the respect you deserve.*"

Blah, blah, blah.

I *know* I deserve better than what I accept.

I *know* I should be patient and wait for someone who is good for me, not toxic.

But being nothing but second best your entire life, it's easier to accept simply having someone's attention, so you're not alone. It's easier to see the good in someone when they're rolling around in the sheets with you, looking at you like you're the only one they see, than knowing you're not good enough to be someone's first choice. Trust me, I did my fair share of sleeping my way through college. Grindr hook-ups, frat parties that end with me sweaty and horizontal with someone who I mean nothing to... but it got old. I was trying to fill a void, trying to find love in the wrong places.

It was easier to take what I could get. It's why when Nathaniel came around, I held on to him and was okay looking past his flaws—flaws I probably should've run from years ago.

"Listen, I talked to your sister, and she's on her way over."

"Wha—"

Holding up a hand, he continues, cutting me off. "She's on her way over, and the two of you are going to spend the afternoon apartment hunting. And no, before you even try to say it, it isn't because I don't want you here. It's because finding a place for yourself will help you heal. It's the first step in moving on."

When I make no move to get up, he stands, ripping the blankets off me.

"Jesus Christ, man. You're fucking ripe." Waving a hand in front of his nose, he adds, "Now get the fuck up and take a shower. She'll be here in twenty."

Downtown Desert Creek in January is a frigid bitch. It hasn't snowed yet this season, but I know it's coming. Hot puffs of air form white clouds in front of me as Charlotte and I walk along the sidewalk.

"You want to talk about it?" My sister has always been too intuitive for her own good. That said, I do think Xander filled her in on my *situation*.

"Not really," I mumble, shoving my hands into my pockets.

In my peripheral, I see her glance over at me, but I don't dare look. She has this innate ability to get people to spill their guts, whether they want to or not. She's like a leopard—avoid eye contact at all costs or else she pounces.

"Okay, well, when you're ready," she mutters softly, but leaves it at that. "I found three nice choices for us to check out. They're all within a five-mile radius of your work, and not too overpriced."

We stop in front of a new looking white building. It's small, compared to other apartment complexes, sitting on the street next to a Dutch bakery and a Starbucks. Glancing over at Charlotte, her green eyes sparkle as she offers me a small smile, presumably meant to be reassuring.

The place isn't half bad. It looks clean and well kept. There're elevators, which is nice since the available unit is on the third floor. It's got hardwood floors, with only carpet in the bedrooms—there are two—and the kitchen looks renovated, with granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. Even the stove is gas powered, which is another plus.

"Whatcha think, Trav?" Charlotte comes up behind me, looping her arm through mine.

"It's nice." It's not the four-bedroom house with a yard I just bought, but I don't say that. "I'll take this one."

Her eyes widen. "Really? Don't you want to see the other two?"

"Not really," I resign. "This one's nice, and I'd rather get it over with."

So, we go back downstairs with the leasing lady, and I sign the lease with plans on moving in this weekend.

Xander's words ring in my head. "*Step one to moving on.*"

TRAVIS BARNES

Every single time I move, I swear to myself it's the last time. It's such a tedious, exhausting task. It costs a fucking fortune for no goddamn reason, and if you aren't able to wrangle some friends into helping out, you have to shell out even more money for overpriced movers.

Thankfully, my sister, her husband, and Xan all offered to help me get moved into the new place. My mom and her husband are puppy sitting Nova for the next four nights while I get settled in. We're on our last load now, bringing it up in the elevator. Sweat drips down my nape, lines my forehead, and my shirt sticks to my back as I set the very last box down in my unfurnished new dining room. The help is appreciated, but man, I can't fucking wait until they leave so I can take a shower.

Xander strolls through the place, looking in the cabinets and fridge in the kitchen, turning on the lights to all the rooms. "This place is nice."

"Yeah, it's not bad."

My mood's been shit all day, and not just from the stress of moving. I had to pick up the rest of my stuff from the house this morning, and Nathaniel said he wouldn't be there. Of course, when I pulled up, he was. Can't count on his word for anything, I guess. He wanted to talk, but I didn't. An argument started, excuses started rolling, and my temper steadily rose for the entire forty-three minutes I was there.

And yes, I counted.

Charlotte's husband, Greg, sets down a box labeled 'kitchen,' wiping his hands off on the front of his jeans. "That's it, man."

He's a nice enough guy. A firefighter. My sister met him at work some

odd years ago when the elevator got stuck. He “*rescued*” her from death—her words, not mine. They got married a few years back in Tahiti. Nathaniel was my date. It was our first out of the country vacation. He flirted with the venue’s bartender that night. Should’ve been a bright red flag indicating what’s to come.

Char steps up to me, a smile pulling at her lips. “Want us to order some Chinese?”

Shaking my head, I rake a hand through my mop of blond hair. I’m due for a haircut, but *priorities*. “Nah. You guys can go. Thank you for all your help. I’m going to shower, and then spend the evening unpacking.”

“You sure?” With one thick, dark eyebrow quirked, she studies me. Most likely seeing right through me. “I don’t mind staying to help, baby bro.”

Pulling her into a hug, I reply with as much gumption as I can muster up. “I’m sure. I’ll be okay. You should enjoy what’s left of your Saturday.”

“Okay...” She grabs her purse and phone from one of the boxes in the living room. “Well, if you need anything at all, call me.”

Fifteen minutes and one scalding hot shower later, I decide to grab some food from one of the places down the block. My stomach’s grumbling. I haven’t eaten anything since last night. The chilly night air slaps me in the face as I step outside. Throwing my hood over my head and shoving my hands into my pockets, I head left toward a Mexican place I know is down there. Temperatures have dropped, and tiny snowflakes cover the quiet streets in a thin blanket of white.

The restaurant isn’t busy, most likely due to the weather, so I’m in and out relatively quickly. On a whim, I decide to pop into the convenience store across the street from my place, grabbing a couple of six-packs for good measure. Getting drunk and unpacking go hand-in-hand, right?

Crossing the street, I pull open my building’s door, shaking off my head once I get inside. The snow’s coming down thicker now. I wouldn’t be surprised if it stuck overnight. My phone chimes in my pocket once I’m inside the elevator. Juggling the food and the beer in one hand, I take it out, swiping across the screen.

NATHANIEL:

Can we please talk? It meant nothing, and it’s hardly something to lose so many years over.

And just like that, my blood pressure shoots through the roof.

ME:

I'm good. Find somebody else to fuck over. Lose my number.

If it weren't for the fact that we had to figure out what to do with the house we own together, I'd block him completely. But we either have to sell it or, at the very least, get my name off the title. All of which require me to communicate with him.

Not tonight, though.

The elevator dings hitting the third floor, the doors sliding open. I climb out and hang a right, walking down the narrow hallway toward my unit. It's all the way at the end. As I get closer, I notice the neighbor directly across from me is outside—coming or going, I'm not sure. Even though I'm not in the socializing mood, I decide to do the nice, neighborly thing and introduce myself.

“Hey, man. I'm Travis, your new neighbor.”

The guy, tall and built, glances over at me, and my blood turns to ice. Slightly bloodshot, hooded green eyes lock with mine. They rake boldly down my form before dancing their way back up. A sinful smirk tugs on the corner of his full, cherry red lips as he shifts, his whole body facing me.

I immediately regret being fucking neighborly.

“Hi, Travis.” His voice is deep, raspy. Sexy enough to get under my skin and make my skin crawl. *This cannot be happening.* “So nice to formally meet you. The last time was a little... *rushed.*”

Rushed. Who the fuck does this guy think he is?

“Do you live here?” I snarl, taking a step back.

“Sure do, *neighbor.*” He practically purrs the last part, his accent making it sound like a dirty word.

How is it possible that, of all the places in Desert Creek I could've moved into—a town purposely *outside* of Pullman, where Nathaniel and I lived together—I picked the one across the fucking hall from the guy who helped upend my entire life just last week? What kind of cosmic fucking joke is this?

Shaking my head in disgust, I turn, pulling out my keys to unlock my door. “Unbelievable.”

As soon as I get the key into the lock, I feel him. The hairs on the back of my neck raise as he stands close enough that I can smell his spicy cologne

and feel his hot breath on my skin.

“Mateo.” That must be his name. I don’t move, and I say nothing. “Welcome to the building, *cariño*. If you ever need *anything*—a cup of sugar, some flour, to let off some *steam*—don’t be shy.”

He steps back, cool air hitting my back in the absence of him. Only once I hear his door shut, do I exhale the deep breath I was holding. *Cariño*... what the hell does that mean? Pushing open my front door, I kick it shut behind me, furious at his cockiness. How fucking dare he.

Does he have no shame?

He is caught with his pants around his ankles—quite literally—with my boyfriend, and he has the fucking *nerve* to make a pass at me. And that fucking smirk... so full of arrogance. I should’ve decked him right in his smug fucking face. A face that, of course, is full of sharp lines, high cheekbones, and ridiculously perfect features. Because why wouldn’t he look like a fucking model?

With my appetite officially gone, I shove the food into the fridge before cracking open one of the beers I’m now even more thankful I got. I wish I had gone to the dispensary this afternoon... could really use a fucking joint right about now.

TRAVIS BARNES

Fuck!

Those twelve beers I pounded last night are coming back to haunt me. The daylight is pouring in from my bedroom window because I haven't had a chance to hang my blackout curtains yet. I haven't had time to do anything but get shitty drunk and feel sorry for myself. Vaguely, I remember downloading Grindr. I don't even know why, because a random hook-up is *not* what I want. The app was deleted an hour after it was downloaded, anyway, because I stumbled upon Nathaniel *and* my annoying fucking cocky neighbor on there.

Must be how they met.

It's actually infuriating how good-looking Mateo is, and he knows it, too. He's gotta be Mexican or Puerto Rican, or something similar. His perfectly dark, bronzed skin tells me as much, as does his accent. He probably bags a lot of ass that way. He talks to them in his deep, sultry voice, rolls his Rs in that sexy fucking way, and suddenly they're rolling around for him.

Asshole.

It's not only his voice that he's got going for him either. It's his eyes... they're so bright, yet pale. Almost mint green. And it's also the tattoos. He was wearing a jacket last night, but they snaked up his neck. He even had some on the side of his head where it's buzzed short. I just know if he were to take his clothes off, they'd cover every inch of him. He was mostly dressed when I walked in on him in my house—my *old* house—so, that doesn't tell me much. His beard is short and thick, perfectly manicured, just like his eyebrows. There's a hoop in his nose, and his lips are plump, the bottom one

more so than the top, and prominently red. *Kissable*.

It's no wonder Nathaniel let him fuck him. He's the poster child for tall, dark, and handsome. How could I ever have competed with all *that*?

My blond hair is chaotic, never sitting right. I'm sure if I glanced in the mirror right now, it'd look like I stuck my finger in a light socket. And my eyes are plain blue. Which yes, a lot of people *do* seem to like blue eyes, but they aren't a shimmering mint fucking green that practically radiates off tan skin. And speaking of skin, mine's about as pale as it can get without being translucent. I'm nearly as tall as Mateo, only an inch or two shorter, but where he's all beefy and built, I'm lanky and lean. Now, for the sake of being fair, I *can* admit, I'm not totally out of shape. A vague six-pack is visible, and my pectorals *are* nice. But still, he's... absolutely everything I am not.

What the fuck am I doing? Comparing myself to a fucking douchebag? This is pathetic.

Rubbing both my closed eyes with my fists, I roll out of bed and immediately regret doing so. My head throbs, like someone's playing ping-pong inside my skull. Except the ping-pong balls are rocks. My throat is so dry, if I don't guzzle some water soon, I'll probably turn to dust.

After taking the world's longest piss, I pad out into the kitchen. My glasses aren't unpacked yet, and I don't feel like doing that right now. So, instead, I turn the faucet on, sticking my mouth under it and drinking straight from the source. I've got a lot to fucking do today. I'm back at work tomorrow, and I don't feel like doing any of this after I get off.

The grumbling of my stomach reminds me that I never ate last night. It also reminds me of the Mexican food I have in the fridge. While I heat up the chicken enchiladas with beans and rice, I scour the apartment for the phone I've seemed to misplace. It wasn't on my bed or on the floor beside it when I woke up, either.

The microwave dings after a minute and a half, and I give up. I can find the stupid phone later. The aroma coming from the kitchen smells so fucking good; I'm practically salivating by the time I walk back in there. Thank God they provided plastic silverware, because I do not feel like going through my boxes to find mine.

Not even ten minutes later, I'm shoveling in my last bite, and just as I figured, it was fucking delicious. Tossing the garbage in the can beside the counter, I meander into the bathroom. May as well take a shower before I get to unpacking. Flicking on the light, I notice my phone sitting on the counter.

Hmm. That's where that went.

Opening up Spotify, I turn on my playlist, moving to start the shower. *Love Note* by Whynotcordell starts playing, the room quickly filling with steam and the slow beat of the song. Ridding myself of my clothes, I kick them into the corner before stepping under the stream. The hot water feels good on my achy muscles as I hang my head and let it beat down on my body for a few minutes.

For a brief moment, I allow my mind to wander to everything that's happened in the last few weeks. At how different my life is now than it was almost a month ago, when I thought I was about to get engaged. It's crazy how things can change in the blink of an eye. How a future you were so sure about can fade like it meant nothing. I'm sure in a month or two, I'll realize it was for the best, but for now, it just fucking hurts. No matter how much I'd like to pretend it doesn't.

Turning the water off, I climb out, toweling off before rummaging through a box in my room for some clean clothes. I end up settling on a pair of white sweats and a black tee. I need to get a move on the unpacking, otherwise I'll be doing it all day.

But... some more beer *would* make the task a little easier, right?

Yeah.

Finding some socks, I pull them on before pushing on my black Nikes. My black puffer coat is draped over the back of my couch, so I slip into that and grab the keys off the counter, shoving them into my pockets. I gotta admit, it's awesome having a convenience store across the street. Almost everything I could need is within walking distance, which is even nicer since gas prices are atrocious.

The hallway outside my apartment is quiet, not a soul in sight. Stepping into the elevator, I press the main level, reaching into my pocket for my phone. Only... *shit*. I must've left it in the bathroom. The doors slide closed, and I start my descent. Oh well, I'll only be gone ten minutes at most. I'll just get it once I'm back.

Once I reach the bottom floor, I step out, the lobby as dead as my hallway. *That's weird*. Where is everyone? It's a Sunday. The answer quickly slaps me in the face, though, when I round the corner and get a good look at the outside.

Shiiit...

It's like a fucking blizzard out there. The light snowfall from last night

clearly picked up its speed. There's gotta be at least six or more inches in front of the door, and it's coming down *hard*. I can't even see across the street. I can't see *anything* other than white.

Guess I'm not getting beer after all. Thankfully, my mom agreed to keeping Nova for a few days... she hates driving in the snow.

Heaving a sigh, I spin on my heels, heading back toward the elevator. When I get back up to the third floor, I stroll down the hallway, thankful I don't run into douchebag Mateo again. Twisting my door handle, I groan when it's locked. My old place, the door wouldn't lock unless you did it manually with the key, but this one locks automatically. Which seems like a safety hazard, if you ask me, but what do I know? Grabbing my keys out of my pocket, I fish through them, looking for the new house key.

Throwing my head back, I groan audibly because, *of fucking course*, I forgot to add the new keys to my ring.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

And my goddamn phone is inside too.

"Fuck!"

At the sound of a door opening, my spine steels, and I refuse to turn around. I already know who is standing there behind me, probably looking smug as fuck.

"What's got you shouting out here, *cariño*?" His voice is full of gravel, like he just rolled out of bed. It has no right being as fucking hot as it is.

Still, I don't turn around. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with," I growl.

I feel, more than hear, him step closer to me. He smells faintly of marijuana and cedar. His warmth radiates off him, wrapping around me like a blanket I don't want. A brown, heavily tattooed arm rests on the door beside me as he brings his lips right beside my ear. "What's wrong, baby? Locked out?"

Spinning around, I shove him, finding sick satisfaction when he stumbles before finding his bearings. "Get the fuck away from me," I snarl.

The sound of his gruff chuckle washes over me, goosebumps forming all over. "Oh-ho, he's *feisty* today." Resting his arm against his doorway, he crosses his arms over his broad chest. "You call the landlord yet? A locksmith?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I left my phone inside." His smug grin grows, dimples poking out and taunting me, further inflating my

annoyance. “I was only planning on running to the convenience store before I realized the weather.”

“You know, I *do* have a phone you could use if you ask nicely.” His eyes darken as he drags his gaze over me once more.

“Oh, how fucking generous of you,” I deadpan, rolling my eyes.

He shrugs. “I can be,” he chirps, throwing me a wink.

“Yeah, well, thanks, but no thanks. I’d rather ask one of the other neighbors.”

Spinning on my heel, I head down the hall, determined to get back into my apartment as fast as possible to get away from this asshole.

“Three out of the four other apartments on this floor are vacant,” he calls out after me. “The fourth belongs to Miss Sheri Lee, retired nurse and widow who spends every single winter in her condo in Arizona.”

God fucking damnit.

Slowly and begrudgingly, I turn to face him, my scowl deepening as his smirk spreads. “You may as well suck it up, *cariño*, and use the damn phone.”

I *hate* that he’s right. What am I going to do? Be stubborn and sit outside my apartment until the snow clears? That could be days. But the thought of using anything of his, taking him up on any offer he has, makes my blood fucking boil.

Stomping over to him, I hold my hand out, palm up. “Fine,” I grumble as he slaps it into my hand.

“Atta boy.” He shakes the hair on my head messily. “Maybe you’re not so stupid after all.”

“You’re a fucking prick, you know that?”

“I do know that, baby. But one day, you’ll find it endearing. Trust me.”

“Stop fucking calling me baby and whatever the fuck *cariño* means.” Of course, I butcher the pronunciation of that word, saying it much less sexy than it sounds rolling off his tongue.

Based on the way his lip tugs into a crooked grin, I’d say he noticed it, too. “Just make the damn call, you stubborn fool.”

Ten minutes later, I’ve called every single locksmith within a twenty-mile radius. Every single one saying they can’t make it out due to the weather conditions. To make matters even better, my landlord—who lives in the building—just so happens to be out of town this weekend.

This can’t be fucking happening.

The icing on top of this blizzard cake is that the window in the hallway is fucking broken, so it's probably close to twenty degrees where I'm standing, and not even the puffer jacket is keeping me warm. At this point, call me Count fucking Olaf because this is a series of unfortunate events if I've ever heard of one.

Dragging my gaze back up to Mateo, I hand him back his phone, already knowing what he's going to say next. And I fucking hate it.

"You could come inside and wait out the storm." He motions inside with one of his hands. "I don't bite... hard."

"Please!" I cough up a laugh. "Like I would ever have sex with you. Do I look that desperate?"

The humor in his expression vanishes, replaced by anger as he stalks toward me, backing me up against my door, boxing me in with his arm as his other hand wraps around my throat, squeezing just enough to startle me. "Let's get one thing straight, *estúpido*... I said you could come inside and wait. I said *nothing* about *fucking you*." He steps back just enough to give me a once over with a disgusted look in his eyes and a curl to his lip. "And I'd say you are, in fact, pretty desperate, so maybe don't bite the hand that fucking feeds you, boy."

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I avert my gaze, feeling like a fucking idiot. He squeezes my throat a little tighter, my eyes snapping to meet his.

"How about we try this again with some manners this time, shall we?" His hands are removed from my body, and he takes a step back, putting some much-needed distance between us. "Would you like to come inside and wait out the storm, or would you rather sit out here and catch hypothermia?"

Clearing my throat, I run a hand through my hair. "Uh, sure. I'll come in," I say, barely above a whisper. "Th-thanks."

MATEO ROJAS

Like a hawk hunting his prey, my eyes never leave the sight of Travis as he wanders around my apartment, nervous and uncomfortable. It's been ten minutes, and he hasn't sat down once. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thrilled by the fact that he's locked out of his place and had no choice but to come into my house. *The enemy*. I know that's how he views me. It's in the way his eyes narrow as he takes me in, lips pinched into a thin line. The way he not-so subtly scoffs or groans under his breath anytime I speak to him.

Not that I blame him. I'd probably be a little miffed, too, if I caught my partner fucking around on me. He's directing his anger in the wrong direction, though. When I met Nathaniel on Grindr, I had no clue he was in a relationship. I may be a dick, but I don't frequently make a habit of fucking men who aren't mine to take.

One thing's for sure... I'm going to enjoy fucking with him while he's here. We're trapped. Why not have a little fun? Sauntering into the kitchen, I pull open the fridge, glancing over to where he's pacing in front of my couch. "Want something to drink?"

His head snaps up, like he's lost in thought and forgot where he was. The scowl that's ever-present around me slides firmly into place as he stops pacing, arms crossed over his chest. "No, I don't want anything to drink," he huffs.

Shrugging, I chuckle as I reach for a beer. "Suit yourself, man." I twist the cap off, tossing it in the trash as I bring the bottle up to my lips, letting the crisp liquid fill my mouth.

Setting the bottle on the counter, I amble across the space into my

bedroom. This entire situation could use some weed, and I'll bet he won't turn *that* down. I know he smokes. There was a bong on the coffee table when I came over to fuck Nathaniel, and he told me it wasn't his. Figured he had a roommate. I grab the red and black box off my dresser. It's ugly as sin, but it belonged to my mom before she died.

After plucking out one of the Js I rolled this morning and a lighter, I make my way back out to the living room. His eyes—pale blue and narrowed—track my every move until I'm right in front of him. With the joint between my teeth, I flick the striker on the red lighter until the flame ignites, holding it on the end of the rolling paper until it glows red.

The earthy, sweet taste of marijuana sits heavy on my taste buds as I take a couple of hits, holding it out for him. "Want some?" Exhaling the smoke, I can't help the grin that forms on my lips. He *wants* it, but he also wants to say *no*. An internal war with himself I love to see. "Come on, *cariño*. It's just some weed. It'll help you relax, so you're not such a buzzkill."

His grimace deepens as he takes it from me. The black polish on his nails is chipped and worn, the skin around the nails picked at. Taking a hit, his nostrils flare, accentuating the black hoop in his left one. It's fucking hot. *He's* hot, and as his pale pink lips purse around the filter, a sudden image of how he'd look with those same lips wrapped around my cock flashes in my mind.

I wonder if I could get him to let me fuck him... I know his ex is a switch. It said as much on his Grindr profile. Is Travis a switch...?

We pass the weed back and forth for a while until it's almost gone, nothing on my mind except that thought. It'll probably be somewhat of a challenge at first. He thinks he hates me after all, but hate sex is always the best, isn't it? Taking one more hit, I stroll into the kitchen, putting the joint out and throwing it away, before grabbing my beer off the counter.

I plop down on the couch, my gaze sizing him up. "You need to relax, man."

He glares at me, the blue of his irises now accompanied by red as the effects of the weed become evident. "Don't tell me what to fucking do, *man*." He mocks the last word, and I can't help but chuckle.

Standing to my full height—which truthfully, isn't *much* taller than him, but I have a couple of inches on him—I step up to him, hand wrapping around his throat as I push him until his back hits my wall. The air is knocked out of him, and I feel his Adam's apple bob as he tries to swallow around the

constriction.

With my grin wide, I bring my mouth right by his ear, feeling a shiver rack through him in the process. Keeping my voice low, I ask, “But what if I want to tell you what to do, baby?” Goosebumps erect over the flesh on his neck as I continue. “Want to know what I think? Don’t worry, I’ll tell you,” I taunt. “I think you *need* someone to tell you what to do. I think you’d *crave* it, giving up control.”

Pulling back, but not removing my hand from his throat, I run my gaze over his face. There’s a faint pink splashed on his cheeks and his bloodshot eyes are heavy. Once again, his hands come to my chest, shoving me away, but this time I’m prepared for it. I don’t move.

“You have no fucking idea what you’re talking about, asshole,” he snarls.

A smirk pulls on my lips before I run my tongue along the bottom, relishing in the way his eyes track the movement. “It’s no wonder your man cheated on you,” I growl. “You’re fucking bitter and boring.”

His eyes narrow, lips parting like he wants to give me a rebuttal, but he remains quiet.

“Maybe if you let yourself have some fun, you’d feel better.” Stepping back, I shamelessly drag my gaze down his body before meeting his eyes once more. “Let me make you come, *cariño*. Bet you’d be in a better mood.”

This time when he shoves me, I let him. The thrill pulsing inside me at his fury is undeniable. My dick’s already so hard inside my pants, and we’ve barely gotten started.

“I’m not boring or bitter,” he barks, stepping closer to me, a finger shoved toward my face. “You’re just a fucking asshole who doesn’t understand boundaries.” When I say nothing back, simply smiling, he continues. “And you’re not even that attractive. I doubt you’d be able to satisfy me, anyway. Guys like you are always selfish.”

There’s so much I could say, but I don’t. Instead, I just reply with, “Prove it.”

He swallows hard. “W-what?”

“Let’s prove how much I *can’t* satisfy you, Travis.” I push my hands into my jeans pockets as he stands there looking wildly uncomfortable. “Let’s see if you’re right. You aren’t,” I add. “But we can humor you for the sake of being fair.”

He shuffles anxiously on the heels of his feet, the entire space quiet save for the ticking arm on the analog clock behind him. “How would we do

that?”

“Let me make you feel good.” *Come on, cariño. Give in. Give it to me.*

His brows pinch together. “That’s all?”

“That’s all,” I repeat. “*But* we play by my rules. This is my house, my bet. We do things my way, got it? But if I’m right, and you enjoy yourself, you have to let me take you out sometime.”

“Why would I do that?” He crosses his arms over his chest, but the temptation is in his eyes.

“Why not? Are you scared?” I taunt as I reach down and adjust myself, his gaze zeroing in on it.

“I’m not fucking scared.”

Stalking toward him, I back him into the wall once again, this time with my hands not touching him. “Prove it, then, *cariño*. Prove how not scared you are.” Our faces are mere inches from each other, his breath fanning my lips, chest rising and falling in rapid succession. I know if I touched his chest, his heart would be pounding beneath the surface. “*Submit. To. Me.*” The words come out as a thunderous growl, snapping his resolve as his lips crash against mine.

TRAVIS BARNES

His lips *devour* mine, hungry and ardent.

His tongue annihilates all logical thinking.

And when his hard, muscular body presses against mine, pinning me farther into this wall, an electric current sets off in my veins, demolishing any reserves I may have had minutes ago.

This is a *terrible* idea. Probably one of the worst I've ever had. But where has playing it safe ever gotten me? So, for tonight... just this once, I'll make a deal with the devil. I'll play his sinister games and reap the benefits. It's my turn to be selfish. I've always been the one used up and thrown away, but this time, I won't be disposable. This time, when I get mine, it'll be *me* deciding to walk away.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when sharp teeth chomp down on my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood, a hiss escaping me a second before Mateo's tongue glides across it soothingly. When he pulls back, the grin curled on his lip—slick with our shared saliva and my blood—is half smile, half threat.

He uses the pad of his thumb to wipe his lip off, sucking it clean seconds later as his dark, tumultuous eyes lock on mine, one perfectly manicured brow arched in question. "I take that as a yes, then?"

Despite being harder than I've probably ever been in my life, I roll my eyes, groaning. "*Fine*," I grit out. "But only this one time. After the snow melts and I go home, we pretend this never fucking happened."

His bright eyes fucking *gleam* with arrogance as he watches me. "Oh, baby, it's cute that you think you'll be able to walk away from me once we're

through.” Bringing our bodies flush again, he nips along my jaw before he continues. “I’ll be your worst goddamn nightmare, your new drug of choice, *cariño*.”

His words send a shiver down my spine as my cock throbs behind my sweats.

Reaching up and threading his fingers through my hair, he yanks my head back, exposing my neck to him. His teeth sink into my flesh as I cry out, my hips instinctually thrusting forward to meet his. My skin feels like its connected to a live wire, everywhere he touches lighting up in response. A low groan bubbles out of me as he sucks on the spot he just bit, both elevating the pain and undoubtedly leaving a mark.

Should I care? Yes, probably.

Do I care? Not one bit.

When he speaks again, it’s throaty and hoarse. “I’m going to *cut* you open, wring you dry, and when you finally manage to escape my claws, you’ll be crawling back, *begging* for more. You’ll leave here a fucking fiend for the way I’ll make you feel. I promise you that.”

My mouth’s so dry, I don’t think I could talk even if I knew what to say. He uses my silence as an invitation, though, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth before thrusting his tongue inside, licking along my own. I groan as I feel the barbell running through his tongue, and the way it feels tangling with mine.

I wonder where else he’s pierced...

One minute his lips are wrecking me, and the next I’m left standing there, head in a cloud as he saunters into a room, presumably his bedroom, leaving me to follow.

Stumbling inside, my jaw drops, taking in the space before me. It looks like I’ve walked into a dungeon. The entire back wall facing me is painted black. In front of the wall is his *massive* four-post, king-size bed. It’s medieval style, tall—nearly as tall as the ceilings—and made of dark wood. There’s a built-in shelf above the headboard, tall enough that it wouldn’t bother you if you were sitting up, that’s holding black and red candles, all various levels of melted down. Unlit. The bedding is crimson and black, and in front of the bed is a black leather chest full of God knows what.

My gaze slides anxiously from the bed to where he’s standing in front of a dresser made from the same wood as the bed. His grin is depraved and full of mischief, dimples poking out, only adding to his sex appeal. Reaching a

hand behind his head, he pulls his shirt off, letting it fall to the floor beside him. His entire chest is covered in ink, all black and shade, and he has two tiny bars running through his nipples.

His body is *cut*. Sharp, defined lines, deep divots making up his eight-pack, and the V that disappears behind his pants leaves little to the imagination. My mouth waters as I take him in.

“Get undressed, *cariño*.” His instruction snaps my gaze back up to his face as I swallow around the lump in my throat. When I make no attempt to move, he growls, “Don’t make me tell you again.”

With shaky fingers and trembling limbs, I pull my shirt off before pushing my sweats down until they pool around my ankles. Kicking them off to the side, I clasp my fingers in front of me, feeling insanely awkward as I stand here waiting for the next order from the dungeon master.

He quirks a brow at me. “Those, too. Off.” He indicates to my black boxer briefs. I shuck them down, despite him still wearing pants. He drags his greedy gaze down my body until he lands on my cock, which is jutting out, hard as a rock, and the urge to cover myself is strong, but I ignore it.

I’m confident in what I have, despite the feelings of nervousness rushing through me now.

Seeming satisfied with what he sees, he tips his head in the direction of the bed. “Climb on up, boy.” He strolls over to the bed at the same time, holding a lighter to the candles. I don’t know if he’s setting the mood or what, but I’ve never had a hook-up light candles for me before.

It’s kind of unnerving.

Next, he opens the chest, tossing various leather straps onto the bed as my pulse goes into overdrive. “What the fuck are those for?”

Instead of answering me, he stands, rounding the bed on my left side. He grabs one of the straps before running a large, hot hand up my calf. He squeezes, raking his nails down the flesh, then wraps the strap around my ankle and connects it to the bed. Effectively restraining me.

“Uh, no,” I sputter. “You aren’t tying me to your bed, Mateo.”

He smirks, tightening the strap. “Say my name like that again, *cariño*. It turns me on when you’re all growly.”

“Fuck off. I’m serious. You’re not tying me up.”

“Yes, I am.” He arches a brow as if he’s challenging me to defy him. “*My. Rules.*”

Not waiting around to see if I’m going to argue with him, he does the

same to my hand before moving around to the right side of the bed and doing the same over there. When he's done, I'm starfished across his bed, completely exposed.

Yet, despite how insanely vulnerable I feel, my cock is still throbbing and leaking a puddle all over my stomach. I don't think I've ever wanted someone to touch me so badly in my life.

Mateo crosses the room and grabs something off his dresser before walking over to the light switch by the door, flipping it off. At the same time they turn off, red LED lights illuminate the room. He must have strip lights along the floorboards and underneath the bed. Between those and the candles, the entire room is glowing in an erotic red.

Next, he pulls his phone from his pocket. The sensual beat of *Chills* by Mickey Valen and Joey Myron reverberates through speakers placed around the room that I can't see. Grabbing something out of his back pocket, he tosses it on the bed—a bottle of some sort—before shoving his pants down and climbing on the bed, still sporting his crimson red briefs.

Clearly, that's his favorite color.

He positions himself between my *wide fucking open* legs, uncapping the mystery bottle. For a minute, I think it's lube until he pours a generous amount onto my left thigh. *Massage oil*. A pineapple aroma floats up, meeting my senses as he begins rubbing it in. His touch is firm as he runs his hands up and down, dipping underneath my leg to spread the oil back there. When he applies pressure behind my knee, it feels like a direct line to my groin. My cock drips, and I bite down on my bottom lip to stifle a groan.

Moving on, he switches legs, focusing on my right. This is sensual as fuck, despite him never actually touching me anywhere sexual. He takes his time, ensuring he gets every inch of my legs before moving to my abdomen. Straddling my lower thighs, he's careful not to graze my cock, and I know he's taking sick satisfaction in watching me squirm. He pours a small amount onto my chest, setting the bottle beside us before working the oil into my skin.

His face is completely unreadable. If it weren't for his endlessly dark, blown-out eyes, I would think he was totally unaffected. The air in the room is thick, the constant eye contact between us heady. Every sense, every nerve ending in my body, feels like they've finally come alive. It's visceral, the way he's making me feel.

His fingers circle my nipple at the same time, tweaking and making me

cry out. That has his eyes darkening even further, hips rolling on top of me, the very tip of his erection brushing against mine. My eyes roll back at the feel of him.

“You’re so pretty, *cariño*.” The rough gravel of his voice sends a shiver down my spine as his devilish eyes, sinful and gleaming, devour me. “I bet you bleed pretty. I bet you cry pretty, too.” His body towers over mine now, full, cherry red lips brushing against my ear. “And I bet when you’re turned inside out and fucking *ruined* for me, you’ll be the prettiest fucking mess I’ve ever tasted.”

My entire body is coiled tight, like a hair-trigger ready to explode. I’m desperate for him to stroke me, to fill me up, and I’m almost to the point of begging.

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MATEO ROJAS

He's putty underneath me. Body eager for release. Just the way I want him.

Terrible Lie by Nine Inch Nails fills the air, accompanied by Travis's breathless pants. Watching him writhe with my hands roaming his body is almost too much, but I don't let it show. His body is beautiful; a pale blank canvas with long limbs and smooth skin. God, he'd look so fucking good marked up by me. Something I plan to do in spades. Leave bruises, cut him open and watch him bleed, have him begging for mercy.

"You like this, *cariño*?" I purr, inching my hands closer to his red, throbbing cock. "Look at how you shake for me, baby." Leaning down, my lips hover over his. "Like a pathetic, needy slut," I spit out, flicking my tongue inside his mouth before sitting back.

Baring his teeth, he shakes his arms, testing the straps. "Fuck you," he grits.

"You want me to touch your cock?" My fingers walk along his pubic line, his stomach dipping, ab muscles tensing. He glares at me, a sadistic laugh bubbling out of me at the sight. "Beg me, *cariño*. Beg me to wrap my oiled up, slick palm around your throbbing cock. Beg me to slide my fist up and down, *up and down*, while you lose your mind. Or better yet... beg me to fill up your tight little cunt while you cry out my name."

His eyes turn into angry slits as he tugs on the restraints again. "Fuck you," he repeats. "Take these fucking things off me, asshole. I'm not begging you for shit."

A grin slides onto my face that I'm positive looks demonic as I lean forward, left arm resting beside his head, while my right cracks down sharply

against his cheek before gripping his face in my palm.

His blue eyes go wide as he stares at me, stunned silent.

“We’re gonna have to teach you some manners, *cariño*.” I rub the affected cheek while simultaneously rolling my hips into his, causing him to groan. “But don’t worry, baby. I can be patient.”

Prisoner by Raphael Lake, Aaron Levy, and Daniel Ryan Murphy filters through the speakers. The bass thumps sensually as I climb off the bed, never taking my eyes off Travis while I push open the chest, pulling out more fun toys he’s probably going to have a conniption about.

He really does look so damn *beautiful* right now, helpless and immobile, spread wide open, giving me a delicious view of everything I plan to destroy by the end of the night. His skin is pulled taut and flushed pink, beads of sweat glistening under the glow of the red lights. My teeth ache to sink into his perfect complexion, marking him for anyone to see. Marking him as *mine*, because if he thinks this is truly just tonight, he’s got another thing coming.

Wild, cautious eyes track my every move as I climb back on the bed and position myself over his thighs again. His cock ruts out at my proximity, the tip slick with his evident arousal. My mouth waters with an undeniable need to taste him—taste how much he wants me, how much his body goes against his mind.

Travis glances down at my hands, swallowing hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “The hell is that?”

“You need to learn to be quiet, *cariño*.” Without another word, I lean down, my tongue flicking out against his left nipple. It tightens under my mouth, and when my teeth graze along the sensitive flesh, he gasps, back arching off the bed.

“*Mateo...*” My name is a breathy moan that he probably doesn’t even realize slipped off his tongue. My cock twitches at the sound.

Using my teeth to tug just hard enough to bring some pain, I pull back, placing one rubber-tipped clamp on the swollen bud as his eyes fly to mine, lips parting with a hiss. I repeat the same process on the other side before pulling, not so gently, on the metal chain the clamps are connected to, causing his upper half to lift slightly off the bed. When my lips meet his, I feel it everywhere. His tongue slips into my mouth, brushing against mine as I release the chain, letting him fall back onto the bed.

One hand crawls up to his neck, wrapping around and squeezing *just*

enough while my other slips between us, taking his silky, hard length in my palm. He's burning hot to touch, whimpering into my mouth as I stroke him. Ripping my lips away, I work my way along his jaw, nipping as I go, until I reach his neck. Flicking my tongue against his earlobe, I can't help the smirk that slides into place as I feel him shiver beneath me, goosebumps popping up on his flesh.

He's *so fucking* responsive. I can't get enough.

I run my thumb over his slit, gathering his precum and smearing it around before bringing it up to my mouth. He watches in rapt silence as I slip it past my lips, sucking it clean. His masculine, salty flavor seeps into my taste buds, and I want *more*. I need to taste more of him. Feel his weight against my tongue. Watch his face go lax from the pleasure *I* bring him.

Needing all of that and more, I slide down his body, positioning myself between his legs as the song switches to *Feel You Out* by Landon Tewers. I wrap my lips around his flared head, running my pierced tongue along the slit. His thighs tremble, breathing labored as he gazes down at me, a fervent type of hunger dancing in his eyes.

He moans softly as I take more of him into my mouth until my nose is brushing against the short blonde hairs at the base. The clean, lightly musky scent of him surrounds me, my own cock throbbing painfully. The desire to sink into him, take him, and make him wholly *mine* is strong. Too strong.

But not yet.

I swallow around his length before wrapping one hand around his shaft, bringing the other up to toy with his balls, and hollowing my cheeks. My mouth glides easily up and down his cock, sucking hard, and bringing him closer to the edge. It doesn't take long to feel him swell in my mouth. Removing my hands and mouth from him, I sit back on my haunches, chuckling when I see the annoyance on his face at the loss of an orgasm. His brows pinch tightly together as he narrows his baby blues at me.

"You're such a fucking asshole." He drops his head back, staring up at the ceiling.

Grabbing the oil from beside me, I uncap it, smiling. "We've already been through this, *cariño*. Get used to it."

Slick fingers find his crack as I use my other hand to spread his cheeks open. He shivers when the tip of my finger presses against his pink puckered hole, but he bares down, letting me slip right past the muscle into his tight, hot channel. Gasps quickly morph into moans as I work my finger slowly in

and out of him, only pausing to add a second digit into the mix.

My fingers crook, grazing that spot inside him that immediately glazes his eyes over. Supple lips part as sexy little cries fall from his mouth. Under the red glow, it's hard to see clearly, but the pink splash staining his neck and cheeks is evident, giving way to how much I'm affecting him.

"Tell me how much you hate me, *cariño*." I slip a third finger into his hole, using my other hand to wrap around his cock, still hard as steel. "Tell me how much you can't fucking stand me, baby, while I have your body trembling with need from only my fingers. *Tell. Me.*"

He says nothing. There's nothing he could say. Not anything truthful, anyway. Sure, he *wants* to hate me. Wants to place his anger somewhere. The thing is, though, he could've told me to stop at any time. But did he? *No*. Because he wants this just as much as I do. The only difference is, I'm not afraid to admit that.

So, he may not *like* me, but his body sure does.

"What's the matter, baby?" I taunt. "Don't like how well I know your body already? Don't like how good I make you feel? Makes it pretty hard to hate me, huh?"

"Fuck you," he growls as he thrusts his hips into my fist.

"Look at you... writhing pathetically on the fingers of a man who fucked what was yours." My fist tightens as I jack him hard. "You're right on the edge, about to come like a little fucking whore for a stranger you claim to fucking hate."

He grits his teeth, but otherwise says nothing.

"You know what, though?" Withdrawing my fingers, I climb up his body until I'm sitting on his chest. "You don't fucking deserve to come. You haven't *earned* it, yet."

My fingers thrust brutally into his mussed-up hair, gripping painfully and yanking his head back until he has no choice but to look at me. With my other hand, I pinch his chin between my thumb and index finger, his lips parting.

"Now, open your fucking mouth," I growl, and much to my surprise, he listens. Leaning closer to his face, the spit falls past my lips, onto his tongue as I let go of his chin, pushing my briefs down. I pump myself a few times before smearing my precum on his lips. His tongue darts out, cleaning the mess immediately.

Pushing past his lips, I shove my cock far enough into his mouth, he gags.

Tears spring to his eyes, and *fuck*, it's a heady sight. "That's it, baby," I coo, rolling my hips so I'm fucking his face slowly. "Cry for me, cariño. Choke on me."

Both my hands move to cradle the back of his head as I use his hot, wet mouth. His bloodshot eyes peer up at me, and mine down at him, as I watch myself disappear between his swollen, red lips.

"Your mouth feels so good wrapped around me, baby." My palm cracks down on the side of his cheek as I thrust myself deeper. "Almost as good as *he* felt."

He glowers, eyes shifting into thin, angry slits as he yanks on the restraints to no avail. Part of me wonders if he'll try to bite down on my dick. He tries to turn his head, but I tighten my grip, not giving him even an inch of budge.

"I don't think so, cariño," My hips snap a little harder, pushing a little deeper, tears streaming steadily out of his eyes now. Reaching behind me, but never taking my eyes off him, I grab the chain connecting the nipple clamps, tugging roughly. He cries out around my cock, eyebrows pinching together in pain. "You're not finished until I say you're finished. Now, *suck me* like you fucking mean it, and maybe I'll consider letting you come."

TRAVIS BARNES

There hasn't ever been a time in my life when I can remember being so unequivocally *pissed off* and turned on at the same time. I'm so fucking horny, I can't think straight. I've been denied *two* orgasms, and now my throat is stuffed full of *him* while my nipples are on fire as he tugs painfully hard on the clamps.

And I want to complain about it. I want to say I hate it.

But I don't. Not even a little bit.

Every sense is doused in Mateo. I see, smell, taste, touch *all* of him. He's lodged so far into my throat, cock so fucking thick it barely fits. Spit is seeping out of the corners of my mouth, eyes watering, nose running. He's everywhere. It's like he knows exactly what I want—what I need—without me even having to tell him. He's the big, gruff, dominating type I love to submit to.

And *Christ*, it's fucking annoying. It would be easier if he was shit in bed. It would make hating him easier. As it is right now, I'd probably do just about anything he asked me to do if it meant he'd put his hands back on my cock again. It's still so hard, it's got its own heartbeat, and I'm restrained, so I can't even touch myself.

The hold he has on the chain has lessened as he continues to pump into my mouth, the pain easily turning into scorching hot pleasure. He tugs gently, the clamps having an unforgiving hold on me, and I can't even help the way my eyes roll back as I moan around him. The throaty, husky sound of *his* moans meets my ears, causing my eyes to snap back open, landing right on him. The sound sends warmth through my already feverish body, and my

mind suddenly hyper focuses on getting him to moan like that because of *me* again.

His gaze on me, from where he is towering over me, makes my blood pump harder in my veins, sending my nerve endings blazing. Under the red glow, his eyes appear black as he watches me suck his cock. His lips are parted, the silver of his tongue ring glinting in the candlelight. The tendons in his neck are pulled taut, chest muscles flexing with each brutal thrust.

“*Fuck*, you look so good taking my cock. Such a *good fucking boy*.” His brows pinch together, teeth biting down on his bottom lip. He wraps a hand snug around my throat, squeezing enough to cut off some of my air supply as his huge cock cuts off the rest. “I wanna come down your throat, make you swallow me down while you fight for air.”

His words shouldn’t turn me on, shouldn’t saturate my veins with a salacious need I don’t quite understand, but they do.

“But this time...” he says, his voice strained as he continues to pump into me. “This time I want to fill your *tight fucking cunt* with my cum until it’s dripping out of you, and you’re nothing more than a *sloppy. Fucking. Slut.*”

He pulls his cock out of my mouth, leaning down to crash his lips against mine, tongue diving in mercilessly. It’s quick and messy, and when it’s over, he cranks my head toward him as he growls into my ear, sending a wicked chill down my spine. “*My slut.*”

I don’t know which part I should be more concerned about; the “*this time*” part, indicating he thinks there will be a *next time*, the “*my slut*” part, or the part where he just assumes I’m a bottom—that there’d be no way someone like *me* would do the fucking. But as he positions himself between my legs, the realization hits me that I’m too fucking gone to care. The shame and regret will probably hit later, but that’s future Travis’s problem.

This is the first time I’m getting a good look at Mateo’s cock, and *fuckkk* me, it’s nice. It’s dark and thick—so fucking thick—and his glistening tip pokes out from his foreskin. He’s bigger than me, by at least a couple of inches, and I know with absolute certainty, he’s going to fill me so fucking good.

He grabs the bottle of oil from the bed, pouring some in his hand before slathering it along his shaft. When his cock is lubed up enough, he brings slick fingers to my hole, pushing a thick digit past the tight muscle, a hiss escaping me at the intrusion. He wastes no time working a second finger in, grazing my prostate as he works me open.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” he purrs. “You’re gonna take *every. Single. Inch*, and you’re going to thank me for it when I’m done. You’ll beg me for more.”

With his face cast in shadows, under the red glow of the candles, he looks like Satan himself. Like he crawled his way from the crust of the earth to break me down and tear me apart. Trepidation buries itself deep in my gut as I swallow over the unease balling up in my throat. Letting him fuck me is a *bad* idea.

I know it is.

But as he grabs my thigh in a bruising hold, lining himself up, I don’t stop him.

I don’t want to.

And when he pushes inside, filling me fuller than I’ve ever felt, all logical reasoning as to why this is a terrible idea vanishes. The ache as he stretches me is overwhelming, my chest rumbling with a low groan as he pumps in and out of me, giving me no time to adjust.

I’d expect nothing less from him.

“*Fuck, cariño...*” The blunt tips of his nails dig into the meaty flesh on my thigh, the bite of pain only adding to the full feeling of his cock in me. “Your pussy’s so *tight*, baby. You feel so *good*.”

My face heats at his fucked up praise. I desperately wish he’d touch me, stroke me.

He pulls all the way out before reaching up and gripping my chest, slamming back into my ass hard enough to knock the wind out of my lungs.

“*Fuck*,” I moan, wishing I had my hands to wrap around him.

“You like this, *cariño*?” His nails dig in deeper. I know he’s going to draw blood soon, but I love it. The pain mixed with the pleasure, it’s euphoric. “You like the way my cock makes you feel?”

Words are lost on me. I can do nothing more than nod my head feverishly, breathless moans falling off my lips as he plows into me at a vicious pace. My head’s light, body trembling. There’s an inferno flowing through my veins, my mind and body at war with each other.

“T-take... take these off.” My arms yank on the straps restraining me to the posts on his bed. They’ve gone numb. “*P-please*.”

His fingernails rake down my chest, beads of blood popping up in their wake. Hissing through gritted teeth, I watch as his gaze zeros in on the mess he’s made. His near black eyes flit up to mine, a menacing smirk on his face.

“Look at you bleed for me, *cariño*. So beautiful... so *delicate*.”

Leaning down, he runs the flat of his tongue along the length of one of the cuts, a deep groan rumbling from his chest. I can feel the vibrations pouring into mine. The way he looks—hair hanging in his eyes, dark gaze locked on mine, as he laps up the blood on my pec from the gash *he* created—is driving me wild. It’s too much. It’s monstrous and lewd. And I can’t get enough of it.

“Mateo,” I whisper breathlessly. “Take these off, please. I need to touch you.” The words leave my lips on a plea, and whatever he sees in my gaze is enough, because the next second, he’s reaching up, undoing the leather strap, and letting my arm fall before moving to do the same to the other. “My feet. Get those, too.”

As soon as I’m free of all restraints, without a second thought, I grab his face, pressing his lips to mine. He moans into my mouth as he slips his tongue inside, the metallic taste of copper heavy, rolling his hips harder into me at the same time. *The Death of Peace of Mind* by Bad Omens is the background noise to the clashing of our bodies, sweaty and slick.

He burrows his face into my neck, nipping and sucking all over. I’m going to look like a crime scene by the time this is over, but I don’t care. I flip us, so I’m on top of him. He grabs hold of my hips, nails biting into the skin as I grind on his lap. The position makes my eyes roll back as it pegs that sweet spot inside me over and over.

“Fuck... *fuck*, I’m close,” I breathe. One hand wraps around my cock while my other one stays planted on his chest, holding me up. “I have to come! Please, *please*... have to come.”

Before I even process what’s happening, he’s flipped us again, him towering over me as he grips the headboard with both hands. The cords of his muscles protrude on his forearms, sweat dripping from his forehead as he slams into me with malice. His teeth are bared, the wild look in his eyes purely animalistic as he pushes us closer to the edge.

I pump myself in time with him, wrapping one hand around his thick, tattooed arm. I’m so, so close, I can feel the heat building at the base of my spine. “I’m... *fuck*, I’m gonna come!”

With one hand still gripping the headboard, he wraps the other around my throat, squeezing and cutting off my air supply. It sends me over the cliff. Jaw slack and my eyes rolled back, I cry out despite no sound escaping, as my cock pumps out thick ropes, coating my chest in my release. My head

swims, lungs aching with a need to fill, but the wanton desire coursing through my body in waves is unparalleled.

When he finally releases me, I drag in gulps of air, my hands flying up to thread through my hair. With two thick fingers, he runs them through my release, shoving them into my mouth. The salty flavor of myself paired with the way his fingers taste is enough to make me come again.

Mateo's movements start to get jerky, and I know he's close. I'm suddenly desperate to watch him come undone with my name on his tongue when he does.

"Say my name," I beg. My legs wrap around him as he drops his face near mine. "Say my name when you come. My *real* name."

He takes my lips in a bruising kiss, unadulterated need pouring into me as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth. With his forehead rested on mine, his dark, hooded gaze locks on mine. "I'm gonna come," he pants. "Travis... *fuck*, I'm coming. *Travis... cariño...*" He stills, emptying himself inside me. I'm all too aware that he's inside me raw right now... something I *never* do.

Resting on top of me for a few minutes, he finally pulls out, removes the clamps from my nipples, and rolls off me. Now that the moment is over, I'm left feeling incredibly awkward. Like I should go home... but I *can't*. He saunters into the bathroom, coming out a moment later with a washcloth. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he lifts my leg slightly, bringing the warm, wet cloth to my hole and cleaning me up.

The gesture is soft and unexpected, but during all of this, we never make eye contact. I can't tell who's avoiding it more, me or him.

MATEO ROJAS

After I cleaned us up last night, we passed out. He drifted onto my side of the bed throughout the night, curling up next to me and nuzzling his face into my neck. He probably doesn't even know he did it. I'm up—wide awake—before he is. Flashes of last night come back in heavy waves, crashing into me, causing all the blood in my body to fly south.

Glancing to my left, he's sound asleep, lips parted as soft snores reach my ears. Blond hair, that's wild and tousled, sticks up every which way. My eyes dip lower to his bare chest. He didn't put a shirt on before passing out, so his creamy complexion, marred only slightly by the nail scratches and bite marks *I* gave him, is on display.

Reaching below the covers, I palm myself over my briefs, squeezing myself almost to the point of pain. This erection needs to go away. I know full well I shouldn't act on any of the desire coursing through my blood.

I shouldn't.

But I'm going to.

Scooting a little closer, careful not to disturb him *yet*, I place my hand on his firm stomach, trailing my hand lower until it slips under the covers. My fingers curl around the thick ridge of his cock, a smirk sliding into place when I find him already hard.

Wonder what he's dreaming about behind those fluttering eyelids.

Making myself as light as can be, I shimmy down the bed until I'm almost eye level with his hips. He stirs a little, letting out a sleepy sigh, and as if his body can sense what I want to do, he shifts over until his front is turned ever so slightly toward me, giving me better access.

Slipping my fingers under the waistband of his boxers, I shove them down enough to let his beautiful cock spring free, my own twitching behind the confines of cotton. The pretty pink tip glistens as the sunlight beams in from the open window. Using the flat of my tongue, I swipe up the precum leaking from his slit as his hips thrust up a little. I glance up at him, seeing he's still sleeping.

I close my lips around the flared head, flicking my tongue gently along the underside. He tastes faintly like the pineapple oil I used on him last night and a mouthwatering musk that's all him. It's intoxicating. Hollowing my cheeks, I mold my tongue around him, sucking hard as he stirs a little more. His hand absently reaches for *something*—if I had to guess, probably his cock—but when his fingers thread into my hair, I feel his body jerk as he lifts himself onto his elbows. With him still in my mouth, I peer up at him from beneath my lashes. He moans softly when I twirl my thumb, and when he speaks, it's thick and raspy from sleep.

“That goddamn tongue ring.” Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he shoves me farther down until there's nothing more for me to take. “*God*,” he groans, deep and low. “It was only supposed to be one time.”

I pull off him, a smirk tugging on my wet lips as I replace my mouth with my hand, pumping him hard and slow. “Come on, *cariño*. You didn't *really* believe that, did you?”

He grumbles, as if it physically pains him to be unable to deny himself me. Bright blue eyes gaze at me while he watches his cock disappear into my mouth. He bites down on his bottom lip, the act causing my nuts to ache. “Fine,” he finally mutters. “But once the snow clears, that's it. I mean it.”

Chuckling, I say, “Sure, whatever you say.” *You're not getting rid of me that easily, boy.*

He huffs, lying flat on his back. “Now, come fuck me already.”

Shit, you don't gotta ask me twice.

I roll over, sliding off the bed, and open the chest in front. Rummaging through the junk in there, I grab the bottle of lube. As soon as I drop the bottle onto the bed, I get rid of my briefs, letting them pool on the floor as I climb back over him. He's already gotten himself completely naked, his heavy eyes watching me as he runs his closed fist up and down his shaft.

Positioning myself between his spread thighs, I slather my cock, drinking all of him in. “Need me to fill you up again, *cariño*?” My words are taunting as he chews on his bottom lip some more. “Pull your legs back for me, baby.

Let me see that pretty pink pussy.”

His face flames as he averts his gaze, sliding his hands behind his knees and pulling them toward his chest. I don't know why Travis being shy is so endearing, but it is. Makes me think of all the ways I can corrupt him and push him out of his comfort zone.

My oiled-up finger drops to his hole, slipping inside with ease. We didn't shower last night, and he's still slick with my cum and worked open from that. “You're so wet for me already, baby.”

“Oh, *my God*,” he groans, tossing his head back. “You're so fucking vulgar. Must you say shit like that to me?”

Throwing my head back, a deep belly laugh rumbles out of me. Gripping myself at the base, I line myself up. “What's the matter, *cariño*?” I sink into him in one go, his eyes widening as he fists my sheets, a cry falling off his lips. “You don't want to hear how tight your little cunt is wrapped around my cock? How you're still wearing my cum from last night, and how I can feel me inside you with every thrust?”

His hands fly up, covering his face as he grumbles incoherently.

Glancing down, I'm mesmerized as I watch my dick be swallowed by his tight fucking hole. It's such a beautiful sight to see. It's rimmed red and still slightly swollen from last night, stretched wide to adjust to me, and he takes me *so well*.

My hand wraps around the back of his thigh, pushing until it's practically resting on his chest, my other hand planted beside his head as I fuck into him hard. When he finally removes the hands from his face, he looks so fucking gone. His pupils devour his irises as he gazes up at me, brows pinched tight, and jaw slack.

“Your cock feels *amazing*.” His words come out breathless, and it's like music to my ears.

When he wraps a tight fist around himself, a growl tears its way up my throat as I slap it away, replacing it with mine. Jacking him firm and fast, I ask him, “You wanna come, baby?”

“Yes... yes, please.”

Molten lava pools in my groin with an overwhelming urge to come, but I stave it off, wanting him to go first. “Come, then,” I grit out. “Milk my cock, *cariño*. Put that hole to use.”

He spills onto my hand, his eyes slamming shut, lips parting as the most beautiful moan rolls out of him. That's all it takes for me to follow right

behind him, a shudder tearing through me as I empty deep inside him.

Pulling out, I revel in the way my cum drips out of him. It's *filthy*. He pulls the covers over him as I climb out of bed, heading to the bathroom for a rag. Like last time, I clean him up, then me. He watches me while I do it, an unreadable expression on his face.

I swat at his ass once I'm finished. "C'mon. Time for a shower." Heading toward the door, his voice stops me in my tracks.

"What?" he scoffs.

Making sure to wipe the grin off my face, I turn to face him. "You know... shower. Shampoo, body wash. Get clean?"

Not giving him any more time to protest, I spin back around and walk into the en-suite. After turning the water on, I grab two plush deep red towels out of the closet, setting them outside the shower. Finally, after a few minutes of me wondering if he's going to ignore me altogether, he pads into the bathroom, barefoot and still naked, looking less than amused with me.

I chuckle, reaching over to pinch his cheek. "Aw, cheer up, cariño. You're always so serious. Maybe you could keep a man if you let loose every once in a while."

His face screws up. "Fuck you, Mateo. God, you're such a fucking—"

"Asshole," I finish for him, deadpan. "Get in before my patience wears thin, and I beat your ass raw with a paddle to teach you a lesson."

His eyes darken at the same time he rears back, like he doesn't know if he should be turned on or offended by that. Regardless, he steps under the stream, with me following. The hot water feels exceptional on my tired and achy muscles, and it's an added bonus that he looks fucking delectable, dripping wet in front of me.

With his hands clasped in front of him, shoulders hunched over, unease radiates off him. He picks the weirdest times to be awkward. I can be three fingers deep in his ass while he's restrained to my bed posts, but a shower is too much?

"Turn around," I instruct him as I reach for the shampoo bottle.

Narrowing his eyes, he glances down at my hands before dragging his gaze back up to meet mine. "Why?"

I roll my eyes. "Can you just do what you're fucking told?"

Still look skeptical, he purses his lips, slowly spinning until I'm left with a fantastic view of his tight ass. I have to resist the urge to bend down and bite a chunk out of it.

Closing the distance between us, I set the bottle down before lathering my hands up, bringing them up to his scalp. His whole body stiffens the moment my fingers slide into the strands, and I have to hold back a laugh.

“Why are you washing my hair? You don’t need to wash my—”

“*Fuck,*” I groan. “You’re *impossible*. Will you please shut the fuck up and let me take care of you for five fucking minutes. Then you can go back to hating me after.”

He huffs his annoyance, but says nothing else as I get to work, massaging his scalp and cleaning his hair. Eventually, he relaxes, his head lolling back, eyes closed. After I’m done with hair, I move on to his body, which makes him stiffen all over again, but in a completely different way. I drop to my knees to get his legs and feet, his cock jutting out in front of my face, taunting me. His cheeks are bright pink as he gazes down at me, lip pulled between his teeth.

Standing back at my full height, I bring my hand to his stiff length, washing the one area left. His bright blue eyes flutter closed, a content sigh coming from him as I half stroke, half wash. I pull away, letting him rinse the suds off before letting myself take it too far. We *just* had sex; there’s no reason why I’d need to take him again so soon.

That’s nuts.

Once I’m done with him, I tell him where he can find a change of clothes, and he gets out, letting me wash myself. Alone with my thoughts, I’m not quite sure what to make of this *situation* I’ve gotten us into. All I know for sure is I wouldn’t mind one bit if this blizzard kept on for a few more days...

TRAVIS BARNES

The last twenty-four hours have been... interesting, to say the least. Mateo is *infuriating*, and even more so since he can work my body over like a puppeteer and I'm his marionette. I need the snow to melt *now*, so I can get a locksmith here and I can go home. Being in his proximity is fucking with my head.

He's a smug bastard, and no matter how good he makes my body feel, I can't get the image out of my head of him railing Nathaniel, and the cocky look on his face when I caught them. Like he found great satisfaction in ruining a relationship. And I know, I know, Nathaniel is more to blame than Mateo, but it isn't Nathaniel I'm trapped in this house with, forced to spend dreadful time with. So, it's much easier to place my anger with Mateo at the moment.

Now, I'm standing in his room, freshly fucked *and* showered, wearing *his* clothes, staring out the window at the winter fucking wonderland happening outside. The snow has at least stopped, but none of it seems to be melting. Who fucking knows how much longer I'm going to be trapped here. The sun needs to come out and wipe this shit away, and fast.

I don't even know how much time has passed that I've been standing in here. I vaguely heard Mateo come in and get dressed before leaving the room. Thankfully, he didn't say anything to me, and just let me be. That shower was *too much*. The way he washed my hair with delicate fingers, and scrubbed my body down, making sure to take his time and get every single inch of flesh. *God*, it felt so fucking good, and he knew it too with the way my cock bobbed in front of his unreadable face.

The aroma of something I can't quite place meets my senses. It's food of some sort, and my stomach grumbles as I smell it, reminding me that I haven't eaten in far too long. Another inconvenience due to this goddamn snowstorm from hell. After contemplating starving myself in favor of hiding out in this room for as long as I can, I decide food is more important to me than holing up, so I begrudgingly pad out to the living room where I see Mateo in the kitchen, *Neon Grave* by Dayseeker playing softly, while he cooks... something. I'm still not sure what.

At the sound of my bare feet on the hardwood, he glances up, his usual unreadable expression plastered on his face. "You finally decided to come out," he deadpans.

Deciding to ignore his statement, I sit down on the stool at the bar. "What are you making?"

"Breakfast burritos and hash browns." He doesn't look up from his frying pan as he speaks to me. "How do you take your coffee?"

"I don't." When he snaps his head up to look over at me, I clear my throat. "Uh, I mean, I don't like coffee. Water is fine."

"Are you a child? Who doesn't like coffee?"

Scoffing, I reply, "No, I'm not a fucking child. It just tastes like shit, asshole."

When he smirks, his teeth practically sparkle and his dimples poke out, and I have to look away for fear of my stupid knees giving out on me. He has no goddamn right to be *that* gorgeous.

He points the spatula in my direction and chuckles. "God, you're hot when you're feisty."

"Fuck off," I growl.

Clutching his chest, he bows his head. "I'm hurt. So hurt."

"You're fucking ridiculous." I roll my eyes, turning to walk toward the couch.

"You'll love it one day," he quips.

"Doubtful." Glancing to my right, the sun is finally shining through his giant open window. "Can I use your phone?" I ask him, wanting to try the locksmith again.

"It's on the counter."

When I reach the counter, he grabs the phone, pulling it toward him, throwing me a shit-eating grin. "You can use the phone on one condition." He arches a brow while he waits to see what I say back.

He's so fucking annoying. Making a show of dramatically rolling my eyes, I cross my arms over my chest. "And what's that?"

Tapping his index finger to his lips twice, he says, "Give me a kiss."

A laugh claws its way up my throat. "Ain't no fucking way."

He shrugs, pocketing the phone, returning to cooking. "Then no phone."

"Mateo, *come on*. I need to call a locksmith and get home."

"Then kiss me, baby." He peers at me from under his lashes. "It's not like you haven't had my whole ass cock in your mouth already. One kiss, one phone call."

Amusement dances in his eyes as I narrow mine at him before throwing my arms in the air, groaning loud enough that you could probably hear it from my apartment. "You're so fucking *impossible*." Rounding the bar, I hold out my hand. "Fine. *One* kiss."

I lean in, lips puckered, but he backs up. "Ah-ah," he says in a chastising way. "A real fucking kiss, *guapo*."

Cool. Another fucking word I don't know the meaning of.

"Whatever," I mumble. "Let's get this over with so I can make the damn call already."

A faint smirk ghosts his face as he wraps his hand around my neck, pulling me into him. His eyes dip down to my mouth as his pink, pierced tongue glides across his full, red lips before his gaze connects with mine again. My heart hammers behind my breastbone, blood roaring in my ears as his lips press down on mine.

Mint toothpaste with a shadow of sweet, earthy marijuana comes to life when his tongue slips past my parted lips, dipping into my mouth and licking all over. A moan falls from me without my permission, the sound causing him to growl into my mouth as his fingers tighten ever so slightly on either side of my esophagus. The feel of the ring through his tongue as it tangles with mine causes my body to warm all over from the memory of that same barbell dragging along the underside of my cock.

The kiss lasts less than a minute, but when we pull apart, my head feels light and woozy. I don't understand how he affects me so much. It's maddening.

Handing me the phone, he smirks. "See, was that so hard?"

"Yes," I huff, walking away as I look up a locksmith. It rings a few times, and much to my surprise, they answer.

"Jefferson Locksmith. How can I help you?"

I have to force myself to not jump with excitement. “Yes, hi. I’m locked out of my apartment. I live on 35th and Freely. Are you able to get out this way and help me?”

“I can send someone out, but it’ll be at least an hour till they can get there. What’s the address and your phone number?”

“It’s 3542 Freely Place, and 555-435-7640.”

“Alri—”

“Oh, wait!” I cut him off, realizing I gave him *my* phone number, which I don’t have. Turning to face Mateo, I ask him, “What’s your phone number to give to this guy?”

Not even looking up from what he’s doing, he says, “555-230-6557.”

Repeating it back to the guy, he assures me someone will be out within the next hour to hour and a half. The relief I feel hanging up that phone is insane. I can’t wait to be back in my own house, and away from Mateo and his devil dick.

Speaking of Satan, as soon as I lock his phone, he’s strolling over to me with a plate full of burritos that smell divine and a giant glass of ice water. “Eat up.” Shoving it into my chest, he walks back to the bar to dive into his own.

We eat in silence, the only noise coming from the speaker currently playing *Vertebrae* by Allistair and Spencer Kane—one of my favorite songs. Which further annoys me.

After we finish, he takes my plate and loads everything into his dishwasher. The air’s tense, but I think it’s just me being awkward. Once he’s done, he sits in the chair across from the couch I’m sitting on. His house is decorated nicely, which, for some reason, surprises me.

He clears his throat, elbow resting on the chair, chin propped in his hand. “I didn’t know he had a boyfriend.”

That’s all he says. He doesn’t elaborate, but he doesn’t need to. He’s talking about Nathaniel.

“Why would I believe you?”

“Because I have no reason to lie to you,” he says, so matter of fact. “What would I gain from lying to you?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know. You think you might have a chance to sleep with me.”

“I already slept with you,” he deadpans. And he’s absolutely right.

My cheeks flame with embarrassment. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I’ve been cheated on before. I know how it feels. So, I don’t know. Just wanted you to know that I didn’t know you existed until you walked in.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t change anything. It’s done.”

He’s silent for a moment, and I let out a sigh of relief that the conversation is over... until he opens his mouth again. “So, what do you do for work?”

“What the hell? Are we on a fucking date now? What’s with the questions?”

He holds his hands up. “I’m just trying to pass the time. Relax. It’s a simple question.”

“I work for a marketing firm. Social media marketing for Fortune 500 companies.”

“Cool, cool.”

This is stupid. “What about you?”

“I’m a mechanic. My uncle owns a shop in town.”

I nod my head, unsure of what to say from here. Small talk is the *last* thing I expected to be doing with him, and that says a lot, considering this entire predicament has been one off-the-wall experience after another.

“How long were you and what’s-his-fuck together for?” he asks, breaking our current round of awkward silence.

I can’t help but laugh at the question, and this entire situation. “Almost five and a half years.”

“Where’d you meet?” He’s got both elbows propped on the chair, hands crossed over himself, watching me like I’m a science project he’s trying to figure out.

“College,” I reply. “We went to Washington State together and met our senior year.”

“Did you love him?”

“What kind of fucking question is that?” I scoff. “Of course, I loved him.”

“Did you, though?” He sits forward, elbows on his knees. “Or did you just like the idea of him? Of what he *could* be?”

“Fuck off,” I bite out.

“No, I’m serious, Travis.” *Travis*. “Five seconds in that guy’s presence and I could tell he wasn’t shit. Not someone you do long term with. And you, my boy, seem like someone who wants to do long term.”

“What the fuck do you know about long term?” I hate how defensive I

feel right now, vulnerable, like all my flaws and insecurities are on display where he can see them.

“I’m just saying...” He shrugs. “You deserve someone who wants what you want.”

“What? And that’s you?” I laugh, immediately feeling dumb for saying that, because why the fuck would I assume he meant him?

“Maybe.” His eyes darken, not a smirk in sight on his usually cocky face. His stare is so intense, I have to fight to not squirm underneath it. My mouth dries, and I try to swallow against the lump that’s formed in my throat. Suddenly, the air feels thick for an entirely different reason.

Surely, he doesn’t mean that. He’s just trying to fuck with me... right?

Before I have a chance to respond, a knock sounds at the door, startling me and effectively breaking the bubble we’ve built. We both stand, watching each other for a moment longer before he turns, heading for the door. With his hand on the knob, he glances behind himself at me. “Don’t forget our bet... you owe me.”

He pulls the door open a second later, a short, stocky man standing in front of us. “Locksmith?” the man says.

Pulling my gaze away from Mateo, I regain my senses. “Uh, yeah. That’s me. It’s across the hall.”

I follow the man out into the hall as he gets to work. Mateo stays put in his doorway while the man fiddles with mine. It only takes a handful of minutes before the apartment door pops open, and as I’m entering my house, I turn around and glance at Mateo, a signature cocky smirk on his face. Something’s shifted. I don’t know what, but it’s there.

“Don’t forget our bet... you owe me.”

The first thing I do once inside is plug my phone into the charger. When it powers on, I scroll through all my missed notifications. My sister and Xander have sent several, but it’s the text from an unknown number that catches my eye and has me opening it before all the others.

UNKNOWN:

Next Friday... we’re going out. Don’t even think of telling me no.
A bet’s a bet, cariño.

For a second, I’m confused about how he got my number, and then it hits me... I gave it to the locksmith over the phone. *He memorized my phone number.*

My stomach flutters, a smile forming on my face despite my best efforts to tame it. Mateo Rojas is a fucking enigma if I've ever seen one...

The End... For Now

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS BY ASHLEY JAMES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley James is an LGBTQ+ author who enjoys writing (and reading) the toxic, swoony, broody, filthy talking, red flag men. She is originally from Washington State—and no, not Seattle—but now resides in South Carolina with her two daughters and her three Sphynx kitties, Goose, Maverick, and Houston. And if you're wondering if those names are Top Gun references, you would be absolutely correct.

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AARON

Valentine's Day — 6:00 a.m.

S wearing under my breath, I replayed the voicemail for the second time to make sure I heard it correctly. It was just what I needed to start my fucking day.

“Hi Aaron, it’s Melissa from Forever Flowers. So I wanted to let you know that Laura was in a pretty bad car accident last night. She got the pieces for the restaurant done but she hadn’t started on the wedding venue yet. I’m sorry for the short notice. We’ll absolutely return the down payment for the wedding flowers and if you want I can reach out to—”

Jamming a button on the desktop phone, I hit it a couple more times to make sure the message was well and truly fucking deleted before I picked up the receiver and slammed it back down in the cradle.

Raking my hands through my hair, I tried to think quickly but my mounting frustration was making that a tad difficult.

It was Valentine’s Day of all goddamn days. Where the fuck was I going to find a florist to fill a wedding order last minute? Every single one of them was probably sold out or completely booked.

“You heard about Laura?” Nico’s voice came from the doorway.

I glanced up at my sous chef and shook my head, jaw clenched. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do.” If the bride had hired her own florist, I’d be off the hook. But she was flying in from out of town, meaning she picked the all-inclusive package and left ninety-five percent of the arrangements up to me and my wedding planner.

“Doesn’t your stepbrother own that flower shop down the street? Briar Lane or whatever?”

“*Ex*-stepbrother,” I snapped. “And I’d rather shut down the entire fucking restaurant for the day before I crawl to him and ask for his help.”

“Ok then...” Luckily for him, the doorbell in the back chimed, putting an end to this incredibly unhelpful conversation. “I’m going to go get that,” he said, throwing a thumb over his shoulder and disappearing to deal with the seafood delivery.

As soon as he was gone, I slammed my fist against the desk, cursing everyone under the sun. There were two holidays I fucking hated the most—Mother’s Day and Valentine’s Day. And of course, both of them were our biggest money makers, especially when you had schmucks paying double the going rate to get married *on* Valentine’s Day as if that somehow made their “magical day” any more special. Idiots. Half of them would probably be divorced by the time their kids graduated high school.

So, no, as much as I hated this fucking holiday, I wasn’t going to risk my business’s reputation. I had to find some way to salvage it. Florists were a dime a dozen. I’m sure I could find one—*not* Briar Lane—that would be able to help me out of a jam.

Three hours later, I was pacing back and forth in front of the last fucking place I ever thought I’d be—the front step of Alex’s goddamn flower shop. After exhausting all of the florists within a sixty-mile radius of me, there was only one left to ask.

Him.

Of course, when I got there, the store was closed according to the little hanging sign on the door. In the dead of a Midwestern February, you could actually see the place, but come springtime you’d hardly even be able to make out the facade of the building with all of the flowering vines and bushes.

The dark green trim around the door had gotten weathered over the years, but the gold lettering still stood out as clear as day: Briar Lane Flower Shoppe. Pretentious prick. When his mom ran the store, it was just “Shop.” Guess Mister High and Mighty decided to add some flair from Merry Ol’

England to make it even more of a fucking cliché.

Right on cue, the asshole himself appeared from around one of the interior corners. He didn't see me right away but I sure as shit saw him. A big blond dick, lumbering around his store without a care in the world. Spinning a potted plant to get sun on the other side, he smiled at the damn thing and then straightened a display of chocolates before his head whipped up toward the front door, like he'd suddenly caught a glimpse of me in his periphery.

Fuck. Here it comes.

I folded my arms over my chest and took a step back, trying to calm down and be rational before I took a big ol' bite of humble pie. This was a business deal. That's it. Nothing else mattered. But with each lock he turned, my heart leapt higher and higher into my throat, wedging there like a giant rock.

Pushing open the door, a stupid little bell tinkling overhead, Alex leaned in the doorway, his brow furrowed behind his blond curls. "Hey. Are you ok?"

It was a perfectly valid question, but I huffed and ran my tongue over my teeth, all but snarling the response. "Clearly not if I'm here on your fucking front step."

"Come in," he said, completely unfazed by my response. He leaned out of the way but kept holding the door open for me.

I held my breath and darted past him, cinching my arms even tighter across my chest as a dozen memories from my childhood hit me like a sledgehammer.

Despite the stupid additional letters to the store's name, the inside hadn't changed at all since his mom ran the place. Old exposed brick and low-hung beams, vibrant plants everywhere you looked. The antique display racks were the same, but the merchandise had been updated—new, exotic plants; candles; chocolates; even handmade cards from the stationery store down the road. It was a one-stop shop for idiots who forgot anniversaries and bullshit commercial holidays like today.

"So, what's up?" Alex asked, mirroring my pose but keeping his distance.

My pride was lodged right there in my throat, next to my spazzing heart. All I could do was swallow, looking anywhere but at the concern in his blue eyes.

"Is it your dad?" he ventured after a moment.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "What? No. That asshole is living it up in

Arizona with his new family. Why would you think it's him?"

"I don't know," he replied, shrugging. "I couldn't think of another reason why you'd be here. I thought maybe something happened."

"I wouldn't come to you for that. This is strictly professional."

"Ok."

"Because I'm out of options."

"Ok..."

"I'm in a bind at work."

"Ok...?" His brow remained furrowed, but the corners of his mouth dipped down like he was on the verge of shaking the rest of the information out of me. I don't know why it was so hard to just tell him. Probably because asking anyone for help was excruciating, but asking *him*? Kill me now. I hadn't asked for his help since I was a teenager and backed into my dad's car and I loathed the fact I had to do it now as an adult. Alex took the blame without hesitation back then, but would he be as willing to help now? After ten years of living like complete strangers?

"We booked a wedding tonight at the banquet hall and my regular florist got into a fucking car accident," I spit out in one breath. "I need two dozen table pieces, decorations, bouquets, and boutonnieres—the works. All by this afternoon."

"And you want *me* to help you?" He blinked, actually glancing around as if there was someone else I could possibly be referring to.

"Nah, I just wanted to come and catch up. Seemed like the perfect fucking opportunity to reminisce."

"I'm just surprised you're asking me," he said quietly, ignoring my sarcasm like he always did.

"Trust me. You were my last resort," I said, uncrossing my arms and taking a step toward him, lest he get the idea that I still idolized him after all these years. That ship fucking sailed and I wanted to make damn sure he knew it.

A flicker of hurt darted across his face. Good. At least he got the message loud and clear. This wasn't a social call nor was it an invitation to walk down Memory Lane.

"I'm honored you came to me," Alex said, glancing away before adding, "but I'm afraid I can't help."

"If it's about money, I'll pay double to get it done."

His expression softened as his gaze returned to mine. "It's not about the

money, Aaron. You're asking for the impossible. It's Valentine's Day. I put my orders in weeks ago. I don't have the surplus that you need for this kind of a project."

I opened my mouth to tear into him, to unleash a decade's worth of pent-up frustration, but the sound of approaching footsteps halted me in my tracks.

Another good-looking blond sauntered out from the back, carrying two cups of coffee. He gave me a once-over as he stopped at Alex's side, handing him one of the drinks.

"Hey, babe. Who's this?" the guy asked, with a smile so fake you could see it from space. Or maybe it was the tan—also fake—that made him look like a douche. Typical of Alex. He thought so highly of himself he was basically dating a carbon copy. There's no way he'd ever mingle with grungy peasants like me.

"My stepbrother," Alex replied without missing a beat, taking the coffee.

"*Ex*-stepbrother," I corrected, making sure he felt the full heat of my glare in case he missed the growl in my tone.

Alex pursed his lips, still not taking the bait. "Aaron..."

"Save it. I asked, you answered. End of conversation. I have work to do." I stuffed all of my feelings of inadequacy back inside their messy little box and strode to the door as fast as my legs would carry me.

"See you around," Alex called after me.

I flipped him off on my way out the door and slammed it shut behind me. Childish? Sure. But that's exactly what the fucker said to me when he walked out of my life ten years ago and never looked back. I wasn't going to fall for it twice.

So much for *that* brilliant idea.

Time to expand my search radius, I guess. I wasn't above begging, so long as it wasn't that asshole down the street.

ALEX**Valentine's Day — 9:10 a.m.**

“No love lost there, I take it?” Brad asked as the front door of the shop slammed shut, the bell overhead practically screaming in time with my racing heart.

“He didn’t handle our parents’ divorce very well,” I said with a sigh. It was the understatement of a century. Watching Aaron’s lean silhouette through the window as he darted across the street, presumably making the short walk back to Bramble Bar & Grill, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of admiration—and more than a smattering of guilt. The restaurant was his pride and joy; I was beyond happy for him, and more than just a little bit sad I hadn’t been able to tell him that.

It was the banquet center above the bar that was the money maker, though. He’d completely homed in on the vintage, rustic look people in this town loved. Apparently, they paid a pretty penny to host events there. I wouldn’t know, since I’d pretty much avoided the building like the plague since he opened for business.

Other than venturing over on the opening night and hiding amidst the crowd, I hadn’t stepped foot inside his restaurant in the two years it had been open. Thank God for online ordering and delivery—he really did have the best food in town. The midnight concoctions he used to create when we were teens had evidently paid off.

Even if he cursed the ground I walked on, I still wanted to support him in whatever way I could. God knew he needed it. He needed *someone* to care,

even if he kept everyone at bay, spitting venom and lashing out. It'd been his trademark move since he was a kid. Guess he'd only gotten meaner the older he got. Not that I blamed him.

"What are you doing here? I didn't think I was seeing you until later," I said, turning my attention to Brad and trying to shove Aaron to the back of my mind.

"Well... I came to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Maybe we should go sit down."

"Babe, I really have a lot of work today, so if you could just—"

"This isn't working for me," Brad blurted out.

I tightened my grip on my coffee cup before it slipped out of my hand. "What?" For the second time in under ten minutes, I'd been completely blindsided. What the fuck was in the air today? It was supposed to be filled with love birds cooing and angels singing, not... whatever the fuck this was!

"This," Brad continued, gesturing around with his free hand. "This relationship. I don't think we're compatible."

"We're not compatible?" I don't know why I thought repeating it would make it make sense in my brain, but I tried—and failed.

"No. And I don't see this going anywhere."

All I could do was stare at him. "We've been together for three months. Two nights ago you were talking about moving your stuff into my apartment. Seemed like we were pretty compatible then."

"I know," Brad made a face, kind of like a pout and a wince all rolled in one. I had no idea what emotion he was trying to convey, but I didn't buy any of it. "I guess this was more of a holiday fling."

I rubbed a hand over my face and walked away from him. I just... couldn't. Not with him, not with Aaron, not with anyone today. This was *the* busiest day of the year for me and the last thing I needed was to be distracted by either of them and whatever baggage they were hauling around.

"That's it?" Brad asked, drifting after me. "You're not going to say anything?"

I whirled on him so fast, he bumped into my chest, nearly spilling coffee all over his dress shoes. "What the fuck do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Maybe act like you give a shit instead of acting like everything is fine?"

"You don't want to be with me? Fine! What do you want me to say to

that? You want me to beg?”

“Yes! Something! I need passion and excitement in a relationship and you’re too nice sometimes. You’re too... predictable.”

“Story of my life. You don’t want passion, Brad. You want fucking drama and theatrics.” I rolled my eyes and turned around again, pitching the coffee he gave me into the nearest trashcan. “And you know what? It’s fine. It’s all fine. Because I’m not that guy and I don’t want to be. I don’t do drama. So good luck finding a guy who does.”

“Wow.”

Ignoring him, I stormed into the work area in the back, grabbing buckets of roses from the cooler on my way by. I was halfway done with the first basic bouquet when Brad sauntered through the room on his way to the exit.

“Bye Alex.”

“See you around,” I replied automatically, not even bothering to look up. It had only been three months, true, but getting dumped on Valentine’s Day wasn’t exactly how I planned to spend the day. Good thing I had a shit ton of orders to fill, otherwise I’d have way too much time to think about things. The past, primarily, since Aaron blew back into my life like a tornado.

No, I snapped at myself silently. I had work to do and worrying about Aaron wouldn’t help me get it done any faster. It was an unnecessary distraction.

An hour and a dozen bouquets later, I threw my floral knife onto the table and wriggled my cell phone out of my back pocket.

On a hunch, I started with the florist the next town over—Forever Flowers.

A chipper female answered. “Thank you for calling Forever Flowers, this is Melissa speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Melissa, this is Alex from Briar Lane Flower Shoppe in Middleton. I have sort of a strange question... Were you contracted to do the flowers for a wedding at the Bramble Banquet Hall tonight?”

“Oh my God! Yes! How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.” I mean, the world of florists was fairly small to begin with and in the middle of nowhere Illinois, it was even smaller. He only had so many options. “I heard about Laura’s accident and I was wondering if I could buy those flowers off you? Aaron asked if I could help but you know how crazy today is. I don’t have the supplies. But I figured since you guys did...” I left my train of thought open-ended, hoping she’d pick up what I

was putting down.

“Oh, wow! Yeah! That’d be great! Oh my God, Laura is going to be so relieved. She feels terrible about leaving all of the customers hanging today, but especially that wedding.”

“I can only imagine. Do you think I can swing by in forty-five minutes or so?”

“Absolutely! Thank you!”

I disconnected and immediately called the main number for Bramble. It just now occurred to me how aptly named Aaron’s restaurant was. A prickly shrub for a prickly pain in my ass. He might have gotten older and taller and covered himself in tattoos, but I was sure deep down he was still the sensitive, insecure guy he’d always been. People didn’t change *that* much. I just had to fight through the thorns to get to him.

A male answered at Bramble, but it wasn’t Aaron. A rush of disappointment shot through me, but maybe it was better to have a middleman in our conversations. That way I wouldn’t upset him more than I already had, though only God knew how I’d accomplished that. I mean, the divorce was hard on everyone, but when I came home from college after freshman year, he was gone. Not like he’d moved out of the house gone—like, he’d left town and ditched his cell phone number gone. *He’s* the one who ghosted *me* but he acted like I was the at-fault party.

I heard through the grapevine he’d dropped out of high school his senior year and ran away to culinary school in Chicago. Even after he moved back to Middleton a couple of years ago, he stayed away. Despite being a relatively small town, we ran into each other precisely one time in the grocery store, in the produce aisle.

As I was reaching for a container of blackberries, funnily enough, a tattooed hand came in from the other side, reaching for the same carton. I remember that big red rose on the back of his hand, thinking how cool it looked with the thorns wrapped around it. When I followed the inky arm up to the face, a puff of air could have knocked me over. It was Aaron! In the flesh!

A whirlwind of emotions swept through me—happiness, surprise, confusion. I reached for him to give him a hug but he reared back like I punched him.

“The fuck are you doing?” he snapped, a look of pure disgust on his face. He’d always been lean, but the planes of his face were even sharper with age

—and anger. Even though I used to have a couple of inches on him in high school, he stood eye-to-eye with me now, as reed-thin as ever despite his mastery at cooking.

I was so stunned by his reaction, I was speechless. So I stood there, like a dolt, and said nothing. All I could do was watch as he grabbed half a dozen cartons of blackberries and stomped away like we were complete strangers.

He looked back as he turned the corner. His expression was blank—cold and hard. But his blue eyes looked as hurt as I felt.

By the time I grabbed the rest of my shit and checked out, rushing outside to the parking lot, he was gone.

A year later, Bramble opened, but after that chilly encounter by the blackberries, I knew I needed to stay away. It's clearly what he wanted, but I had no idea why.

All things considered, we were tight growing up. We didn't have that stepbrother rivalry, even after he hit puberty and turned into a miniature version of Paul, his asshole of a father. Aaron was moody back then, but I rolled with it like I always did. Plus, I was busy with football and helping my mom at Briar Lane, so I wasn't around very much toward the end. Maybe that's what his problem was.

“Can I help you?” a male voice said through the phone, snapping me out of La La Land.

“Yeah, hi. Could you tell Aaron the flowers are covered for tonight? And what time is the wedding?”

“Uh, let me double-check.” The phone muffled for a moment. I could vaguely hear the guy yelling for someone in the background and I wondered if Aaron was going to pick up another extension. A second later, the first guy came back on the line. “Ceremony starts at four-thirty.”

“Great. I'll be there by three-thirty.”

“Awesome. Sorry, man. I didn't get your name.”

“It's Alex. His stepbrother.”

AARON

Valentine's Day — 10:32 a.m.

“He said *what?*” I blinked at Dane, my bartender, and cocked my head like it would help me hear him better.

Dane shrugged and went back to wedging white taper candles into their respective glass holders. “He said the flowers are covered. He’s setting up at three-thirty.”

“What the fuck?” I scratched the back of my head, trying to figure out what Alex was really up to. I mean, I’d asked for help, sure. And he essentially told me to get bent. Then an hour later he calls and swoops in like the hero? Nah. Not buying it.

I dug my cell phone out of my pocket and promptly called Briar Lane. Alex answered after two rings.

“What do you mean it’s covered?” I asked as soon as I heard his voice.

There was a pause on the other end and it sounded like he shifted the phone to his other ear. “Aaron?”

“Duh. How many other people are you performing miracles for today? You said it was impossible. So what gives?”

“I just needed a minute to move some stuff around. You kinda blindsided me this morning. But I found a workaround.”

I still wasn’t buying it. Unfortunately, I’d learned a long time ago not to get my hopes up when it came to Alex. Or anyone, for that matter. “This isn’t some sort of revenge plot, is it?”

“What? No. This isn’t a revenge plot. Why would this be a revenge plot?”

“I don’t know, dude. I don’t know you anymore. Maybe you’re still holding a grudge from when we were kids.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. I would *never* hurt you like that.”

He might have been in a totally separate building down the road, but it felt like a sucker punch right to the gut. I ground my molars together and did my best to ignore the memories tapping incessantly in the back of my brain, trying to break through the barrier I installed ten years ago—when he *did* fucking hurt me like that.

Realizing I’d gone entirely too long without speaking, I drew in a breath and was about to blunder through some lame-ass excuse to get off the phone when he spared me.

“I’m sure we’re both really busy,” Alex said, clearing his throat. “So I’ll see you later, ok?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed the nape of my neck, trying not to overthink the next question out of my mouth. “You’re not on some weird fucking food cleanse, are you?”

He actually chuckled. “No. Not since I quit football in college.”

“K. I’ll set a plate aside for you tonight. It’s nothing special,” I added quickly. “All of the staff get dinner on the house, especially for weddings and bullshit holidays like this.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” If he was put out by my clarification, it didn’t seep into his tone. In fact, it sounded like he was still smiling on the other end, which was fucking weird considering our history. But, whatever. I didn’t have time to think about it because for once he was right, I *was* busy and I’m sure he was too now that I doubled his workload.

“Later,” I said, disconnecting before I slumped against the bar top and closed my eyes.

Goddamn him. Why did he have to be so nice? So easy-going?

Except, he wasn’t always nice. Sometimes he could be a real fucking asshole, like when he went off to college in Mississippi and didn’t look back. I went six years without seeing him. Not a phone call. Not a letter. Not even a goddamn friend request on social media. But then out of the blue, there he was at the grocery store, trying to hug me like old times, like he didn’t up and abandon me when our family fell apart.

Did I blame him for the divorce? Of course not. I blamed him for promising me nothing would change when *everything* changed. He said he’d always be there and then he wasn’t. After eleven years of being my rock, he

was just... gone. His mom was gone. The house I'd grown up in was gone. It was me and the asshole sperm donor on our own until *I* threw a middle finger in the air and left it all behind, just like my mom did when she found out the asshole was cheating on her with the woman before Heather.

And now here I was, back in Middleton, trying to carve out a life for myself, trying to reclaim a piece of the security I felt before it had all been ripped away. Alex wasn't supposed to be a part of it, but when shit hit the fan, he's the one I ran to. Guess some things never changed.

"Hey boss, you ok?" Dane asked, picking the portable phone up from the bar and setting it back in its stand.

"Yeah," I said, straightening and cracking my neck from side to side. "Spaced out for a bit. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

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ALEX**Valentine's Day — 3:25 p.m.**

Wiping the sweat from my forehead with the back of my arm, I expelled a short breath before hefting the final bucket of table arrangements into the back of the van.

Thank God my part-timer, Piper, had been able to come in for a few hours to help otherwise there was no way I would have gotten all of this done. But between the two of us, we knocked it out sooner than I thought we would.

I might have skimped on designing bouquets for the retail aspect of the business, but whatever. If someone waited until the day *of* to pick out flowers, I didn't have much sympathy for the lack of selection. Besides, on a holiday like Valentine's Day, you couldn't really go wrong with roses and Lord knew with as many roses as I ordered there would be enough to last the rest of the night.

As soon as everything was loaded and secured, I drove to the end of the street and turned into the alley that ran behind Bramble. I didn't have to guess which door belonged to the banquet hall—a series of other wedding professionals were in the process of unloading their equipment and schlepping it up the stairs.

I followed after them like a little worker ant, hauling buckets of carefully packed floral displays up and down the stairs until the van was empty.

Just as I was assessing the banquet hall and trying to decide which displays should go where, Aaron walked in and did a double take. I didn't

know if it was because of me or all the flowers. Either way, I couldn't help but smile at the look of surprise on his face.

"Hey," I said, snagging a vase with a towering fan of roses and lilies and centering it on the gift table.

"Hey," he replied automatically, his gaze following me as I moved around, setting up more pieces on the tables. It reminded me of high school, the way I could sense him watching me during football games, despite the fact there were dozens of other people milling around.

He cleared his throat when I caught (and held) his curious stare and looked down at the pocket-sized notebook in his hand, scratching off something quickly, like he'd been in thought the whole time and not watching me specifically.

"Still carry one of those around, huh?" I nodded toward the notebook on my way by.

"Yeah." He shoved it in his back pocket and gave me a look that said he didn't want to talk about anything personal. "Where are the flowers for the wedding party?"

"Those boxes over there."

"Great. I'll put them in the fridge."

"I've got it."

"No, *I*'ve got it."

We reached for the box at the same time, our hands colliding. He jerked his hand back so fast, you'd think I somehow burned him. Instead of anger, this time he looked alarmed.

I straightened, without the box, and frowned at him. "I'm sorry," I said softly, even though I had no idea what I was really apologizing for. For bumping into him again? For obviously making him hate me?

"Yeah, me too." He turned and strode toward the stairs, taking them at a jog, never once looking back.

Expelling a breath, I propped my hands on my hips and let my head fall back. As much as we clearly needed to hash this out, I knew this wasn't the time or place. But there was no way I was going to let another ten years pass without getting some sort of answer out of him.

Spying the box of flowers, I swore under my breath and picked it up.

I ventured down the same stairs Aaron used to disappear and found myself in the massive kitchen, lost in a sea of bodies. Chefs and busboys and servers darted back and forth in a frenzy, preparing for both dinner service

and the wedding from the looks of things.

Through clouds of fragrant steam and ‘whooshes’ of flames, I saw Aaron having an intense discussion with one of the other chefs. He held up a finger to the chef and darted away, yanking open a giant metal door. The cooler.

Trying to make myself as small as possible to avoid getting burned by hot pans or crashed into by any one of the staff, I held the box aloft and made my way toward the cooler.

Opening the door, I stepped inside right as Aaron was coming out. The accident I’d been trying to avoid happened anyway, with the last person I wanted it to.

The box of flowers fell to the floor as my hands went to Aaron’s biceps to steady both of us.

Likewise, he dropped whatever was in his hands and grabbed ahold of my shirt.

A rush of memories and feelings surged to the forefront of my mind, stuff I thought I’d buried a long time ago.

We’d been in this situation before—holding one another, so close each quick exhalation fanned across my skin. He was shorter the first time, though. Back then, his blue eyes were glassy and bloodshot and he smelled like vodka. And when he’d pressed his lips to mine, I was too stunned to do anything. Then the longer I stood there, letting him kiss me, the more I wanted to kiss him back. So I did.

It was hot and wrong. He was my stepbrother, for starters, *and* he was drunk. But if he didn’t care, why should I? Especially when it was the thing I’d spent the better part of a year fantasizing about, ever since he turned seventeen. What started as a playful wrestling match in the living room turned into me pinning him to the floor while trying to pretend I didn’t feel his hard-on, or that my own wasn’t digging into his hip.

We didn’t speak about it then, nor did we speak about the drunken kiss that came later... or anything else that happened that night. I chalked it up to all of the alcohol he apparently had. If he didn’t remember, I wasn’t going to make things super awkward and ask him about it. Plus, the guilt had already set in, gnawing its way through me as I slept. He was my *stepbrother*. What the hell was wrong with me? I was supposed to look out for him, not take advantage of him!

When Aaron woke that next morning to the sound of Mom summoning us to breakfast, he climbed out of my bed and made a beeline for his room

without so much as a backward glance. He was probably still hungover, plus the threat of being caught was even more possible in broad daylight.

I'm sure my mom would have been mostly fine with the situation, but his dad would *not* be ok with any of it. While Paul had kept the not-so-funny gay jokes to a minimum after I came out to my mom my junior year, I still caught the disgusted looks and snide remarks from time to time—the fear I would somehow corrupt his son. Turn Aaron gay through osmosis or some shit. I had broad shoulders. I could take Paul's bullshit. But I didn't want that for Aaron, especially if he was still trying to figure things out for himself.

Little did we know it was *the* breakfast—the one where our parents dropped the bomb on us that they were divorcing.

It was also the day before I was set to leave for Mississippi. Even though school didn't start until August, I had to be down there in June for the summer football program. Since the family was already “splitting up,” as Paul put it, it seemed like a good time to announce their impending divorce.

Aaron accepted that proclamation the same way he accepted any other bad news—by upending his chair, screaming “Fuck you!” at his father, and storming out.

By the time he came back to the house, it was nightfall. His dad was *irate*. Mom tried to keep Aaron, claiming she'd already registered him for his senior year of high school and that this was his home. His dad wouldn't budge. The minute Aaron showed his face, Paul grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the already-packed car.

I managed to give Aaron one last hug and tell him everything would be ok. Instead of telling him “Goodbye,” I told him “See you around,” to make it feel less... permanent. But the look he gave me, like he knew I was lying before I did, twisted right through the center of my chest. I never forgot it.

And it was the same exact look on his face in the cooler, ten years later. Eyes so full of hurt and anger and sadness. My fingers tightened on his arms, pulling him closer, trying to let him know I wouldn't let him go without a fight this time.

He stiffened against me, the muscle along the side of his jaw flexing. “Don't.”

“Aaron...”

“I don't want to talk.”

“Right now or ever?”

He scowled at me but didn't say anything.

“I don’t want to go years without talking to you again,” I said quietly.

“Well, I don’t give a shit what you want. I stopped caring about your opinion when you left me to go chase a fucking football scholarship.” He shoved his forearms against my chest, breaking the hold I had on his arms. Once I was out of his way, he darted forward and threw open the cooler door. It crashed into something on the other side, but he didn’t slow down.

Shaking my head, I picked up the items we’d dropped and set them on the shelves. I checked the flowers quickly to make sure they weren’t damaged and set the box up high where it was less likely to be crushed by anything inadvertently falling.

I didn’t blame Aaron for being mad, but I did blame him for acting like a goddamn child. Running from his problems was the easy way out. Refusing to talk was the easy way out. From now on, I wasn’t going to be fucking easy on him.

AARON

Valentine's Day — 11:57 p.m.

When the last of the bridal party finally staggered out of the banquet hall, I exhaled a sigh of relief. I was used to the chaos of a kitchen, but the chaos of a wedding party? Ugh. Fuck me, no thanks. If it wasn't for the money I made doing this, there's no way in hell I'd subject myself and my staff to this bullshit every year.

The only good thing about it being so busy on Valentine's Day was that I successfully avoided Alex for the rest of the night. Between overseeing the restaurant and checking in on the wedding, I hadn't had any time to freak out over what happened in the cooler. Or what *didn't* happen, I should say. Story of my life. Expect one thing, get something totally different.

Asking Alex for help was such a bad idea. All it did was stir up shit from the past and make him think I wanted to reestablish some sort of relationship. Friendship? Whatever the fuck he wanted to call it, it wasn't happening. I learned my lesson a long time ago not to hang my hopes on Alex and anything he said.

Except, the way he looked at me earlier during set up made my stomach do stupid somersaults. Having his arms wrapped around me, warming me in the chill air in the cooler? Keeping me from falling flat on my ass and wounding my pride? God, it was just like the first time I kissed him.

Despite the fact I'd downed a bottle of vodka at a summer kick-off party, I managed to stumble home while it was still dark. I not-so-stealthily climbed the lattice to the porch roof and crawled through the open window to what

turned out to be Alex's room instead of my own.

Landing in a sprawl on the floor, laughing hysterically, I didn't even realize my mistake until he was suddenly in front of me, half-naked, yanking me up to my feet.

"What are you—Jesus! How much did you have to drink?" He leaned back, taking me in with a furrowed brow, but not letting go. Probably so I didn't topple over, which was entirely possible since I kept swaying once I was vertical.

Shrugging in answer to his question, I rested my hands on his waist for more stability. It was pretty sobering considering for the past couple of years I'd made an effort *not* to touch him or be anywhere around him when he was less than one hundred percent dressed. No swimming. No barging into bathrooms or bedrooms. No locker rooms. Nada. It made for some awkward (not to mention boring) vacations, but it was a sacrifice I had to make.

I knew I was in trouble when I turned fifteen and started having wildly inappropriate dreams about him, but I thought I was safe because it was never reciprocated. How could it be? We were stepbrothers, for fuck's sake. And until that point, I'd assumed we were both straight. Even after he came out to his mom, I didn't get my hopes up. Alex was a Grade A Golden Child. There was no way he'd ever see me as anything other than the little brother who was shoved into his life when we were kids.

Our parents got together when I was six and he was seven, which meant I'd spent more than half my life growing up with Alex as family—not someone to lust after. But lust I did, like the fucked-up reject I was. I didn't even know what my sexuality was back then, I just knew the mere sight of him made my dick hard and when I furtively jerked off in the shower, I always came to thoughts of him.

So when I stumbled into his bedroom, drunk, and was confronted with him in nothing but boxers? Fuck yeah, I kissed him. But to my infinite surprise, *he* kissed *me*.

Even with liquor sloshing in my brain, I knew it was wrong. It was the wrongness that made it a thousand times hotter. All of my wildest fantasies were on the verge of coming true.

Neither one of us even tried to stop the other. We didn't try to point out all the reasons we shouldn't proceed down the dangerous road we were on. Once the ice was broken, we plunged headfirst into forbidden territory and we didn't look back.

That night was one of the greatest of my life, followed immediately by one of the worst days ever.

In the morning, Alex was a total stranger. He acted like the whole thing never happened. Not a peep after his mom knocked on his door, telling him breakfast was ready. Not a single word over the piles of eggs and waffles. I even purposely withheld the syrup from him, but he neither asked for it nor glanced in my direction to see what I was doing, which was hoarding the bottle and stealing glances at him from behind the jug of orange juice.

And then my fucking dad made the announcement—not only was he and Heather getting divorced, but I was being forcibly removed from the house that had been my home for eleven years and ripped away from the only real family I'd ever had.

Alex left the next day and made his life in Mississippi, meanwhile, I struggled with my new reality.

After a particularly rough night of trying to lose myself in the bottom of a bottle I stole from my fuckhead father's liquor stash, I saw a commercial for a culinary school, and my brilliant plan was hatched. I packed a bag, cleared out my meager savings account the next day, and ran away to the city.

Now here I was, back in Middleton, freaking the fuck out over the same guy I was ten years ago.

Watching Alex disassemble his floral masterpieces from across the ballroom, I couldn't help all of those old feelings as they came flooding in. He was still as muscular as he was in high school. Every time he hoisted a bucket of flowers, I swore his white t-shirt was in danger of ripping. Not that *that* would have been terrible.

No, it *would* have been terrible. I'd tried so hard to forget him and yet the second he so much as glanced my way, my proverbial tail started wagging like crazy.

I hated how he smiled at me when he came back from taking flowers to his van. I hated that once he was done picking up his shit, he started helping the waitstaff stack chairs and push tables out of the way for cleaning. But more than anything, I hated how when everyone else had gone home and it was just the two of us, he looked at me expectantly, like he was waiting for something—a thank you, an apology, goodbye. *Something*.

"I guess that's it," Alex said, hooking his thumbs in his pockets and swaggering forward.

"Yeah. Send me an invoice tomorrow and I'll get you a check."

“I think you still owe me dinner.”

“Shit.” I raked a hand through my hair, having completely forgotten what I told him earlier. “There might be some left in the kitchen.”

As I turned to go, his hand shot out and landed on my chest. “No, stay. I don’t really care about dinner...”

From the way the corner of his mouth lifted into a slow smile, I was pretty sure he could feel my heartbeat hammering under his palm.

“What are you doing?” I managed to spit out as he backed me up a couple of steps to the wall and pressed me against it.

“I’m not letting you run out of here without talking about what happened.”

“I’m not apologizing,” I said, chin lifting.

“You never do.”

“Fuck you, Alex. I knew calling you was a mistake. I should have—”

He crashed against me, stealing the rest of my reproach and whatever breath I had. For once, he was a man of action. His mouth slanted over mine in a bruising kiss, taking what he wanted but had been too chicken shit to do anything about all those years ago.

But it was too little too late.

I bunched my hands in his t-shirt and shoved against his stupidly hard pecs, unable to move him more than an inch or two.

He pulled away, but his hands cupped my face. “What’s the matter? Nothing to say now?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to stop being a brat and talk to me like a fucking adult.”

“Or what? You’re going to punish me? Pull out that Big Brother card like it actually means something?”

He stepped forward again, pressing me back into the wall and pinning me there with his massive frame. I’d always been scrawny compared to him but I’d never been as hyperaware of it as I was at that moment—the same way I was keenly aware of the fact his cock was hardening by the second, right next to my own.

“Is that what you want, Aaron? You want me to treat you like a piece of shit so you can finally work out your issues? Ok, I’ll play. You’ve had this coming for too damn long anyway.”

His words had barely sunk into my head before he grabbed me by the back of my neck and hauled me over to the closest table. Knocking the chairs

out of his way, he bent me over and shoved me face-first against the glossy wood.

“What the fuck?” I twisted, trying to get a look at him, but he snatched both wrists in one of his hands, preventing me from doing much of anything except squirming in place.

“You want to be a brat? I’ll treat you like a brat,” he replied, reaching around my hips and yanking open my belt buckle.

I smirked, wriggling my ass against his dick, calling his bluff. “Look at you. A closet Dom daddy. I bet your boyfriend just *loves* that.”

A resounding crack filled the room, followed immediately by a sharp sting on my ass. I stifled my yelp into a grimace, groaning through the pain.

“You like that?” he asked, his breath hot on my ear as he leaned in close. Grabbing my asscheek in one hand, he rubbed it firmly, soothing away the bite of pain. “Then keep it up.”

“Better save some of that energy for your *boyfriend*,” I carried on despite the fact he pulled my pants and my boxers down in one go, letting them pool at my feet. “It’s Valentine’s Day after all. Can’t go home to your little clone without any lead in your pencil.”

Crack. Crack.

I arched involuntarily, rising up my toes. Heat bloomed across both sides of my ass, which I’m sure would be marked in the morning with a perfect fucking outline of his hand. A shiver rippled down my back, a combination of the pain and the thought of him leaving irrefutable evidence of tonight—something my brain couldn’t deny in the days that followed. Not like last time.

Alex kneaded my stinging muscles until I relaxed. “Don’t fucking worry about my relationship status or what goddamn day it is. This is about you and me.”

“Aw, don’t tell me. Did you two have a fight?”

Crack.

I exhaled the breath I’d sucked in in anticipation. He was so easy to rile up. He always had been, when I had a mind to. Beneath that Golden Boy shell, he was as damaged as I was. Clearly. He just hid it better than I did.

“Nah,” I continued, widening my stance and arching my back for him, practically begging him to spank me again. Leave it to Alex to unlock a kink I didn’t even know I had. “I take it back. I bet your douchey little boyfriend doesn’t know this side of you even exists. He doesn’t know that what really

gets you hard is using your stepbrother's tight little hole. Pounding into it again and again until you blow—”

He cracked his hand across my ass so hard I hissed in pain.

And he didn't stop.

A rapid succession of swats left both cheeks stinging.

“Hate to break it to you,” Alex crooned against my ear, “but that douche you're so fixated on broke up with me earlier today, so you're not going to get very far by bringing him up in conversation every two seconds.” His hand caressed my ass, sweeping over my burning cheeks and rubbing them gently.

“Is that why you're so hard up? Gotta make sure you get laid on Valentine's Day or something? And who better to get your rocks off with than the guy you fucked over ten years ago? Make it a milestone each decade?”

The swat that came next was no more than a flick but instead of hitting my ass, his fingertips smacked my balls, sending a jolt up my spine. When I came up off the table, his big hand plastered itself on my back, keeping me flat.

“Oh, no you don't,” he chuckled darkly, rolling my tingling balls in his hand with a striking gentleness considering he might as well have just slapped them. “You don't get to spew venom without consequences anymore. So, say what you want, Aaron. Get it all out of your system. Every ugly thought rolling around in that head of yours. But you're getting smacked each time you get it wrong.”

“Is that what this is? Some big life lesson you're so graciously teaching me?”

“I told you, you've had this coming for a long time. Since sex and pain are the only ways to get through that hard as fuck exterior of yours, you left me no choice. I tried to talk to you and you ran away. No more running. We're figuring this shit out right here, right now.”

“Well hate to break it to *you*, Golden Boy, but this isn't exactly sex. I don't know what corner of the internet you've been lurking on.”

He circled my rim with the pad of his finger before, dipping in slightly.

I tried to stifle my gasp but I knew he heard it by the husky chuckle against my ear.

“Is this more your speed, brother?”

“Don't call me that.”

“Then what should I call you?” His finger slid in to the first knuckle,

slowly, tauntingly.

I bit my lip and tried not to press back against him. “How about my name?” I ground out between my teeth.

“Ok... *Aaron*...” The way he growled my name sent a full shudder down my spine. He pushed his finger in the rest of the way, working it in and out slowly. The weight of him against my back held me in place, keeping me from spinning out into orbit.

“Fuck...” I closed my eyes, the pleasure-pain sensation firing through every nerve.

“Oh, that’s right,” he mused out loud, “I remember now. When it comes down to it, you’re all bark and no bite.”

“Fuck you.”

“You first.” He licked my ear before nipping it. I was still reeling from that flash of pain when a second finger pressed inside. They were warm and extraordinarily slippery. I didn’t want to think about the fact he was using a packet of lube he’d originally meant for some douche named Brad but I was grateful he was considerate enough to use *something*. It had been a while since I’d had anything up my ass, let alone a cock like the one I knew he was packing.

“There you go,” he sighed, his hard-on pressing against me as he rolled his hips, giving himself some friction as he kept fingering me. “Open up for me like a good boy.”

I actually whimpered. Like a fucking moron.

Fuck! What was I doing? What were we doing? I’d spent the last decade hating him. And now here I was, clutching the hand that was pinning my wrists together behind my back, on the verge of being fucked by a guy I shouldn’t want. Who shouldn’t want me. And like I hadn’t spent the past ten years convincing myself I was worthless in his eyes, that what happened between us wasn’t real.

“Alex...” I bit my lip.

Twisting his fingers inside me, he rubbed against that bundle of nerves and completely disrupted my train of thought. “You want me to stop?”

Of everything racing through my head, that was the last thing I wanted. “No,” I said quickly before he took my silence as a “Yes.”

“You want to keep going?”

Whatever uncertainty had been creeping into the back of my mind was crushed by his question, the fact he even gave a damn and bothered asking.

“Yeah.”

“Then turn around and get on your knees and get to work with that bratty mouth of yours.” He grabbed me by the back of my shirt and hauled me off of the table.

Already salivating at his command, I spun and dropped to my knees for him. I hated authority figures, always had. I hated being at someone else’s beck and call. But Alex was different. Somehow he got under my skin and made me jump at his every request. Maybe because he was generally a “good” guy, except when it came to keeping his fucking promises.

Sliding his zipper down, I shimmied his pants out of the way while he reached into his Andrew Christian’s and pulled out his cock, pumping it slowly. He was hard as a fucking rock, a silver strand of pre-cum glistening on the flushed head.

It was the cock of my fucking dreams, of every childhood fantasy and one drunken memory commingling together. I’d only experienced it once and thanks to the vodka and the turmoil of the subsequent days, I’d forgotten a lot of the details, but being presented with it again, up close and personal, a host of feelings rushed through me.

He gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger, his blue eyes softening. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t do this again.” It was out of my mouth before I could reel it back in. And once again, the damage was done. I couldn’t take it back. There was only one thing I could do—run.

Shaking my head, I pulled out of his grip and got to my feet, fixing my pants as quickly as I could.

“Aaron.”

I heard the silent question attached to my name, just like I heard his zipper and his footsteps as they hastened to catch up to me. I didn’t stop and I didn’t answer him, flying down the stairs and out the backdoor of the restaurant.

He caught up to me in the alley behind the bar, halfway between the door and my car, just shy of escape.

“Aaron. Stop!”

“I’m not fucking doing this with you right now!”

“Please, just talk to me!”

“Leave me alone, Alex.” I shrugged him off and kept moving for my car. My eyes burned in the freezing winter air and I blinked hard, grateful he was

behind me and couldn't see how fucking pathetic I was.

"No, I won't." He darted in front of me, his breath coming in fast puffs of glittery clouds. "After ten years, I finally have you back in my life. I'm not going to let you walk away again and treat me like I'm a stranger when we are so much more than that."

"Hurts, huh?" I smirked, reclaiming an iota of control I was rapidly losing by the second. "Feeling like you're nothing?"

"You're *not* nothing. You were never nothing."

"Really? Could have fucking fooled me."

"What did you want me to do? Take you to Mississippi with me? I texted you! I called you! You never answered! When I came home for Christmas, you were gone!"

"Convenient excuse since the fuckwad who is my father turned off my cell phone! But that doesn't explain why *you* never answered any of *my* messages, Mister High and Mighty."

"I never got any!" His face crumpled a moment before he ran his palm over it, exhaling a weary sigh. "Because he turned mine off too. Goddamn it! We were on the same plan and when Paul canceled everything, we all got new numbers."

Well... fuck.

That certainly explained why the guy who *did* eventually answer Alex's number told me to fuck off and stop calling.

God fucking damn it.

I wanted to scream into the void, to find a way to undo my mistakes, to apologize for being a fucking idiot. But all I could muster was a half-hearted shrug. "Guess it wasn't meant to be, then. Glad we cleared all that up. You feel better now?"

He grabbed my bicep and kept me in place before I could so much as pivot to walk away. "Why are you here? Why did you come back to Middleton?"

"The fuck does it matter to you?" I shoved at his hand, but it was locked on tight.

"If you hate me, if you hate this town, then why the fuck are you here? Why did you open a restaurant down the street from me? Tell me why."

The burning in my eyes was back; no amount of blinking would make it go away. I wanted to deck him, or scream at him, anything to get him to let go so I could go home and down a bottle of vodka and forget this whole

fucking day had ever happened.

I managed to yank myself free before crossing my arms over my chest, glaring past his head. My reply came out croaky and thick, since my throat felt like it was closing with each passing second. “Because of your mom.”

“My mom?”

Rather than try and find the right words and run the risk of fucking everything up even more, I pulled out my wallet and untucked a pristine hundred-dollar bill. Heather’s perfect cursive covered the top in her favorite turquoise ink.

I’m so proud of you and everything you’ve done. This is just the beginning. Love, Mom.

His jaw shifted and flexed. I couldn’t tell if he was pissed that she called herself “Mom” to me or that I had the nerve to carry a piece of her around in my wallet.

“I don’t understand,” Alex whispered, handing the money back. “You saw her?”

“She found me in Chicago. Convinced me I should open my own restaurant. Then she gave me that and told me about some expo Middleton was having to try and bring in new businesses to the downtown area. That day in the grocery store? I was meeting with investors to see what needed to be done to get the restaurant open. Turned out there was no expo. It was just Heather. She knew that space was going to be available and got the landlord to give me a break.”

“She never said anything.” He blinked, hard, and let his gaze fall to the ground.

“Probably because she died... right after...” I slipped my wallet back into my pocket, feeling like even more of an asshole as I waited for the next battle to begin.

Alex didn’t skip a beat. His gaze snapped up again, eyes narrowed in a dark mixture of anger and sadness. “If you knew she died, then why didn’t you come to the funeral?”

“I did.” I swallowed thickly. “I just... came late. I saw you with your grandma and your cousins. Your family. I didn’t want to ruin that for you, especially after the last time...”

“*You’re* my family, idiot,” he said hotly, still glaring. “Why didn’t you see me after? It’s not like you didn’t know where the hell I was!”

I scoffed, hackles rising again in guilt and defensiveness. “Because I’m a

fucking coward! Is that what you want to hear? You're the better man, Alex. You always have been. And I couldn't be rejected by you again. It hurt too fucking much the first time. You were already hurting. I didn't want to fucking pile it on for you!"

"I never rejected you!"

"I gave my virginity to you and you wouldn't even fucking *look* at me the next morning!"

He gaped at me. "You didn't say anything! I didn't know if you remembered or not! Even if you did, I thought you were ashamed! It's like you were avoiding me and I didn't want to make things worse for you!"

"Well, you did! And now you want to point the finger that I didn't rush to your side the second I moved back? What about you? Huh? I damn near opened a restaurant in your fucking face and you couldn't even be bothered to walk your happy little ass down here? Pick up a fucking phone? Shows how much I really mean to you."

He move forward so quickly I took a step back. Instead of punching me, he cupped my face between his hands and kissed me. When he finally pulled away, he swept his thumb across my damp cheekbone. "I love you, you stubborn asshole. And I *did* walk over here. I was here for your grand opening. And I've ordered your blackberry crepes at least once a week ever since."

My chest squeezed. "No powdered sugar and an orange juice to go?"

He smiled and nodded. "I thought you wanted to be left alone, so that's what I did. Except now I see what an idiot I was. I should have fought harder for you. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Aaron."

"I'm sorry too." I pressed my lips to his, kissing him fervently despite my tears. Although at one point I wasn't sure they were entirely mine. "I shouldn't have been such an asshole. I should—"

He kissed me again, slipping one hand to the back of my neck and pulling me closer. "Can we finish this inside? I don't know about you, but I'm freezing."

I shook my head. "I just want to go home. I'll worry about the rest of that shit tomorrow," I said, waving a hand toward the restaurant.

"Do you want to come to my place?"

"I don't even know where your place is."

His hopeful smile brightened as he squeezed my hand. "Yeah, you do. Come on."

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AARON

February 15th — 12:41 a.m.

“**Y**ou live *here*?” I asked, like a moron, as Alex keyed us in the backdoor of Briar Lane.

“Yeah. Upstairs.”

“I can’t believe you did it. I mean, I remember your mom talking about restoring it up there, but...”

He grinned at me, leading the way up the back stairs. “I think you’ll like it.”

The upstairs loft was a continuation of the magical Secret Garden vibe downstairs. Plants and flowers hung everywhere, pops of pinks and reds and whites against the sage greens and beiges of the decor. It was warm and cozy and begged you to curl up on the couch and relax in front of the old brick fireplace. The large windows were frosted over, but the dim glow of Middleton illuminated them softly.

“Better than my condo,” I said, wandering into the living room. There was no sign of another guy. Guess he wasn’t lying about the douche breaking things off earlier.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “Can I get you anything?”

“A drink would be great.”

Alex stepped into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer. He poured two glasses and handed me one with a small smile.

“Thank you.” I took it but didn’t drink. As much as I wanted it to calm my nerves, I also didn’t want some twisted repeat of what happened in high

school.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but he blinked quickly and looked away, downing his vodka in one gulp. Was he as nervous as I was all of a sudden? And why was I so fucking nervous? Why was *he*? Maybe because I wasn't drunk, or angry. I didn't know what his excuse was, but actually having a real conversation behind Bramble, brief though it was, somehow left me feeling more vulnerable than being bent over a table and spanked by my stepbrother.

"I don't know what we're doing," I admitted, clearing my throat even as my gaze fell to the untouched drink in my hand. "I thought we hashed it all out. So why did you bring me here?"

He closed the distance and took the glass from me, setting it on the edge of the coffee table. "Because I want to be with you. We've lost so much time already. I don't want to lose another second."

"You think one conversation is going to undo the last ten years?"

"No." He smiled softly and touched my face. "But it's a start, right?"

"You didn't even ask if I'm in a relationship. I could have someone waiting at home, you know."

He smirked. "You don't."

"How do you know?" I narrowed my gaze at him. Middleton might have been small, but it wasn't *that* small. There were still a few thousand other residents and I doubted my love life was the topic of anyone's conversation.

"Because despite what you think, I *know* you," Alex replied, smirk firmly intact. "I know you're too busy—not to mention too stubborn and picky as all get out—for any sort of a long-term relationship. Plus, there's no way in Hell you would have let me go as far as I did if you were seeing someone. You might play up that bad boy image for other people, but you're not your father. You don't cheat."

He had a point. Ok, several points, but rather than admit he was right about any of it, I conceded with an eye roll. "So what happened to the douchebag?"

"Do you really want to talk about him right now?" He arched a blond brow.

Ugh. Even thinking about Alex with another guy made bile rise in the back of my throat. Why did I keep doing this? Oh, that's right. Because it was easier to pick a fight than have another honest conversation.

"No," I finally mumbled when it was clear he wasn't going to let it go.

“No.” He shook his head with a slow grin. “So get him out of your head. He doesn’t matter. You’re the only thing that matters to me right now. Truth be told, you’re the only one who *ever* mattered.”

I stepped away from him quickly, pretending to be more interested in the rack of wine bottles on the counter. “I owe you dinner, right?”

“Yeah, you do.” His footsteps approached slowly, but I didn’t turn until he slid up on the counter, facing me with a gentle expression. “However, I’m just as happy with a bowl of cereal after a long ass day like today.”

I made a face at him, insulted on a number of levels. “I can’t let you eat cereal for dinner, not after you saved my ass.”

“I can’t ask you to cook for me after you’ve been up since—what time? Five? Six?”

“So what am I doing here then?” I repeated, leaning my hip against the counter next to him and folding my arms over my chest.

“I told you. I don’t want to waste any more time. I want to know everything you’ve been doing, everything you’ve done, everything you *want* to do. We lost ten years because of stupid circumstances and the fact neither of us was man enough to open our mouths when it mattered.”

Wordlessly, I slid between his thighs and wrapped my arms around his waist, burying my face in the side of his neck. He smelled clean and fresh, like the greenery all around us with a touch of spice. He smelled like home.

He hugged me tightly. “I love you, Aaron. I’ve always loved you. In every possible way.”

“Even though you shouldn’t?” I pulled back as he ran a hand through my mess of dark hair, attempting to tilt my face toward his. “Even though it’s wrong?”

“Do you really think it’s wrong?” His eyes tightened at the corners, like he was the one bracing for rejection this time.

“You don’t?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“No? Just like that?”

“Just like that. Is it unconventional? Sure. But I stopped caring what people think about me a long time ago. Life is too damn short. And if I get a second chance with you, I’m gonna fucking take it.”

I could hardly wrap my head around everything that had happened throughout the day, let alone what he was saying now. It had to be exhaustion, urging me to flee. Or the whisper of my father’s voice—

reminding me I wasn't good enough for anyone or anything. Even my own mother couldn't love me, which is why she left me with the asshole instead of taking me with her. I wasn't worth anyone's time, or effort, or love. That's why they *all* left in the end, Alex and Heather included.

"I should go," I said, pulling away from Alex. "It's been a long day for both of us."

"Stay," Alex said softly. "Please? It's late and you look beat. I don't want you driving like this. You can take the bed and I'll sleep on the couch."

"Yeah. Sure. Ok." Frankly, I was too tired to argue after the day I'd had. It didn't seem to get me anywhere with him anyway. And yet he said *I* was the stubborn one.

After Alex put fresh sheets on the bed, he gave me a shy little smile and an awkward one-armed hug. "I'm really glad you're here."

"Goodnight."

His smile brightened a bit before he drifted away to the living room, turning off the lights. Once the loft was dark, he settled on the overstuffed beige sectional, true to his word.

I exhaled softly and stared at the soaring ceiling overhead. What the hell had happened in the universe today? Valentine's Day was the worst. The absolute worst. And yet... did an over-priced, consumer-driven holiday for sappy schmucks really bring Alex back into my life? Was there some fat little angel flying around shooting people in the ass with arrows?

Whatever the fuck it was, I thanked my lucky (or unlucky) stars that I was getting a do-over.

For the first time in I don't know when, I woke up after the sun was already high in the sky. The smell of butter frying and a knife chopping only added to the confusion. I rubbed the heel of my hand in my eye and sat up slowly, taking in my foreign surroundings. Memories of the night before came back to me and what seemed like a weird-as-fuck dream was slowly sinking in as reality.

Right as a flutter of nerves ran through my stomach, I saw Alex in the kitchen, shirtless, standing at the stove.

I crept out of bed and made my way toward him. "What are you doing?"

He smiled brightly, lighting up the whole room more than the sunshine streaming in the oversized windows. “Making you breakfast. Well, brunch, I guess.”

“Why?”

“You feed everyone else, but who cooks for you?”

I didn’t have a ready answer for him, mainly because I’d been on my own for so long.

Since I didn’t say anything, he nudged me out of the way of his prep area. “Sit.”

“Let me help.”

“Afraid I’ll mess it up?” he teased with a grin.

“More like divide and conquer.” I slid around him and opened the fridge, surveying what I had to work with. Knowing him, it would either be feast or famine as far as ingredients went.

My eyes lit up the moment I opened the fruit drawer.

As soon as Alex saw me with the blackberries in hand, he paused in his chopping. “Are you making what I think you’re making?”

Biting my lower lip suggestively, I reached behind him, forcing him to back up against the counter as I grabbed a wooden spoon. “I hear it’s your favorite.”

“Might be... but I don’t have any oranges.” His voice was breathier than it was a moment ago, something that thrilled me to no end.

“Lemon will work,” I murmured, sliding in the other direction to grab one from a bowl, our bare chests grazing with the movement. “Do you have any honey?”

He blinked a second too long before nodding and tossing his head to the side. “On the right.”

“Thanks.” I stepped away in the direction he indicated, a full-on grin splitting my face as soon as my back was turned. Growing up, it always felt like he had the power, like he was the one in control. But now? Somehow I had gained the upper hand in the daylight and I wasn’t about to give it up.

We worked side by side, the sound of utensils and cooking food filling up the weighted silence between us.

Once the blackberry sauce had come together, I spooned some out of the pot and blew on it gently before offering it to him. “What do you think?”

His blue eyes met mine as his tongue caressed the underside of the spoon. I was entranced as I watched the dark purple concoction coat his pink tongue

and disappear into his luscious mouth. His lashes closed, like it was some sinful delight, and I couldn't help myself. I flung the spoon back into the pot and grabbed his face between my hands, kissing him greedily. The tartness of the blackberry and the sweetness of his lips tasted better than any culinary combination I could have hoped to achieve.

"I want to lick this off of every inch of you," he growled, reaching for the spoon.

"That could get messy."

"That's the whole idea." He backed me up against the counter, scooping up some more sauce and blowing on it. Once the steam cleared, he let it drip down my bare, tattooed chest. The warm sauce trickled over my skin, followed by his tongue, licking and sucking the blackberries from my pec. When he got to my nipple, he kept sucking long after the sauce was gone, swirling his tongue around the peak.

"I can't believe this is happening." For a moment, I wasn't sure if I said it out loud or not, but Alex stopped and lifted his gaze to mine.

"Did I misread the signals? Do you want to stop?" he asked, his voice as pained as his expression.

"No," I replied quickly. "I'm just... I, I-I'm negative." Oh my God. What was wrong with me?! Just blurting shit out without actually forming a complete sentence? But that's what people did, right? That's what adults did? Had serious conversations before jumping into the sack with one another? I mean, this wasn't like a random hookup from an app or in a bar bathroom or something. This was *Alex*. I wanted to be worthy of him. I wanted to *try* and get it right this time.

He quirked a sandy brow before the corners of his mouth pulled into a smile. "You mean you tested negative?"

Suddenly, my face felt like it was on fire. "Yeah. The fuck you think I meant?"

"Well, I mean, you have such a sunny personality..."

"Fuck you." I made sure it was less caustic than usual, matching his smug little smirk.

"I'm negative too," he said, ignoring my snappy remark. "Any other questions?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. Do you have any? Or whatever?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Ok," I said simply.

“Ok?”

“Yeah, ok. Let’s do this then.”

“Man, you sure know how to sweet talk a guy.”

“Do you want to fuck me or not?” I huffed.

“Still not a morning person, I see?” He bit his lip in what I think was an attempt to stifle his shit-eating grin, but it failed. Miserably. It didn’t matter, though, because he pressed his mouth to mine and slid his tongue inside. I caressed mine along his, running my hands over his chest and down his abs. Our cocks rubbed together through our boxers, as eager as the rest of us for some attention.

“Get on the counter,” he instructed, “on all fours.”

I moved to the island and started to climb up, but he grabbed my hips and yanked my ass against his cock, his thumbs hooked in the waistband of my Calvins.

“Without these,” he said against my ear, his teeth grazing the edge of my pierced earlobe.

I let him slide my boxers down, his fingertips skimming along my thighs as the material dropped to my ankles. He palmed my bare ass, squeezing and groaning in appreciation. “Fuck, Aaron. Your body is perfect.” His hands continued to roam, over my hips, my back, my shoulders. “These tattoos look so fucking sexy.”

“You don’t care that I’m not some ‘roided-out gym rat?”

“Not one bit.” He turned me to face him, nothing but hunger and sincerity in his gaze, not derision. “Your skin is so soft and beautiful. I love it.” He ran his lips along the underside of my jaw and dipped down to kiss my throat—the giant red rose I’d put there after Heather died. If he looked closely, he would have seen her initials embedded in the petals, but he was too busy kissing and biting my neck. His hands dropped to my ass again and he hoisted me up with ease, setting me on the counter. Pushing me onto my back gently, he proceeded to drizzle blackberry sauce all over my torso, dripping a dark purple trail straight to my cock. Thankfully, the mixture had completely cooled, but I still jumped and tried to suppress a laugh when a larger chunk of berry splatted on my groin.

He chuckled and scooped it off with the tip of his finger. “Missed one,” he said offering it to me.

“I was distracted,” I said in my defense before sucking the berry and its sauce off Alex’s finger.

As soon as it was clean, it was his turn to pounce, like a starving man in front of a buffet. His tongue twirled and danced across my skin, making every nerve come alive. By the time he finally got to my cock, I was a sticky, writhing mess beneath him.

He devoured my sauce-covered cock with the same enthusiasm he had for my chest and abs, perhaps more. One suck and he pulled me in deep, hitting the back of his throat with zero hesitation. I arched my back, pushing myself even deeper into his mouth while fighting to keep my gaze locked on the glorious sight before me—Alex’s perfect, sensuous mouth wrapped around my dick.

“Oh my God,” I gasped, eyes rolling in the back of my head as he sucked harder, his tongue teasing around my crown. I only vaguely remembered him doing it our first time, but needless to say, his skillset had probably greatly improved since then.

Releasing my cock with a wet ‘pop,’ he ducked his face and dragged his tongue along my balls, sucking the skin with determination. They tightened in his mouth, first one and then the other, before he popped off again and pushed my thighs open wider.

“Uh oh,” he said, sounding anything but concerned. “Seems I made a bigger mess than I meant to.”

“What—” Before I could finish the question, he pushed my legs forward, tilting my ass up at an angle approximately two seconds before burying his face between my cheeks and running his tongue all over my hole.

“Oh, shit!” I squirmed, gripping the edge of the counter for support before I went flying off of it. He tightened his hold on the backs of my highs, keeping me still while he lapped my hole, teased my rim, and sucked the delicate area like it was his last meal.

“I told you,” he rasped when he finally came up for air. “I want to lick this off of every inch of you.” He dipped his fingers in the sauce and swirled them around provocatively.

I grabbed his wrist and brought his hand to my lips, sucking the tip of his finger into my mouth and licking off the tart sweetness. His gaze darkened, an almost primal response. A strangled noise sounded in the back of his throat and he ripped his finger from my mouth, seizing me in a fierce kiss and thrusting his tongue inside to reclaim the blackberry sauce. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him in close, kissing him as hard as I could, as if I could compress ten years of lost time into the intensity of this one

moment.

“I want you to fuck me,” I panted against his lips.

Nodding, almost frantic, he cast about the kitchen quickly before lunging at a cabinet near the stove and returning in a split second with a jar of coconut oil.

“Interesting,” I observed with a smirk.

“It’ll do, right?” he asked, warming some of it in his palm and smearing it over his cock until it was glistening from root to tip.

“It’ll do,” I agreed, spreading the melty white substance around my hole and fingering myself open in the process.

“Fuck, baby... You look so fucking hot like that.” He stroked his dick slowly, his eyes glued to my ass, watching my fingers work in sheer desperation.

I made a show of it for him, rolling onto my side on the counter and reaching behind me to finger myself as deeply as I could. “Just imagining that fat cock in here,” I groaned, stuffing a second finger inside. “Oh my God, I already know it’s going to make me scream. I don’t know if I can take it.”

He stepped closer and dipped a finger in the coconut oil before wedging it inside with mine.

I cried out, clenching around our joined fingers.

“Oh, you can take it,” he purred, working his finger in and out when mine stopped, stretching my rim from every angle. “Look at you. Three fingers in this tight little hole. Just begging to be fucked.”

“Then do it. I’m ready.”

“Mmm... not yet.” He slid a second finger inside, scissoring me open as if he had all the time in the world.

“Oh fuck. That feels—” Whatever else I was going to say ended in a moan as his fingers expertly moved inside of me. My eyes slammed shut and I bit my lip, rolling my hips against his hand.

“I think you’re ready now.”

The loss of heat and fullness from our combined fingers was sudden and I was desperate to have it back. He dropped some more of the coconut oil in my hole and massaged it for a moment before flipping me onto my back again and pulling my ass to the end of the counter.

“I’ve been dreaming about this,” Alex said, lining up his cock up against my ass. “You have no idea.”

“I do.” I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him against me, trying to hurry him up. “Every time I fuck myself, I imagine it’s you. I have ever since that night.”

“No one else has done it for you?” he asked, pushing the tip inside.

“No,” I gasped, forcing myself to relax as my body stretched around him. “I’ve fucked around a bit, but you’re the only one who’s ever fucked me.”

Alex moaned and grabbed me by the back of my neck, pulling my mouth against his while his cock slid in deeper.

Inch by glorious, but still kinda painful inch, he pushed inside the rest of the way, kissing me and caressing me with his free hand. My face, my hair, my shoulder, like he wanted to touch me everywhere at once, inside and out.

We stayed like that for a while, kissing and stroking one another, until I rocked my hips, testing the impossible fullness inside of me.

“You feel so good,” I breathed. “I just need a minute.”

“Whatever you need, baby,” he replied, pressing soft kisses to my face and throat, letting me roll my hips against him, taking him in all the way until his balls were pressed against my ass.

“God, you’re so fucking tight.” He gasped when I clenched reflexively. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah. Let me ride you, though. That might make it easier.”

Wrapping his arms around me, he carried me to the couch, his cock still inside. He sat carefully and settled his hands on my hips, gazing up at me with an almost reverent look in his eyes. “Whenever you’re ready. Just tell me what you need. How you want it.”

I steadied myself, hands on his broad shoulders, and bounced slowly, swiveling my hips every now and again, getting reacquainted with the feeling of a real cock, a real *person* on the other end. It wasn’t like when I fucked myself with a dildo to get off. Alex responded to every thrust and each time I ground against his lap, his fingers dug into my hip bones. He kissed and bit my wrist as I ran my fingers through his dark blond curls. Sweat and coconut oil glistened against his pristine skin and his eyes rolled up in his head as I picked up the pace, riding him harder, my own dick slapping and bouncing on his abs.

“You’re going to make me fucking come, baby,” Alex groaned, grabbing my hips and thrusting up into me.

“Good.” I grinned, grinding my ass against him.

“But you haven’t.”

“I will when I breed that perfect ass of yours.”

“Oh, fuck.” He threw me on my back on the couch and settled between my legs again, reinserting himself with ease. It was like a switch flipped inside of him. He slammed into me again and again. I could barely keep my legs on his shoulders until he leaned forward and kissed me hotly, panting between thrusts. “I’m gonna come so deep in your fucking ass, baby.”

“Do it,” I panted, clamping my muscles around his dick each time he pulled back.

“Fuck, yes. Oh my God.” It only took a few more thrusts before he unloaded everything he had into my ass with desperate grunts and groans between our frenzied kisses.

My balls were so full, aching for their own release, but it would be worth the wait.

After Alex came down from his climax, kissing me softly, I bit his lower lip and sucked on it. “Your turn.”

He grinned and sat back, pulling me up with him. “Where do you want me?”

“On your knees. I want to see everything.”

His grin widened and he turned around, bending himself over the arm of the couch and presenting me with the ass of my dreams. All those years of football had most definitely paid off. He was all muscle and smooth, unblemished skin, not marked up by ink and scars like me.

I slipped off the couch and grabbed the coconut oil from the counter.

Smearing a handful of the melty stuff all over his ass, I massaged the hard muscles and rubbed the oil into his perfect pink hole.

“Fuck, this is beautiful,” I said, circling his rim and tracing the faint line down to his balls. “You should have a fan page with an ass like this.”

“Only if you do it with me.” He smirked at me over his shoulder. “I mean, the marketing writes itself.”

“Stepbrothers?”

“Stepbrothers. Jock and bad boy. Brat and—”

“I’m *not* calling you Daddy.” I couldn’t even say it with a straight face.

And apparently, he couldn’t even picture it without laughing. “Don’t tell me *you* want to be the Daddy?”

“Don’t you fucking dare.” I punctuated the threat by smacking his ass soundly. A perfect red handprint swelled on his ass cheek and I hummed in appreciation. “Goddamn...”

He rolled his hips, tempting me to hit him again. “See something you like?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” I didn’t have a spanking kink before him, but I could certainly get on board with it.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“Just appreciating the view.”

It didn’t take long before he was hard again. Oil in hand, I stroked his dick while massaging his rim, his balls, and the red handprint on his ass. When I finally pressed a finger inside, we moaned at the same time, like the tension was leaving both of us.

“Goddamn you’re perfect,” I murmured in awe.

The more I touched him, the less composure he seemed to have, until he was slumped on the arm of the couch. Moaning and rocking back against my hand, he was either trying to get me to speed up stroking his cock or finger-fuck him harder. Or both.

But torturing him was torturing me, so I scooted closer on my knees and held him by the hip, guiding my cock into position.

“You ready?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah.”

Pushing inside of him was a euphoria I could only imagine in my dreams—and I had. My whole sexual life. He was the source of my wildest fantasies and now they were coming to life, more than they ever had in high school.

A hiss escaped him as I bottomed out, ending abruptly in a ragged breath that tore out of him. I leaned forward, looping my arm over his shoulder and across his chest while nuzzling his neck. “You ok?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m good.”

I thrust in slowly. “You still good?”

“I’m good. Now fuck me already.”

I moved my hand up to his throat, fingers tightening just enough to make a point. “Now who’s being a brat?”

He chuckled darkly, clenching his ass around my cock as I pulled back, teasing me the same way I’d teased him. “Takes one to know one.”

I thrust into him again, harder, pleased when he let out a surprised gasp. Keeping one hand in place around his throat, I thrust into him in steady strokes, finding a rhythm that suited us both.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” he moaned. “Just like that. You feel amazing.”

I almost busted from that alone, but I had ten years of fantasies to make

up for—and judging from the way he met each thrust, I had a feeling he did too. I couldn't ruin it for both of us.

Letting go of his throat, I gripped his hips with both hands and drove into him, timing my speed and thrusts with his reactions, giving him more of what made him moan and swear under his breath.

“You're fucking incredible,” I gasped, running my hand down the muscles in his back, slippery with sweat and coconut oil.

He bounced his ass against my cock, seeming to take the compliment in stride and pushing me closer to orgasm.

“Oh, shit. I'm gonna—” The warning died in a strangled groan, my cock buried in him one more time. Pulse after pulse of pleasure ran down my spine, unleashing deep inside of him.

I slumped over his back, kissing his shoulder and his neck between ragged pants to try and steady my breathing.

He reached behind him and ran his fingers through my hair, scratching my scalp lightly. “You ok? You're shaking.”

I hadn't even realized I was. “Yeah. I'm ok.”

“Think you can manage a shower?”

Too tired for words, I simply nodded.

ALEX

February 15th — 10:57 a.m.

Aron was like a zombie on the way to the shower. I'm pretty sure if I let him lay on the couch one second longer, he would have passed out. He'd had dark circles under his eyes yesterday but I assumed it was the stress of the day and his flower snafu. In the light of the next day, though, I wondered how deep his exhaustion ran.

He looked like he wanted to cry when he saw me cooking an omelet for him, like it was some glorious culinary feat. Standing before me in the shower, with his eyes closed and head tilted back under the spray so I could massage the shampoo into his hair, my mission was clear. Whether his stubborn ass wanted to admit it or not, he needed someone to take care of him—and *I* was going to be that someone. I meant what I said the night before. We'd already lost so much time. I didn't want to lose another moment with him.

"When's the last time you took a vacation?" I asked, almost as soon as the thought popped into my head.

He opened his eyes slowly, a crease between his brows. "Huh?"

"A vacation? When is the last time you took a vacation?"

I might as well have been speaking Greek with the way he looked at me. "There's never really a good time. I mean, there's Easter, graduations, and goddamn Mother's Day. Then fucking Father's Day and—"

"I'm well aware of the dates on the calendar. What I'm saying is, you *need* a vacation. So let's plan one."

“I can’t.”

“Because of the restaurant?”

“That’s part of it.”

“What’s the other part?”

Averting his gaze, he didn’t answer. It looked like his fight or flight instincts had kicked in again. Rather than push for a verbal answer and run the risk of losing him a second time, I tipped his head back again and finished rinsing his hair.

“One day at a time, ok?” I said after I finished. “One day at a time. Just... Getting to know one another again. See if you’re still a nerd underneath all this badass ink.”

That brought his gaze back to me and a small smirk to his lips. “Says the guy who could lift me with one arm. Not very badass of me.”

“I could never sit for one tattoo, let alone do all this,” I said, running my hands over his wet skin. “You know I get queasy at the sight of blood.”

“Like the time I fell off my skateboard and cut my leg open?” He grinned darkly.

I groaned. “Why did you have to bring that up?”

“Because *I* was the one bleeding all over the driveway and yet *you* were the one who got to ride in the ambulance!”

“It is not my fault I passed out,” I countered. “But it proves my point—they patched you up right there at the house and you were skateboarding again the next day, meanwhile I had to go to the hospital for a CT scan.”

“You do not want to hear about my early years in a kitchen then.” He chuckled.

“No, I probably don’t. But I see all of your fingers are still attached, so I guess that’s a good sign.”

He laced said fingers through mine, pulling me in close, his blue eyes full of sadness again. “I really missed you...”

A pang of guilt tore through me as I rested my forehead against his. “I really missed you too. I’m sorry for—”

He pressed his lips to mine, cutting off yet another apology. I didn’t want to keep bringing it up, but I also didn’t want him to think I’d swept everything under the rug, either. It *would* take time to get reacquainted, to fill in the ten-year gap to our history. Having him back made me stupidly happy, though. I didn’t want to address the past any more than we had to—not when we had our future in front of us.

Rumbling in our stomachs prompted us to actually finish our shower and get dressed. Since everything had happened so last minute, I loaned him a t-shirt and a pair of sweats. The baggy t-shirt was fine, but I snickered when he had to roll the waistband on the pants down a couple of times. It reminded me of high school when he used to borrow my stuff. At the time I thought he genuinely liked the skater/emo vibe my bigger clothes gave him—looking back, I wondered if there was more to it. My guess is, yes.

“Ready to eat?” I asked once he was done fiddling with the pants.

“Fucking starving.”

Trudging back to the kitchen, we both groaned, surveying the disaster we’d left behind in our horny rush.

“I’m sorry about breakfast,” I said sheepishly as he poked the congealed blackberry sauce with his finger, his nose wrinkled. From the faint scorched smell, I was pretty sure it wasn’t salvageable.

“It was the best breakfast I never had,” he replied with a smile and a tight hug. “But I’ll call Bramble. I should probably check in anyway. Nico’s been blowing up my phone. They’re not used to me not being there.”

“While you do that, I’ll clean this up.”

“What about your shop?”

I shrugged. “What about it? I don’t feel like opening today. Besides, it’s a Sunday. It’s not my busiest day of the week.”

He nodded and wandered off to the far side of the loft to make his phone call, pacing in front of the large windows overlooking Middleton.

I watched him for a bit, trying to gauge his body language from a distance and not strain my neck eavesdropping. Not that I thought he’d be talking to his employee about what he was doing, or where, or with whom... It was simple curiosity. That’s all. Wondering what excuse he was going to use to mark his notable absence from the most important thing in his life.

When Aaron turned in his pacing, facing me, I whirled in the opposite direction and hurriedly loaded the dishwasher. He was still pacing (and talking) while I wiped down the counters, glancing up now and again, until I scolded myself to give him some privacy.

Appearing out of nowhere, Aaron slipped his arms around my waist from behind and buried his face in the back of my neck. “Food’s on its way.”

“Perfect.” I tossed the rag in the sink and spun in his embrace, draping my arms over his shoulders. “What should we do in the meantime?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you want to run downstairs and open your store?”

Or put a note in the window or something?”

“You’re more important. I told you that.”

“Dude, don’t trash your business because we hooked up one time.”

“Bro,” I shot back, mockingly. The tone may have been sarcastic, but not the sincerity of what I was saying. “I’m not trashing my business. The people in this town can deal with me being closed for a day. And this wasn’t a hookup. Not for me.”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” he said, starting to pull away.

I cinched my arms tighter around his neck, pressing my forehead to his. “For once in your life, would you stop being so stubborn? Stop running.”

“For once in *your* life, would you stop bossing me around?” He pushed me against the fridge, but his hands stayed locked on my hips, allowing his pelvis to rub against mine.

Smirking, I leaned forward, my lips brushing his. “Make me.”

“Spank me?” He shot back with a laugh.

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Who knew the Golden Boy would have a spanking kink?” He slid his hands around me and swatted one cheek before grabbing my ass with both hands.

I flinched away from the stinging pain, only to press myself against him in the process, hardly able to mask a mischievous grin. “You know you like it.”

“I like everything when it comes to you.” Sealing his lips to mine, he traced his tongue along my lower lip and slipped it inside.

His cock was just as hard as mine, practically begging me to grind myself against him in those gray sweats. Which I did. Happily. Until we were groaning and panting against one another.

“What the fuck?!” a male voice echoed through the loft. “What in the ever-loving fuck, Alex?!”

Aaron and I shot away from each other, staring at Brad as he finished ascending the stairs, his mouth hanging open so wide his jaw may as well have been dragging on the ground.

Oh, fuck...

“You told me he’s your stepbrother!” Brad shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at Aaron.

“You told me you broke up!” Aaron threw out, staring at me with a bewildered expression. It didn’t last long before anger crept in, darkening the

look in his eyes and making the muscle in his jaw tick.

I held a hand out to both of them like a lion tamer about to be torn apart, answering in the order of importance. “We *did* break up,” I said to Aaron before glaring at Brad, “so what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you,” Brad snapped back. “I didn’t like how we left things yesterday.”

“You mean when you broke up with me?” I reiterated, more for Aaron’s benefit than mine. The widening gap between us hadn’t escaped my notice. The second I turned my attention to Brad, Aaron drifted even farther away from me, toward the bed—and his stuff. There was no way in Hell I was going to let him run out of my life again. Not after this.

“I don’t know what you’re so fucking mad about,” Brad continued, “since you found some pretty boy to keep you company despite the fact you’re always bitching about how busy you are on Valentine’s Day.” He shot daggers in Aaron’s direction before turning his wrath back on me. “Kudos on the lie, though. Very convincing performance yesterday. Both of you.”

Surprisingly, that brought Aaron back to the fight. He took a step toward Brad, hands balled at his sides and molars grinding.

I darted forward too, blocking him before he could get any closer to Brad and do something stupid. “I’ll take my key back now.”

Brad shook his head in disgust, working the bit of brass off his keyring before slapping it in my open palm. “I thought you were one of the good ones. That big old speech about how you don’t ‘do’ drama? Really had me second-guessing myself this morning.”

“I *don’t* do drama. We had enough of it growing up. I sure as shit don’t want any as an adult.”

“Still trying to convince me that you’re stepbrothers?” Brad snorted. “Give it up already.”

“We are, you dumb fuck,” Aaron snarled. “Not that it’s any of your goddamn business.”

Brad hesitated, like he wasn’t sure if he should believe us or not.

Before he could visibly make up his mind, Aaron seized the front of my t-shirt and kissed me until I was breathless and weak-kneed. When he was done, he pulled away with a wicked smile and plucked Brad’s former key out of my hand. “See yourself out, douche, or he can have you arrested for trespassing.”

“You’re fucking sick,” Brad said, glaring down his perfectly straight nose

at us before stomping down the stairs again. “*Both* of you.”

As soon as the door downstairs slammed, Aaron turned to me with a wrinkled nose. “What the fuck did you see in him?”

“Look around,” I said with a sigh, gesturing vaguely. “Middleton’s not exactly swarming with options.”

“Well, that’s not your problem anymore.” He twirled the key in his fingers before pocketing it.

“What happened to taking things one day at a time?”

“Fuck it.”

“Fuck it?”

“Fuck it,” he repeated with a smile.

“I like it,” I grinned, kissing him softly. “But, next year—” The scowl on his face stopped me in my tracks.

“If you ask me to be your fucking Valentine, I’m going to punch you in the face.”

I laughed and pulled him in for a hug. “No, dick, I think we should book a vacation the day after. It’s stupid for either one of us to miss our biggest revenue days, but that doesn’t mean we can’t relax afterward.”

He considered it before shrugging. “Yeah. Ok.”

“Fuck it?” I teased.

“Yeah, fuck it.” His lips curved into a smirk before they were back on mine, heating every nerve ending in my body and filling the void I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying around with me until Aaron blew back into my life like a damn hurricane.

Who knew the holiday we both hated would be the one to ultimately bring us back together? Despite everything, I was grateful for whatever magic was in the air for Valentine’s Day, making people complete idiots for something as abstract as love.

After a string of bad luck and miscommunication, I was happy Fate got their shit together and made sure our lives intersected once more. The hatred we had for Valentine’s Day—and the shit ton of work it meant for both of us—dulled a bit, softened by the realization that after all these years I could call Aaron mine. From that moment onward, nothing, and I meant *nothing*, was going to keep us apart.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International best-selling and award-winning dark romance author Ashlyn Drewek has always been a hopeless romantic. She's also fascinated by the dark, macabre things in life such as Halloween, murder, cemeteries, and witchcraft. Not necessarily in that order.

Most of her time is spent making up stories in her head or researching obscure historical topics. The results of those efforts usually end up in a book as some sort of weird Easter egg or symbolism. Anything to make Edgar Allan Poe proud.

For more information on her other dark, MM books and where you can find her online, check out her website at: <https://www.ashlyndrewek.com/main>

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BY THE THROAT

A HIS REVELRY COMPANION

BAILEY NICOLE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a sequel to my dark Christmas novella, His Revelry. It can be read as a standalone as there are no plot spoilers. In this story, there is drug abuse, including cocaine and marijuana, alcohol use, vague references to past self-harm scars, and references to growing up in abusive, neglectful foster homes. There is exhibitionism, voyeurism, humiliation and degradation, spanking, general rough sex, sharing, boot worship, choking, double penetration, and MM and MMM explicit sex between consenting adults.

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DEVIN

Rome is the same as he's always been.

It's not that I thought he might morph into a different type of person when we finally gave in to our feelings for each other a little over a month ago, but I figured he might calm down, at the very least. That's not been the case.

Rome isn't grounded. He's the strike of a match with a potential to ignite at any given time. He needs me.

Currently, though, my patience is being stretched thin. A vein throbs in my temple as I watch him talk to our friend, Julian. It's subtle, what he's doing—almost imperceptible. He's sitting there on the dingy couch right next to Julian. He's the picture of comfort with his shirt off, head tilted back, and long legs spread wide. He's as sexy as ever, from the leather pants to the long lines of pale skin, corded with sinuous muscle, to the gaunt features of his face. He is everything to me.

My fingers strangle the flesh just above my knee, and I know he sees it because the corner of his lips tick up.

He's toying with me, wanting to get a rise out of me, but I don't know why. I'm not entirely sure there even needs to be a reason when it comes to Rome, though. He entertains himself at the expense of others.

His legs relax a little further until his thigh slots right against Julian's and stays there. Rome's eyes fall closed as he taps the toe of his combat boot up and down, the leather of his pants sliding against Julian's denim rhythmically.

I grit my teeth against the torrent of rage that threatens to consume me.

Rome is not an affectionate person. He's not the type of friend who gives casual shoulder grabs or pats on the back. It makes him sick.

So, this... display he's putting on is intentional, and it's going to be intentional when I choke him the fuck out.

I stand up abruptly, heading to the door. "Let's go, Rome."

"No." Even while sitting on the couch, he somehow manages to look down his nose at me, confidence radiating off him in waves. "There's a party here tonight, and I will be attending, Dev. You can go home if you want."

Focusing on the pulse jumping in his throat, I will myself to not do anything irrational. He wants me to explode, and I'm not going to. Not yet, that is. My threshold for bullshit is pretty high, especially after dealing with him all these years.

"Step outside with me for a minute."

He eyes me with the faintest bit of curiosity. Knowing he'll follow, I step out onto the rickety porch. I put a cigarette between my lips and light it as the door swings open. Rome's heavy footsteps thud as he approaches me. His forearms land on the wooden rail next to mine before he reaches out and takes the cigarette from my mouth, staring at me intently as he takes a long drag. I watch him for what feels like forever, examining the way his long, bony fingers crush the filter between their tips. His steel eyes never give away much; I've gotten good at reading him. He's assessing me while I'm stuck admiring the sharp features of his face. Sometimes, like now, I just want to crush him. I want to wrap my hand around his face, hook my fingers in his mouth, and tug him back by his hair. He needs to *feel* me, so he never forgets that I'm here.

He looks out toward the street before flicking the cigarette to the ground, straightening up to go back inside.

"Look at me," I demand. He stills, crossing his arms in front of his chest, peering down at his boots, blatantly going against my orders.

He wants me to fly off the handle, and it works.

My hand connects with his throat as I force him back. He flattens against the siding of the house, and I crowd around him. A crooked, breathless smile plays at his lips, proof that he won.

"Never fucking stop looking at me," I grit out.

"Oh, but I haven't, Dev," he breathes across my lips.

"Then what do you call this shit with Julian? I know you're up to something. Don't you dare try to lie to me." I don't care how it sounds. No

human being could make anyone crazier than him.

He tilts his chin up and to the side, baring his neck to me. Jagged marks are already engraved in his skin there from me—only me. The sight of it, the thought of it, him here strangled in my grip, it burns inside of me. It fucking burns like nothing I've ever felt before, and I'll never let it go out.

I latch onto the flesh of his neck where he smells like *mine*, and suck him into my mouth, gnawing at him. His breath trembles slightly, hands flying out to dig into my hips—a reminder that he's not impervious when it comes to *me*.

“I was looking at you the whole time,” he hisses through his teeth.

My brain tries to make sense of his words with no success. He *was* looking at me, but he was simultaneously rubbing up on Julian. So, what difference does that even fucking make?

Blood thunders in my ears as I roughly grab his jaw roughly, just the way he likes it. He needs everything to have a bite of pain. His skin blanches beneath my fingertips. “I don't know how this isn't clear to you yet, but let me make it crystal. No one gets to feel you but me. I don't care who it is. It could be Satan him-fucking-self, and you'd still tell him to go to hell.”

His nostrils flare, eyelids getting heavier. “Would I, baby?”

My grip tightens, pressing into his teeth, despite the endearment settling somewhere deep in my marrow. “You would,” I seethe.

His hips jerk sporadically, seeking me out. “Maybe so.” His voice rasps through his lips, taunting me. “Or maybe you'd see him touching me, and *you'd* do something about it. I'm just so helpless, you know? I need you to stop me sometimes, save me from myself.”

He looks up at me through long lashes, the closest he'll ever look to innocent. It's a façade meant to unravel me. Rome being considered helpless is almost laughable.

That's the thing about Rome. He wants me to rough him up, control him, force him, yet somehow, I'm the one perpetually trapped in his snare. He has me by the throat, even when my hand is wrapped around his.

“That's what you want, huh? You want to send me over the edge?” I thrust my hips against his, grinding our hard cocks together as if I could fuck him into this wall. “You want me to protect you from yourself?”

His chest rapidly rises and falls, a flush muddling his pale skin. There's mischief in those half-lidded eyes as he reaches for my other hand, prying it from his hip. He brings it to his face, scraping his cheek against my hard

calluses. Then, the flat of his tongue is running up my palm, and two fingers are sucked into his warm mouth. Our hips rut against each other, more desperately now. A ragged groan falls from my lips, and the little psycho smiles around my fingers—a great big one, teeth cutting into the skin below my knuckles. The blunt sting of it clouds my head as he grabs the back of my neck, pulling me closer. I rip my fingers from his bite and slot our lips together. Our kiss is animalistic, the two of us competing at devouring the other. My tongue delves into his mouth, licking all inside, filling him up with me. I love the way he feels, love the way he lets me.

He grabs my chin, pushing me back just enough that our lips graze as we pant.

“You fucking own me, right, Dev?” he breathes, almost sweetly. “Maybe you’ll have to prove it.”

There’s something about the way those words dance off his lips like an easy threat. He’s only giving me a little, but it’s enough. He intends to do something, and I don’t know how far he’s willing to go. I’ve never known him to have limits.

It makes my blood boil.

If he wants me unhinged, it’s looking like that’s exactly what he’ll get.

ROME

All I had to do was sit a little closer to someone than I normally ever would to get Dev fuming, and he's *oh so hot* when he's like this.

Anyone who knows us would say that I'm the crazy one. I'm the psycho who sets things on fire, the one who's willing to go to extreme measures to get what I want, but it's as if they never stop to consider why Dev would be with someone like me.

The answer is simple: he's as fucked up and vengeful as I am, but with a touch more charm and charisma.

He's so charismatic in fact, that girls are still fawning over him at school, knowing fully well that we're together. Maybe it's because we're both guys, so they assume that he's missing out on something. After all, he's always been something of a flirt—whether he realized it or not—and he's only newly out about being gay. It's reasonable to some extent that girls might still think they have a chance with him—the resident bad boy.

He takes that title because, again, charisma. No one is actually scared of him. Can't say the same about me though. People at school never approach me, and if they do, it's with caution. Without even knowing me, they avoid me because of wildly exaggerated rumors. Okay, maybe not *wildly*, but still. Graduation is a few months away, and fuck, if it can't come any fucking sooner.

Today is Valentine's Day. It's not a holiday I ever really acknowledged, mainly because holidays were rarely if ever celebrated in my foster homes, but also, I'd never been in love. Hell, the only person I've ever loved at all is Devin himself, and it took far too many years for me to realize it and be

honest about it.

Feelings like love aren't all that simple for me though. It's not an emotion I ever had a chance to feel after growing up in chaos. It wasn't until Devin and I moved in with Suzie, the overly kind owner of our shitty trailer park, that I started to understand just what set me apart from other people in that regard.

I imagine that kids who have loving families develop a better sense of morality and respect authority more than I ever could. I never had anyone that I respected enough to obey. Never had anyone that I regarded highly enough to not want to disappoint. Most importantly, I never knew what it meant to care about someone until Dev.

The people here in our town, at our high school, they wouldn't know any of that. They wrote me off a long time ago, and rightfully so. I still want fucking nothing to do with any of them anyway. I may know what it feels like to love and be loved now, but that isn't a miraculous cure for a lifetime of abuse and neglect—the list goes on and fucking on. My mind has its own sets of challenges that don't just go away.

Leading up to this holiday, girls have been increasingly more flirtatious with Devin. A coy look here, a batting of lashes there—maybe even a casual touch. He does brush them off. Of course, he does, because he's perfect, but something in me wants to see them crushed. I want them eviscerated, and I can't help it. I've tried. Unfortunately, it seems to be something I will always have to endure as long as we're together. I've been having trouble coping with that, coming to terms with it. Things have always been out of my control in one way or another, but I've found ways to seize some of it—just enough to get me through. That's what I'm planning to do here tonight.

Parties at Julian's place are a frequent occurrence. His mom doesn't care about her house being filled with tons of young people drinking and doing drugs. She partakes in all of it—always has. Matter of fact, right now, she's sitting at the dining room table in a thick cloud of smoke, passing a joint around with Dev and our other friend, James. She's talking his ear off as usual, her raspy voice booming through the room, and Dev looks serene as ever. His raven black hair is slicked back, except for the single lock that always breaks free, grazing his forehead. My features have always been more... emaciated. My face is sharp in a pointy kind of way, whereas his sharp lines look carved by the Gods. He's rough enough around the edges to not lean into pretty boy territory, though. I wouldn't have him any other way.

There's power behind those eyes, beneath that skin, beyond all of that muscle. Hell, he's the only one who can bring me to my knees.

I want some of that unchecked power to break free, so after Julian finishes lining up some coke on the filthy coffee table in front of us, I extend my hand. His thick, dark brows lift in silent question.

"Give me the straw."

"You haven't done blow in months though," he insists.

I applaud him for noticing—I really do—but it's not his fucking business. The last time I had a coke bender, I made some poor decisions according to Dev. He'd rather me not do it anymore, and I haven't. It hasn't been difficult at all. The only reason I'm doing it now is to get under his skin. My heart speeds up fractionally just thinking about it. He gets so riled up, and then, he gets to take it out on me. My cock twitches in my leather pants in anticipation of what's to come.

"I'm not an addict, Julian. Give me the fucking straw."

"All right, but I don't want to hear shit from Dev about this." He plops the straw onto my open palm with a dramatic flourish, a small smile gracing his lips. Julian and James are our closest friends—in my instance, only friends—for a reason. They are infinitely more tolerable than everyone else, which is saying a lot. I don't mind having them around.

I lean over, pushing one nostril shut, and bring the straw to my nose. My sinuses are exceptionally clear, so the white powder shoots up my nose with ease. It burns, not unpleasantly, and a sour taste drips down the back of my throat; it's an acquired one, that's for sure. I squeeze my nostrils together, soothing the burn, before going back in for another line.

I can practically feel Dev's gaze before I see it. Even beneath the shadow of his thick brow ridge, his eyes harden, his mouth pressed into a firm line.

It's worth noting that he looks furious rather than disappointed. That lets me know that he's aware I'm only doing this to get a rise out of him. It would be particularly exhausting if I had to try to convince him that I'm not relapsing into cocaine addiction or something.

He brings the joint back to his lips, never breaking eye contact with me. Chills ripple across my skin, and I have the urge to go seal my mouth over his and inhale the smoke, but instead, I practice restraint. I turn my gaze back to Julian. He's rubbing at his nose, having just finished snorting some too. His eyes are glazed over, the same way everyone else's are.

"Is there a reason you've been hanging around me rather than Dev

tonight?" he asks. "I'm assuming you guys are fighting or something with all the glaring he's doing. I mean, really, it's pretty intense."

I can't help the laugh that escapes me, but on second thought, it's probably only pissing Dev off more, so I decide to not hold back. Julian's eyes widen, even as his smile gets bigger.

"Devin and I don't fight." I shrug. "I'm just trying to make a point."

Julian reaches into the case of beer next to his boots and pulls two out, handing one over to me. I grimace despite myself. "How can you just drink warm beer? Disgusting, man." I shake my head but upend it, chugging most of it down in one go.

He ignores my bitching but presses further. "What point are you trying to make?"

I can feel the coke buzzing in my brain and tingling across my skin as I take another gulp, debating how much I should tell him. "Things have been a bit stagnant lately, you know. I just like to shake it up every once in a while. Devin is far sexier when he's angry."

Julian rolls his eyes at me. "There's something severely wrong with you."

"And yet, here we are."

He brushes his shoulder against mine, a bright smile lighting up his face. See, Julian is definitely in pretty boy territory. I'm not blind to it. "You got me there," he laughs. "So, you're trying to make him jealous or something? I'm not really looking to get my ass beat tonight. Sort of wanted to drown in the abyss of alcohol and what not."

"Don't worry about that. Whatever happens, he'll take it out on me. He knows that's what I want."

Julian shakes his head. "You kinky motherfuckers."

I look into his eyes intently. "And how kinky are you, Julian?" I'm aware of the way my voice has dropped an octave or two and am not the slightest bit surprised when a faint blush spreads across his cheeks.

He coughs abruptly before leaning in closer and lowering his voice. "What are you trying to do here, Rome?"

I drop my arm that was resting on the couch behind him, just enough that it rests on his shoulders. "Let's not get too ahead of ourselves." His eyes dart down to my lips as my tongue swipes across them, and I know I've got him in my pocket. Using my free arm, I reach across his lap to grab another beer. He stills momentarily before visibly relaxing.

It's thrilling. He's actually scared of Dev; I can tell, but I wish he'd

believe me when I tell him has nothing to worry about.

He stands up suddenly. "Beer pong?"

I nod and follow him, walking right out into the backyard without a backward glance at Dev. My boots crunch over crushed cans as we make our way over to the plastic table where a game is already wrapping up. "We'll take the winner," Julian says, and they listen because it is technically his party.

It's nice and humid out despite it being an evening in February. Just the way I like it. When the weather is like this, Devin smells especially good with his musky sweat in the mix. I bite my lip just thinking about it. He should be out here soon enough. Doubt he'd miss the opportunity to keep his eyes on me right now.

With one final throw, the game comes to a finish, and we swap out with the losers. Julian takes off his shirt, throwing it somewhere in the overgrown grass behind us. He's just as ripped as Devin is, with firm pecs and ridges in his abdomen. I eye his physique appreciatively, and that's when I spot my fuming-with-love boyfriend leaning against the house. I slant a smile at him. His arms are crossed firmly in front of his chest, almost as if he's restraining himself. I wonder just how far he plans to let this go; he knows he can end it at any time.

If it's as I suspect, as much as he wishes he wasn't, he's getting some kind of thrill from this too. The fantasy is starting to leap from his mind and take shape right before his eyes, and he's enjoying it.

Julian hands me a ping pong ball and beckons me to go first, carefully avoiding Devin's gaze. It's almost cute. I aim and shoot, sinking the ball into a cup on the first try.

"Damn," he says, pulling me to his side. His already sweaty torso slicks across mine, sending tingles across my skin. Then he lowers his voice so only I can hear. "I can't believe you're even letting me touch you."

"Neither can I," I say with a snort. "Don't get used to it."

He positions his ball at eye level, aiming with practiced ease. I already know he's going to score; he rarely misses. The ball lands with a splash in one of our opponents' cups, and they begrudgingly chug the warm beer. The game continues on much like this. They score on us often enough, but Julian never misses a shot, and I make a couple more. When we finally win, I am significantly more buzzed. The alcohol churns in my veins lazily, the buzz of the coke long gone. Julian grips the back of my neck, and I let myself relax

into it.

Devin and James break through the crowd. “We’ll go next,” Dev tells the losing team. He is also, very notably, shirtless. I spend a moment drinking in every square inch of him, and what a fucking sight it is.

“You look fucking good tonight, baby,” I say, loud and proud. A few laughs sound from the groups of people loitering around the table, which makes me even happier.

“He’s not wrong. I think you’re getting bigger than me,” Julian teases, playing along in a surprising turn of events. I guess he’s not all that scared after all. It could just be the alcohol, or maybe he’s really starting to understand.

James’s eyes are darting back and forth between the two hulking men, trying and most likely failing to figure out why the world has suddenly flipped on its head.

“Yeah. You havin’ a good time over there, Julian? Sure fucking looks like it,” Dev says, his words laced with venom.

Then, Julian does something extremely ballsy. I mean, who knew he had it in him? He wraps his large arm around my shoulders, pulling me over and holding me to his front; his open palm slips right under the hem of my shirt to rest on my stomach. My breath catches at the blatantly possessive display, warmth spreading from the contact. “You know it,” he volleys back. I can hear the smile in his voice.

Now my blood is really pumping.

It doesn’t feel even a little uncomfortable being in Julian’s arms like this—probably because I know and trust him, and at the end of the day, this whole thing is all my own doing. I’m in control here.

Devin’s jaw twitches, his arms corded with veins as his fists tighten, but he doesn’t even flinch. A display of self-control that is so beyond impressive, my dick could probably whimper. *God*. Something about him makes all my walls come crashing down. I want to flay myself open for him, give him everything.

It dawns on me that the crowd has gone utterly silent, their eyes all saucers and some mouths agape. Devin gives them all the finger and a curt, “Mind your fucking business.”

Julian grabs a ball and hands it to me, letting me go first once again. My

first shot misses, but his lands, of course. Dev does the honor of chugging the contents of the red solo cup, his throat bobbing as it slides down. A small moan of appreciation slips from me, and Julian shoots me a look, one eyebrow cocked in an exasperated sort of way. “Guess I need to step my game up,” he says easily.

“You don’t stand a chance,” I say. “No one does.”

His chest puffs out a bit as he stands taller. “We’ll see about that, won’t we, Rome?”

Anyone with eyes knows that Julian is hot shit, attractive in a textbook kind of way, and it works for him. But I meant what I said. No one could ever get my blood boiling quite like Dev does. It’s just different—plain and simple. Regardless, messing around with Julian is far from a hardship for me.

Dev is a brooding statue on the other side of the table when we finally turn our attention back to the game at hand. He sinks the first ball in one of our cups. I grab it and drink it down, the warm, watery beer not even bothering me anymore.

The game continues on. Dev doesn’t miss a single shot, James holds his own, and before we know it, we’ve lost. The smooth satisfaction on Devin’s face pleases me. He’s the only one I’d ever be happy to lose to.

“You just can’t do it like me, Julian,” he says. It’s a small barb between friends, but with the current atmosphere, it feels sharper than usual.

Julian slips his hand down into my back pocket, palming my ass through the leather as he stretches his other arm up in a show of nonchalance. “Must not be doing *too* bad, though.” All this dominance being thrown around is starting to get to me; my dick throbs in its confines. I readjust myself, and Devin’s nostrils flare.

“A word,” he says and starts walking away. I debate following but decide it’s probably better to touch base with him. I’m not ready to quit my fun yet though.

“I’ll be back,” I tell Julian before following Dev over to an empty corner of the yard. My eyes lock on to the muscles in his broad back rippling beneath the skin. As soon as I’m close enough, he crowds me against the fence, hands planted on either side of my head.

He dips his head to my ear, his words deep and rough. “How much further are you gonna push me, Rome?”

I wrap my arms around him, fingers digging into his sexy back. “You can make it stop whenever you want, but remember what I said earlier tonight.”

His forehead falls to my shoulder. “You drive me fucking crazy. You know that, right?”

I trail my fingertips up and down his back, soothing him.

“I can tell you like it when he touches you, and I can’t believe you’re even allowing it. You don’t let *anyone* touch you.” The words are laced with anger and something else—something that sounds oddly like curiosity.

“It’s just a game, Dev,” I reassure him. I grab his chin, forcing him to stop talking into my neck and look at me. “It gets me hot. Gets me hot to know you’re watching, and that I’m teetering right on the edge of your wrath. To think that at any moment, I could step too far, and your hell will rain down upon me.” I moan low and deep at the way his eyes darken. “God, I can’t fucking wait for it.” I slide my lips over his gently, lovingly. “And I know you like it too. You love knowing that I’m doing this for you. That every time he touches me, it’s you that I’m thinking of,” I breathe, right there against his lips.

He pushes in closer, pressing every inch of his body to mine, pushing me flat against the fence. Fire rips through my body at the feel of him, hard and strong. When he closes me in like this, gives me no room, I feel safe. Safe is another feeling I never knew until him, but it’s one I’ve come to cherish. From the outside, people might think Devin is overly clingy, that he doesn’t give me room to breathe, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Being wrapped up in him is when I feel freer than I’ve ever been. I can finally just fucking relax for a second because I trust him with everything in me.

“I need to be certain, Rome, that this isn’t happening because... because what we have isn’t enough for you. If that’s what’s really going on—”

I cut him off, stopping whatever he thought he could get away with saying just now. “You have nothing to worry about, and don’t you ever fucking doubt it,” I tell him, the threat clear.

The corner of his lips curve up into a mischievous smile as he looks down at me, and the ease with which he trusts my word alone sends all of my blood rushing south. I push my hips against his, gasping at the friction our hard cocks create. He takes the opportunity to slip one hand straight down my pants, palming my ass. He squeezes the flesh before flattening his palm in the middle, right in the valley of my crack. His rough hand digs in proprietarily, skating along the sensitive skin there as he dips two fingers to press firmly against my hole. My breath catches in my throat, and I shudder. His other hand wraps securely around my neck, and now I’m panting. He knows

exactly how to handle me—roughly and possessively. He knows how to make me feel trapped and owned with nothing but his hands and body.

He presses his forehead to mine, his expression still sinfully devious. “You think he could fuck you better than me?”

My body jerks against my will, forcing his fingers harder against my hole. It’s getting harder to form a coherent thought; he’s undoing me so effortlessly. My brain says *fuck no*, but my mouth says, “Maybe. We’ll see.”

Devin growls, a guttural sound that rips from him like nothing I’ve ever heard before, but all I can think is that I need more. Need his hands wrapped around my dick, his mouth, *something*. “Come on, baby. Do something,” I beg with a whimper. “You got me strung so high here.”

He seals his lips against mine, swiping his tongue in my mouth just once before pulling back, like he just needed a quick taste of me. His hands leave my ass and throat with jolting quickness.

He utters one word.

“No.”

I groan and tip my face up to the sky, squeezing my eyes closed as I listen to his heavy footsteps get farther away. I’m going to fucking explode with it. Every moment of this night has edged me. I have to remind myself that this is what I wanted, I’ve done it to myself, and it’ll be worth it in the end. *Fuck*, it’ll be worth it.

Pulling myself together, I step away from the cursed fence. The humid air breezes against my bare torso, cooling my sweat-slick skin a little. I approach a group of people huddled together and grab a beer straight from their case and keep walking toward the house. Their scoffs and groans bring a smile to my lips as I upend the bottle, wetting my dry throat. All that fucking panting Dev had me doing feels like I just got fucked.

I swing open the door, and the large room is significantly louder now that I got used to the open air. My ears buzz and ring, trying to adjust. I spot Devin immediately, his lips sealed around a foot-long bong, surrounded by people at the table. And what a fucking picture that is. If only his lips were wrapped around my dick right now. If only anything could ever be that easy for a masochist like me.

Julian’s chilled out on the couch, big thighs spread wide. His corded, tan arms hover over the table, lining up more blow. The lighting in this room makes me realize I’m drunker than I thought, so more cocaine will do me some good, but I’m also keyed up beyond reckoning. So, I approach, noting

the way his eyes travel down to my hips as I walk. They sway slightly, and I know it's tantalizing because Dev has told me so more than once.

When I reach him, I turn around and sit on his lap, my legs spread wide while his narrow to accommodate me. His hands fly up dramatically, like he's not quite sure where he's allowed to touch me. "Damn, Rome," he says on a gasp.

I don't give him much time to think before I lean over, bending nearly in half, and grab a straw. Julian groans from behind me. I can feel his eyes burning into my naked back, my leather covered ass bearing down on him.

Focusing on the task at hand is admittedly difficult, but I manage to plug one nostril and snort both lines in front of me. They hit me like a shockwave, tears instantly spring to my eyes, the burn spreading through my sinuses. I hum as every square inch of my skin electrifies. I grab my beer and lean back all the way, resting my head on the couch right above Julian's shoulder. My back sticks to his front, our skin on fire. It's pure euphoria.

"So indecent, Rome," Julian chides smoothly. "Straddling me in a room full of people with your boyfriend watching." He settles one hand on my upper thigh and uses the other one to grab my beer. He takes a sip from it before bringing it to my lips, tilting it up so I can drink from it, and *fuck*, do I love it—him servicing me like that.

"I've seen people literally fuck at your parties before," I respond, somehow still breathless.

He downs the rest of my beer and sets it on the table. Now he has both hands on me, one on each thigh, digging right up into my groin. They're big and strong, and they start rocking my hips against his denim-covered crotch. "Well, let's up the ante then. Give 'em a show."

My back arches, and my hands fly back to wrap behind his neck.

"Fuck, you're good. Too good," he groans, his fingers digging in deeper. I distantly think it'll be nice to see the map of bruises from this night and remember each step of the way.

I start working my hips, grinding down on him with more rhythm as "Sugar" by Sleep Token starts pounding through the speakers in the house. I shoot a glance over at Devin, and just as I suspected, he's the one who put the song on. Goosebumps spread across my overheated skin, which I formerly thought was impossible. Leave it to Dev to prove me wrong.

He knows how this song makes me feel, so I owe it to him to make this good. I lean forward, placing my hands on Julian's knees, and arch my back.

His rough hand scratches my skin as he trails it down my spine. Another “Fuck,” is wrenched from him as I continue moving on him, nice and slow with the beat of the song. His cock is hard as steel when I slide my ass across it. It’s thick and long, and a moan escapes from me.

Suddenly, he sits up straight, nearly pushing me off him, but his arm comes around my front, holding me to him. It snakes down my tense abdomen and grabs a handful of my junk. A jolt of pleasure rips through me, and an unintelligible sound falls from my lips. Tremors vibrate through my body, and my eyes fall shut as the pressure of his hand radiates through my crotch.

A hand grabs my jaw, pulling my face down. I peel my eyes open, and they connect with Devin’s’. I smile, all teeth and cheek at the sight. His expression is hard. I can see the restraint in every bulging vein and corded muscle—even the droplets of sweat at his temple.

There are people all around us, draping off every surface and every chair in the room. Seems that everyone is just high or drunk enough to be openly interested in the scene before them. It’s heady, knowing that they’re all watching, and most of them seem turned on too.

Dev’s fingertips dig harder into my cheek, forcing my teeth to cut into my gums, as he takes a drag from a cigarette. “My boyfriend is a fucking slut, isn’t he,” he says, his voice loud enough that I know he wanted everyone to hear. Heat prickles across my skin at the somewhat humiliating words. There’s a distinctly crazed look in his bloodshot eyes.

A few chuckles ripple through the room.

“A real dirty one,” Julian says, right next to my ear.

My chest rises rapidly as I pant. The two of them teaming up against me is too much. My dick feels like it’s going to combust.

Dev lets go of my face and sits down on the coffee table right there in front of us. “Continue,” he says, hard and demanding.

My heart thuds furiously behind my ribs, everything ratcheting up in intensity now. I stand up, hovering in front of him before turning around and straddling Julian’s lap. Now that I’m facing him, I can see that his pupils are blown wide. There’s a sheen of sweat on his face and broad shoulders, down to his pecs. He eyes me lazily as his hands come up to rest behind his neck. “Give it all you got, man. Everyone’s watching,” he says, purposely reminding me, but it only gets me hotter.

I have to admit that I underestimated Julian and what he’s capable of. It

makes this that much better.

He bucks his hips, spurring me forward, so I get to work again. My hips circle his lap, slow at first, and then with more pressure. I let my hard cock drag against his sometimes, and each time I do, his breaths come faster. If only he could lose the denim and I, the leather, then I could feel his burning hot cock against mine. The thought of our skin moving together has me falling forward. I plant my hands on the back of the couch, moaning in his ear. The song climaxes, thundering through the room and through my veins as I gyrate against him roughly, my moans breathy and desperate in his ear. His hands fall to my hips, urging me forward. He whispers in the space between us, “You’re my slut for the night, aren’t you?”

All I can do is pant and try my fucking hardest to not come. I feel it approaching like a full speed train about to slam into me, and I’m paralyzed by it.

He grips the back of my neck harshly, burying me deeper in his neck to whisper in my ear, “The dirtiest fucking slut. Fucking yourself right here on my lap with your boyfriend watching. He looks like he wants to rip you apart. He wants to fucking demolish you, Rome.”

A strangled groan explodes from my throat. Knowing that they’re making eye contact over my shoulder nearly unravels me. I did not know he could talk like that, sound like that. He’s filthy just like us, and it’s all I can do to keep my movements steady when my hips want to jerk erratically, seeking an orgasm.

The song slows to an end though, and so do I, until I’m completely still. We’re both panting, trying to catch our breath, and I’m squeezing my eyes shut tight as my impending climax recedes. It’s bordering on pain at this point.

Hands land on the back of the couch on either side of mine, and I feel Dev’s heat as he looms over us. “Can’t take much more, can you?” he growls. “This is only the beginning, baby.” His voice has a menacing lilt that sends prickles down my spine.

How the tables have turned.

DEVIN

At first, all I could feel was rage.

I've considered stomping Julian's face in, and I've envisioned fucking Rome so hard that he *bled*. The thoughts that have slammed through my mind tonight have made me uneasy, made me question if I even know myself at all. Especially, when they started heading in a different direction altogether.

Something clicked for me after I cornered Rome. The reassurance he gave me might have been more of a threat than anything else, but coming from him, it made sense. This is a game to him—one with the sole intention of making me crazy with jealousy. He wants me to prove that I own him. I didn't understand what the point of that was because he already fucking knows, but now I get it.

Not only do I get it, but I don't know that I've ever been this keyed up in my life. Even now, as I look down at my boyfriend straddling my best friend, looking freshly fucked, my dick is hard as a rock. That lap dance might have been given to Julian, but it was for *me*. That's just how it works in Rome's sick little head, and I've always loved it, so this is no different.

Now, the wheels are spinning for me. I have ideas—filthy ones. Ones that I never thought possible for us.

There are things that I know about Rome, things he would never show to the world. He likes pain. Rome wants to be slapped, stepped on, choked. Whatever it is, he wants it to hurt. He likes being humiliated. And, now, if this night is anything to go by, I know he wants to be *shared*, like a possession that I own.

“Get up,” I tell him, backing up to give him room. He takes one final shaky breath and detaches himself from Julian. Standing on weak legs, he runs a hand through his short, platinum-blond hair, a shit-eating grin on his face as he looks around the room. We have to finish out the school year with some of these people, and only he would find this amusing.

Julian reaches down and adjusts himself through his jeans without a care in the world, the bastard. I don’t think he’s ever even been with a guy, but I guess he’s more open than I thought. He *is* a carefree, always-looking-for-a-good-time, kind of guy.

I place my hand on Rome’s lower back, guiding him toward the hallway. Julian’s still planted on the couch when I shoot him a pointed look. His eyes widen when he realizes, but he gets up and follows behind us.

A few whistles sound around the room as we open Julian’s bedroom door and close it behind us.

I can’t believe we’re really doing this shit right now, but my blood is thrumming in my veins just imagining it. Rome started this, and now I’m going to finish it. We’re going all the way.

“On your knees,” I command. His eyes dart over to Julian quickly before he drops down with ease.

Julian opens the drawer in his nightstand, pulling out a joint. He lights it up, taking a couple of hits before passing it to me with a certain look in his eyes. It’s probably his way of acknowledging that he does respect our relationship, since it sure as shit didn’t appear that way when the night started. He’s lucky I know Rome suckered him into this shit.

I take the token for what it is and hit it a couple of times myself. We leisurely pass it back and forth for a while as Rome kneels on the floor, watching us.

“Come the fuck on,” he complains. “You’re really going to leave me out of the rotation?”

Only then do I acknowledge his presence. “Not a word,” I say, wanting him to still be under the illusion that I’m angry, and a small part of me is. When I look at Julian, all I can think about is his fucking hands that have been all over my boyfriend, the way Rome just rode his dick right in front of me. I grit my teeth. It was equally as hot as it was infuriating.

“Looks like you’re gonna have to earn it, man,” Julian tells him easily. He stubs the half-smoked joint out in an ashtray.

I unbutton my jeans, sliding them and my briefs to my knees in one go,

nodding at Julian to do the same, our cocks both long and solid as we wrap our hands around them. Rome's mouth falls open as his eyes bounce between each of us, openly ogling my best friend's junk. "You think Julian has a nice, big dick, don't you? You think he's hot?"

Rome pauses before speaking. "I do," he says. "Julian's sexy as hell, and I could tell he had a massive dick, just like you, when I was grinding on it." The little shit looks up through his eyelashes at me, a smirk planted on his face.

"You hear that, Julian? My boyfriend is a slut for big cocks."

"I can tell," Julian muses.

Rome squirms around on his knees, clearly growing impatient. "Let me ___"

"Not a fucking word, I said. You should know better," I interrupt. My voice is hard and severe, and he stills, a flush spreading across his skin even as his teeth clench. Always at war with himself. I approach him and grip his face, hard and unyielding. With my pants still at my knees, I aim my dick at his lips, smearing them with precome. He opens his mouth, attempting to dart out his tongue, but I back up quickly. I grab his short hair, and using my other hand, I land a hard slap to his cheek.

He groans as his face jerks to the side. I know that one stung, but when he meets my gaze again, he's grinning like the little psycho he is. He loves it.

His eyes lock on the scar he gave me a couple of months ago. He leans forward quickly, trailing a hand over the other raised lines of silvery skin that are scattered around it before pressing a kiss to it. He gazes up at me adoringly as he slowly withdraws, leaving warmth coiling in my gut. I could never punish him for that, so I swallow, and say, "Lick the tip." I bring it closer to his lips, and his pink tongue darts out again, long and flat. He slides it from the underside of my flared head to the tip, pressing into the hole. I hiss, and he continues, the slow drag driving me crazy. All I want to do is thrust my cock all the way into his throat, choke him with it.

Not yet, I have to remind myself.

I crook my fingers at Julian, and he sidles up next to me, still slowly stroking his shaft. "Lick Julian's," I grunt. Never thought those words or anything like them would be coming from my mouth. As Rome flicks his tongue out at Julian's darker flesh, a pang lances through my gut, but blood throbs between my legs, too. This is fucked all the way up.

Rome's eyes fall closed as he swirls his tongue, getting lost in the taste of

someone new—someone other than me.

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ROME

A hand grips my short hair, roughly tugging my head back. Definitely, Dev. I don't think Julian's comfortable enough to treat me that way just yet, or if Dev will even let him. I saw the look of shock on his face when Devin slapped me. It was a hard slap too; he knows how I like it.

He makes me look him in the eyes. He's fully naked now, his combat boots and jeans nowhere to be seen. "Open your mouth," he says. The way he sounds, all deep and commanding, is enough to make me obey anything. His voice seeps into my skin and weaves around my bones like a chain that ties me to him.

My mouth falls open.

"You like the way he tastes, don't you?" he asks.

I nod my head, tugging my hair in his grip.

"Spit in his mouth, Julian. Let's see if he means it."

My eyes widen, but I stay still. It's not that I don't want to swallow Julian's spit; it's just that I can hear the jealousy in Devin's tone.

Julian follows suit, leaning over and gathering spit on his tongue before letting it slide onto mine. I swallow it down immediately with a hum of appreciation.

My scalp burns when Dev's fingers tighten. He leans down to whisper in my ear, voice like gravel, "Taste better than me?"

"No," I breathe.

"No one does," he promises, and lets go, the force of it like a shove.

A shiver travels down my spine, and I bite down on my lip, attempting to quell the pent-up need threatening to explode.

Dev turns his back on us, taking a seat on the bed behind me by the sounds of it. “I think Julian’s boots need a shine.” I hesitate for a second but lean forward anyway. “Naked,” he adds, jolting me to a stop.

“Hate to see the leather go,” Julian sighs. “You look damn good in it.”

I get up and kick off my boots before shimmying out of the skin-tight pants. The compliment doesn’t set me on edge like it usually would, had he or anyone else said it. It makes me feel... powerful, in the same way Dev’s compliments do. I push the thought away and get down on all fours, arching my back deeply with my knees spread wide. Dev can see every inch of me back there. “This what you wanted, baby?” I ask. I can’t help the way my voice drips saccharine sweet. I don’t give him the chance to answer as I drop down and flatten my tongue along the toe of one black boot.

“God, he’s filthy, Dev.”

I tremble but continue laving away at the soft leather, working my tongue along the inner arch. This is one of my favorite things to do for Dev; I get so lost in it. I can already feel my mind clouding with fog.

Until a hard slap lands on my ass. “Fuck,” I breathe as my teeth collide with Julian’s boot, the sting radiating across my skin.

“Don’t stop now, Rome,” Dev grits out.

I push my ass back against his hand as I dive back in, licking the other boot. A slap lands on the other cheek, loud in the room even over the music still pounding outside these walls. I pant, dragging my tongue along the leather with more fervor, losing any technique I might’ve had.

My cock hangs between my legs, thick and aching. Even the cool air breezing over the precome-soaked slit threatens to undo me.

Next thing I know, Dev’s hand is colliding with each of my ass cheeks in rapid succession, a relentless volley that forces my teeth into my lip, the coppery taste of blood filling my mouth. Fire dances across my skin, but I don’t dare stop. I don’t want to stop—haven’t gotten to the arch yet.

“You’re doing so damn good. My boots are going to be spotless,” Julian says, and I can hear his hand sliding up and down his dick.

A whimper slips from me, and an embarrassing warmth floods my cheeks.

Julian continues on, tormenting me by saying all the right things. “Fuck, you should see yourself right now. Dev’s handprints are bright red on your ass, and you’re still doing such a good job cleaning me up. Your boyfriend’s a lucky fucking guy. I bet you do this for him all the time like the good little

slut you are. Don't you, sweetie?"

I nod fervently, nuzzling into the leather, inhaling its heady scent, until it dawns on me.

Sweetie? No one has ever called me that, and I'm glad because it sounds condescending as hell, but not just now. Not when it rolled off Julian's tongue, rough like gravel.

Dev's fingers dig into my neck as he rips me from Julian's boots. He crowds in, pressing his back against mine. "Thank him," he grits out.

I pant, my heart racing so fast that it aches. "Thank you, Julian," I manage.

"You can do better than that."

I swallow, trying to wet my dry throat, but it's no use. My voice comes out raspy. "Thank you for letting me clean your boots. Th-they taste and smell like sex, and I wasn't ready to stop. It m-made me so hot when you told me how good I did." I can barely get the words out. It's fucking humiliating, but my cock twitches anyway.

"That's right," Dev says as he plants a wet kiss on my cheek. I try turning my head to meet his lips, but he holds me still. "On the bed," he tells me, short and clipped. I rise to my feet, knees aching as I do. Then, I climb up onto the bed on all fours again, just because I love making Devin crazy. He wants in me so badly; I don't know how he's kept his composure this long.

He whispers something in Julian's ear, and he receives a nod in response. I watch as he kicks his boots off and sheds his ripped, black jeans. Julian situates himself on the bed, right in front of me, so my eyes are level with his dick. Devin kneads my sore ass cheek, sending tingles through my skin. "My best friend's gonna fuck your face now, Rome." My breath stutters. "You said his dick was massive. You want to choke on it?"

I lick my lips and nod, already imagining Julian losing his composure.

"Good, because I want to watch," he says.

Julian's hands cup both sides of my face, holding me still. I wrap my lips around his wide, flared head. Hunger bubbles up within me, and I suck with more intention. He lets me take the lead at first, so I can get him nice and wet.

Suddenly, Dev's slick fingertip thrusts deep into my hole, right past the ring of muscle in one quick go. My moan is garbled around Julian's cock, and it spurs him forward. He starts rocking into my mouth, gliding over my tongue, giving me time to adjust around him. Dev, wasting no time, works another finger in from the back. The muscles quiver around him, relaxing

easily for those thick, calloused fingers I know so well.

Julian's thumb tenderly strokes across my cheek, and I try to steady my breathing. He starts to speed up, and then slams into the back of my throat. I gag as he withdraws slightly, saliva flying from my mouth. Dev swirls his fingers along the outer walls of my entrance, stretching me methodically.

Dev buries his face in my shoulder and wraps his free hand around my throat as Julian continues his relentless thrusting. A third finger slides in easily, and my cock fucking weeps. I squeeze my eyes shut. "I know you fucking love it, baby," he growls into my skin. I whimper at the endearment. "You're being such a perfect whore for me and Julian, letting us fuck you from both ends."

Julian slams in once more, lodging the head of his dick in my throat. He groans out a long and low, "Fuck." Tears spring to my eyes as I focus on breathing steadily through my nose. Black flares around the edges of my vision right before he pulls out. I inhale greedily, licking my lips, watching as saliva falls from the tip of his cock.

I need more, so much more. My hole aches to be filled with more, and my dick burns with the need to come. Dev's fingers keep pumping into me, grazing across the bundle of nerves that makes my whole body tremble.

Dev's fingers pull out of me, and the whine that rips from my throat is one I'll never live down. He leaves me all together, cold air freezing over my sweat-slick skin, but then he palms my ass cheeks and spreads them wide. Sealing his lips over the pucker, he licks it hard. The sounds coming out of me are desperate and needy as he continues moving that sinful tongue of his.

Julian's hand wraps around my chin, tilting my head up. He skims his lips over mine, and I can't stop panting against them. "You make the sweetest fucking sounds. I've never heard anything like it." His voice is heavy with awe, and then he seals our lips together at the same moment Dev thrusts his tongue in my channel.

The warmth pooling in both ends of my body shocks me momentarily, but I get lost in Julian's soft mouth, pushing back against Dev's face. His nose digs into my crack, his fingernails claw into my ass—every sensation feels multiplied. Julian's tongue thrusts deep into my mouth. It's rough and proprietary, its only goal to fill my mouth with him while Dev fills my ass. They're brutal with everything they do, but there's a raw sensuality to it all at the same time.

It's like they can't help but to worship me, even as they rip me apart.

They're powerless to it. To me.

Dev's hand wraps around the base of my sac, squeezing tight. I wrench away from Julian's kiss with a groan.

"I said he was going to fuck your face, not make love to it," Dev sneers. His hand wraps around my throat like a vice again as he yanks me back, pressing me to his chest. He takes a deep, steadying breath, ribs pushing into my back as he does. "Why do you insist on pushing so fucking hard?"

It's with little thought that I say, "Cause it's so fucking hot to see you like this. Besides, it was just a kiss."

His teeth collide with my neck, cutting into the skin. I hiss and moan through the pain. When he unlatches, his tongue dances over the grooves his teeth left. "I own you—every part of you—and that is something I won't share. Do you get it now?"

His grip relaxes a bit. "Of course, baby," I utter sweetly, assuaging his inferno with a knowing grin on my face. Julian shakes his head at me, eyes narrowed as if to say *you little shit*.

Dev turns my face toward him and attacks my mouth with his own; the angle is uncomfortable, but fuck if I care. He plunders my mouth, battering every inch with his tongue. Every time he kisses me, it's like being eaten alive, like he's devouring my very essence.

"Now, you're going to ride my dick, and you're gonna do it like a bat out of hell," he whispers against my lips.

He lets go of me completely and arranges himself so he's lying flat and his legs hang over the edge of the bed. I straddle him quickly as he grabs the lube and slicks up his long, thick shaft.

It's almost too good to be true—like everything else has been since Dev has been mine—that he's finally going to fill me up. After all of this, he still wants me and still wants to drill me into tomorrow. It's worth every vulnerability I've shown him, ten times over.

I look down into his dark, hooded eyes, his lips pressed thin, and that damn tick in his jaw. I grab his shaft resolutely, but he crooks his fingers at me, telling me to come closer. Our cocks brush against each other as our stomachs align, and he whispers hoarsely, "Don't get too comfortable. There's more in store for you yet."

A shiver snakes down my spine, and my eyes flit over to Julian. He watches us, stroking his cock slowly, one hand kneading his heavy sac. I don't know what Dev has planned, but I trust him with all I've got.

With that, I right myself and aim his flared head at my entrance. He's loosened me up sufficiently already, and hell, with the way he fucked me last night, the ease with which he breaches me is no surprise. I bear down on him, feeling the pop as just the tip stretches me wide. I slowly slide down until I'm skewered to the hilt. "Mmm," I moan.

"How's that for a massive dick, my love?"

Blood rushes to my face and groin all at once. It's on the tip of my tongue to push him further over the edge. He's rewarded me with this, but I simply can't help it when I smirk at him and shrug my shoulders nonchalantly.

His nostrils flare wide as his fingers dig into my hips with a bruising grip and lifts me before slamming me down and thrusting into me simultaneously. He flips us over so he's on top of me now and I'm on my stomach. Without pause, his cock is buried deep inside of me once more, and then he's moving. He punches into me recklessly, pulling me back by the hips to meet his thrusts, practically lifting me from the mattress. Lightning bolts of pain thrum each time he slams, but they ease into something warmer like fire. It's roaring, with each drag of his heavy cock along the sensitive rim of my hole, with each time he brushes past the extra sensitive spot within me. The hard, sweat-slick slaps of his skin against mine echo around us. Every single one of my senses is dominated by him.

His hand reaches around, gripping my face, but with the speed and strength of his thrusts, I keep bouncing from his grip.

With some impressive strength, he lifts me with a hand pressed to my stomach, turning our bodies so that I'm facing Julian. Then, he's back to fucking me. His fingers hook into my mouth, pulling at my cheek, adding another sensation to try to focus on while he absolutely brutalizes me with his cock. With my jaw open, I can't contain any of the garbled noises that wrench from me. Can't contain the way his thrusts punch the air from my lungs, and what's more, Julian has a front-row seat to my undoing.

I wish I could frame this moment for anyone who ever thought Dev wasn't as twisted as me. The thought brings a smile to my lips that probably looks insane with my cheek being hooked.

Julian's eyes nearly twinkle, and with speed that I did not anticipate, his fingers are in my hair, pulling my head back.

He must get some kind of confirmation from Dev because then his cock is in my gaping mouth. He almost just rests it there on my tongue, and every time Devin thrusts into my ass, Julian's head slams into the back of my

throat.

There isn't any resistance in the tight muscle that Dev's pounding into anymore; everything radiating back there is pleasure. Julian's steel shaft scratches along my teeth messily, but I guess he doesn't mind if the harsh pants and low groans are anything to go by. My cheek burns from Dev's thick fingers, and my mouth is overflowing with saliva. It dribbles out, running down my chin. They've set fire to my body; every single touch sends a shock to my leaking dick. It's the most agonizing pleasure ever, knowing that I'm not allowed to come yet. It's starting to feel like I never will.

"Fuck, Dev," he rasps. "Rome can take anything, can't he? Maybe he needs some more." He pulls his dick out. It drips with saliva, hanging heavily between his monstrous thighs. One of his rough hands scrubs my face soothingly, and I lean into the touch, feeling overheated and exhausted.

Dev grunts, slowing down to a languid slide. "I think my slutty little boyfriend wants us both to fill him up—size queen that he is."

My brain short circuits, and I fucking whimper, my brain too blissed out to even care. "Fuck, yes. Please, please, please," I pant the words over and over again, reduced to a begging puddle of limbs. Only Devin could turn me inside out like this.

He pulls out of me, and that makes it so much worse. My hole spasms around nothing. Devin readjusts himself so he's lying flat with his legs hung over the bed again, and while I only have a few brain cells left, I can envision how this will come together. I straddle his thighs once again, immediately putting his cock back in its rightful fucking place: me. A sigh of relief rushes from my lips.

"Julian. More lube, and work him open around my dick with your fingers," Dev says, all business, but I'm dying inside at the mere thought. While I do want to be stuffed full of both of them, it doesn't seem like it's possible, especially given their sizes.

Devin must see the apprehension on my face. As a stream of cold lube slicks its way around my entrance, cooling the skin, he brings my lips to his. "Don't worry. I wouldn't try if I didn't think you could, but you're just so fucking perfect that I know you can."

Julian inserts a finger alongside Dev's dick, and it only feels like a slight increase in pressure.

Devin reaches down, wrapping a hand around my cock for the first time all night, and I groan so loud it might as well be a scream. Julian continues

working his finger around my entrance, stretching with intention.

“It’s going to burn, Rome,” Dev says, leveling me with a serious look.

I pant against his skin. “Worth it.”

His other hand grabs the flesh of my ass, still tender from earlier. “Such a good fucking slut for me,” he croons, words laden with reverence and adoration.

Another finger slips in, and still, it just feels like added pressure. Dev keeps stroking me slowly, just enough to send bursts of pleasure to my balls, but not enough to catapult me over the edge. The anticipation ramps up when a third finger slides in, working more lube inside of me.

I look over my shoulder and find Julian’s eyes locked on my hole, which is stretched wide around Dev’s cock and three fingers, sweat dripping down his flushed face. He’s absorbed in it, revelation in his eyes. I decide to push back against them, thrusting them deeper into me. Julian licks his lips, losing his concentration momentarily.

“I’m ready,” I announce. My voice is raspier than I expected, throat parched.

Devin reaches out one arm toward the nightstand. “Water,” he tells Julian, and then there’s a half-empty bottle being pressed to my lips. I gulp greedily, feeling the liquid cool my flaming insides. He watches me intently until I’ve finished the whole thing. Then, he throws the empty bottle; it clatters somewhere in the room.

“Now you’re ready.”

I plant my hands on his shoulders, leaning my weight against unsteady arms.

“Rome, I know you’re tough as nails, but you need to say something if it hurts too bad,” Julian says.

“Just get in me already,” I demand, and he laughs.

I hear him slicking up his cock with more lube. We must’ve used the whole fucking bottle at this point. Then, his blunt head pushes right above Dev’s dick. It feels like more pressure than all three of his fingers combined as he tries to get it in. Then, with a slick pop, the head is in. It stings like hellfire as the ring of muscle thins and stretches to accommodate his girth.

“Fuck,” he seethes through clenched teeth. I groan, willing the pain to subside until Devin’s hand starts stroking my dick with the perfect amount of speed and pressure. Stars dance in my vision, the sensation of being torn in half melting into something more like a deep, throbbing ache.

Julian gives a tentative thrust, and something happens. Blinding pleasure slams into me as the weight of Julian's cock presses Devin's against my prostate. "Holy, sh-shit," I stutter as my body starts trembling.

Devin groans beneath me, pupils blown wide. He moves, beginning to meet Julian thrusts for thrust, pumping into me slow and steady.

"Dev, where's your phone? Please tell me it's nearby. You're both gonna want to see this, it's fucking insane how filthy this view is," Julian says through gasping breaths.

The words barely process in my head, but when they do, I nearly explode on the spot. I scream, an ungodly noise that rips from my very soul. "Not fucking yet, Rome," Dev grits out, tightening his hand like a vice around the base of my dick. I whine as the buildup of my impending orgasm slams into a brick wall.

I watch blearily as he roots around in the twisted-up blankets and hands his phone to Julian.

He must begin recording, because now they both pick up the pace, their fat cocks thrusting in and out faster. Dev wraps both hands around my throat as I hover above him. "You're going to come untouched when I tell you to." He squeezes my neck lovingly, and goosebumps ripple across my skin. I might as well be wrapped up in him, that's how all-encompassing the contact is.

I nod hurriedly. Each thrust from Julian makes Dev hit that crazy sensitive spot, and before I know it, my balls are drawing up again. Our collective pants and groans meld together with the slick sounds of our skin slapping together, their cocks plunging into my soaking wet hole. The pure, primal depravity of it all is what brings me to the point of return. "I c-can't hold it back anymore," I barely choke the words.

Devin's hands constrict around my throat as he says, "Go ahead. Come for me. You earned it, little psycho." His words fall on deaf ears as blood roars through them like lava, my vision goes black, and my whole body shudders. A scream explodes from my throat that falters with each twitch of my body.

When my vision starts to clear a little, I'm still mewling, but I hear Dev's words loud and clear. "Do not come inside of him."

Julian pulls out as carefully as he can, and my battered hole quivers at the loss. Everything happens so quickly from there. Devin's arms wrap around my back, clawing my skin to shreds as he holds me close, pounding into me

from below like a madman. It's well and truly fucking unhinged, but I melt into his hard chest, inhaling his sweat-slick neck like it's my last dying breath. He fucks into me so hard and fast, holding me so tight, moaning louder than ever, and then he punches in one final time and stills. His cum floods into me, hot against my inner walls. There's a groan from behind me, and then Julian's load splashes on my ass haphazardly. It drips into my crack, burning the skin.

He falls to the bed next to us, panting and covering his face with both hands.

My weight on top of Dev might make it harder for him to catch his own breath, but I don't really care. I have no intention of moving anytime soon. In fact, I burrow in closer to his neck, nuzzling the damp skin.

After what could be thirty minutes or an hour, we've all calmed down enough. My heart is no longer doing a marathon in my chest, so I break the silence. "How about that joint, assholes?"

Julian laughs loudly, and Dev snorts, stroking my back.

"Yeah, that's right. I didn't forget," I say. "I do believe I've earned it, all things considered. You guys aren't the ones who will have a sore ass for a week."

Devin tenderly seals his lips to mine, while Julian gets up. I hear the sound of his drawer sliding open and closed, then the flick of a lighter.

Dev grabs my chin. "Is this what you wanted?" he whispers.

I toss it around in my still foggy mind. "All I ever wanted was to see you lose control over me. So, in a roundabout way—yes." Julian's hand comes into my field of vision, passing me the joint I worked so hard for. "You're just so fucking beautiful when you're angry," I tell Dev.

Julian snorts out a laugh. "I don't know about all that now."

"Shut the fuck up, Julian," Dev says before I press the joint to his lips, and I don't actually think he'll hold any of this against him, but all three of us are inexplicably altered.

I brush my lips against Dev's ear, "Happy Valentine's Day, baby."

He grabs my throat one more time. "You're a little psycho, but damn, do I love you."

"I love you more. Now give me your phone. I need to watch that video."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bailey is an author who loves writing LGBTQ+ romance books.

They'd much rather write about fictional worlds and characters than themselves, but they love interacting with readers!

You can stalk them here:
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author is British, and this story contains British English spellings and phrases.

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COLE

“I ’m getting married.”

I stared at my mum, my jaw dropping. “What the fuck?” I whispered. Since when had she been in a relationship?

Her mouth thinned, her way of letting me know that she didn’t approve of my language, but I was beyond caring. She was getting *married*? To whom?

“Yes. I’m marrying David.”

“David Granger? Your *boss*?” My voice was rising as I clenched and unclenched my fists. “Isn’t he married?”

“Not anymore.” She smiled then, and I’d never seen her look so pleased. “I know this must come as a shock, but he’s a wonderful man and I know you’ll grow to love him. We’ll be moving into his house next week.”

My gaze whipped around our flat. It was small, yeah...we were in London, after all, even if it was a shit part. But it was home, and it had been since my parents had split when I was fifteen. My dad, Matthew Clarke, had since remarried and he lived up in Aberdeen with his wife. Suffice to say we didn’t speak often. A monthly allowance was deposited into my account, and we exchanged the occasional text about the football scores—the one thing we had in common was that we both supported Arsenal—but that was more or less the extent of our interaction.

But that was irrelevant right now. What was relevant was the fact that out of completely fucking nowhere, my mum had gone and dropped this bombshell, leaving me reeling. I didn’t want to leave my home. Technically, I could move out now since I was already eighteen, but realistically, that wasn’t going to happen. I was a school student for another two months, and

then there were the London prices to consider. No one was going to want to hire me when I was barely scraping through my A levels, and I already had a part-time volunteer job at a charity lined up for the summer which would be taking up a chunk of my time.

“I’d like you to pack up all your things this weekend. David was kind enough to volunteer his son’s help to get everything unpacked at the other end. Did you know he has a son just a little older than you? Huxley, his name is. Bit of a wild card, by David’s accounts.”

“No. I didn’t know he had a son,” I said sourly. I barely knew anything about the man other than the fact that he was the manager of a small architectural firm in London, supposedly married, and my mum was his personal assistant. She’d mentioned him on occasion, but I knew nothing whatsoever about him other than that, let alone that they were dating.

“You’ll like Huxley,” she said, and then picked up her phone, placing it to her ear. I guessed the conversation was over then.

Spoiler alert: I didn’t like him. But as much as I had an instant dislike for him, he *loathed* me on sight.

I’d just finished dumping the final box of my shit into my new bedroom—the smallest of the four in the Granger household, but still bigger than my bedroom in our flat—when the door flew open with a crash, rebounding against the wall. I didn’t even have a chance to take a breath before I was being shoved back against the wall, an arm across my throat as a body roughly the same height as mine but a little more wiry held me immobile.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking you belong here,” a voice snarled in my ear. I blinked, recalibrating, and then my attacker’s face came into focus. Bleached blond hair, smudged eyeliner and dark brows, a stubbled jaw, pierced ears and septum...

Huxley.

“You really are a walking, talking stereotype,” I laughed softly, which made him bare his teeth.

“Explain.” His sapphire blue eyes connected with mine, rage sparking in them.

“The emo bad boy. Let me guess, you sit in your room and play your

guitar while you cry about how unfair your privileged life is. Oh, yeah, and you've got a stash of weed hidden from your dad in your bedside drawer."

He gaped at me, but quickly recovered. "Fuck you, loser. You don't belong here, and as soon as school finishes you'd better get the fuck out of my house, otherwise I'll make you regret every single one of your life choices."

I swallowed against the tattooed arm that was pressing into my throat. Time to teach this wanker a lesson. Shoving off the wall, I sent us both crashing across the bedroom. Unfortunately, in the short time I'd been pinned, I'd managed to forget all about the piles of boxes currently scattered across the floor. Catching his foot on one, he fell backwards, taking me down with him, both of us smacking our heads on yet another box on the way down.

Our noses cracked together, and then we were scrambling away from each other and onto our feet, both of us breathing heavily. I bared my teeth at him. "Let's get one thing straight, emo boy. My mum is going to marry your dad. I like it just about as much as you do, but they're adults and it's not our decision to make. Therefore, that means that I have just as much right to be here as you do. You can start by getting the fuck out of my room."

With those words I pushed him backwards with all my strength, sending him staggering back into the doorway. One more push, and I slammed the door in his face, giving him the middle finger as I did so. I wasted no time in locking the door and then walking over to the mirror to examine my nose. It didn't appear to be broken, but I decided to head down to the kitchen for some ice just in case.

In the large, spotless kitchen, I found my mum pouring a glass of wine, humming to herself as something simmered on one of the shiny stainless-steel hobs on the huge range cooker. She glanced up as I entered the room, the smile falling from her face as she took me in.

"Cole! What's the matter?"

"Uh..." Stalling, I went to the freezer, rummaging around inside until I found a bag of frozen peas. That should help with any possible swelling. When I was seated at the kitchen island with the peas pressed to my nose, gradually freezing my skin, I replied as carefully as I could. "Would there be any reason why David's son would hate me on sight? Other than the fact that he's a dic—uh, other than his personality?"

She sighed. "Cole...there's something you should know. David and I...he

was still married when we began our relationship. That is to say, as far as Huxley was concerned, the marriage was still real and valid.”

What? “Mum! Why would you sleep with a married man?”

“I know. Believe me, that’s the part of this I regret the most. It’s not that easy. We tried so hard to stay away from one another, but eventually our... attraction to one another became too great to ignore.”

“He still should’ve left her before he did anything with you,” I muttered. “And it still doesn’t mean that Huxley should hate me. I didn’t even know you were seeing the guy until three days ago.”

“Cole, listen. David and Catherine had a very unhappy marriage, from what I could gather. They’d already been sleeping in separate bedrooms for over a year before he and I first...got together, although they’d taken care to hide the breakdown of their marriage from Huxley. He had already been in quite a bit of trouble at school, and they didn’t want to contribute to his... issues. From what I could gather, Catherine didn’t take the news of our relationship too well, even though she’d fallen out of love with David a long time ago. She...well, there was a lot of animosity on both ends.” Picking up her wine glass again, she took a sip, and I noticed the tremble in her hand. “When she left, she wasn’t interested in taking Huxley with her. She’d never been the maternal type, I suppose, and David said that Huxley was quite upset when he found out that he had to stay with his dad. You have to understand, his world has been upended. He can’t direct his anger at me, not in person at least, and unfortunately, that leaves you as the next best target.”

“Great. Well, that’s just idiotic.” I placed the bag of peas down on the kitchen island. “Mum, are you sure it was a good idea for me to be here? I don’t want to live somewhere where I’m going to have to be walking on eggshells.”

Meeting my eyes, she finally let a small smile cross her face. “Cole. You’ve never let anyone push you around before. Show him that you won’t accept his behaviour, and then maybe you can move past everything.”

Somehow, I didn’t think it would be that easy. But she had one thing right. I’d never let anyone push me around before, and I wasn’t going to start now.

I wasn’t interested in being friends with an asshole like Huxley Granger. And if he continued to threaten me, he’d soon learn that I wasn’t the easy target he thought I was.

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COLE

Huxley gave me a wide berth over the next few days, other than the odd times our paths crossed and we'd both glare at each other until one of us cracked and left the room. But through his dad and my mum, I managed to find out a few things about him. Not by choice, but by the fact that David and my mum seemed to want to saturate me with information about the Grangers every time I was in the same room as them. It was like my mum was trying to make up for not telling me anything by oversharing every single detail she could think of.

I couldn't blame them. Regardless of the fact that they'd gone about things the wrong way, they were both trying to make an effort now. And now I was over the shock of being uprooted from my life—at least my school wasn't too far to get to—I could see there were some benefits to being here. Much more space. Quieter, too, without paper-thin walls and neighbours who liked to blast music at all hours of the day and night. My mum seemed much happier as well, happier than I'd seen her in years. David seemed alright, from what I could tell. He'd taken a particular interest in my upcoming summer voluntary role at MindYou, a mental health charity, offering to research the charity's background and financials. He'd also offered me the opportunity to gain some work experience at his architecture company—something I turned down because working with my mum and my soon-to-be stepdad was not something I had an interest in. And I'd rather get by without handouts if at all possible.

Anyway, back to Huxley. If my brain had a list made up of all the things they'd told me, it would look something like this.

Things I know about Huxley Granger:

1) His middle name is John, the same as his dad's and his grandad's

2) He plays the guitar (I knew it!!!)

3) He's studying A levels in business (same as me), computing, and music (not the same as me—my other subjects are maths and design & technology)

4) David wants him to work at his architecture firm, but isn't pushing him into it because he doesn't think he wants to work there

5) He broke his left arm when he was six, falling out of a tree

6) He has a sweet tooth, and his favourite fruit is strawberries

7) He was close to his mum when he was younger, but when he became a teenager they grew apart

8) He's hot, but his wankerish personality cancels it out

Okay, scrap the first part of point number eight, and keep the part about his wankerish personality.

It became especially clear on Tuesday night. My mum and David were out entertaining some clients. I'd set myself up at the kitchen island, switching between revising for my A-level maths exam, and scouring the internet for possible part-time jobs that I could fit around my volunteer job and wouldn't be too soul-destroying. I'd just put a pizza and a garlic bread in the oven, and the kitchen TV was playing the football highlights in the background. Everything was chilled, and it was the first time I'd sat in the kitchen and not felt like a stranger.

An advert caught my eye on one of the job sites—a bartender at Revolve, a gay club in Soho. Part-time shifts of varying hours, and the pay wasn't bad either. That could work. I quickly filled in the application form, attached my CV, and hit the Submit button.

The TV abruptly turned off, and my head shot up to see Huxley standing across the other side of the island, his arms folded across his chest and his usual glare on his face.

I jerked my head in the direction of the TV, glaring straight back at him. "I was watching that."

"Yeah? Do you have an extra set of eyes? Because it looked like you were looking at your laptop screen to me."

Dick. Pushing back my stool, I rounded the island to stand in front of him, mimicking his posture by folding my arms across my chest. "Did you want

something, or did you just come in here to piss me off?”

His lip curled as he turned his body to face me head-on and took a step closer to me. “You’re way too easy to piss off.”

“Am I?” I stepped forwards. There was no way I was going to back down. “Are you sure it isn’t the other way around? Let’s think back to when we first met...oh yeah, I remember. You pushed me into a wall and told me that I shouldn’t make the mistake of thinking I belonged here. Seemed to me like you were *very* pissed off then. I hadn’t even spoken to you at that point.”

“Fuck you. I didn’t need to know you to know you were an asshole. You and your gold-digging, homewrecker mum—”

He hadn’t even finished talking before my fist swung at him, connecting with his face. “Don’t you fucking dare talk about my mum that way, you absolute fucking wanker!”

His fist shot out in retaliation, and I tried to duck, but he still struck a glancing blow off my jaw that made my teeth smash down on my tongue. A burst of blood filled my mouth, and I did what any sensible person would do—I lunged for him. He was gripping his nose, which I now saw had blood pouring from it, but he caught me around my waist, twisting us and sending the back of my head smacking into one of the cupboards.

I shoved him away from me and ran for the sink, where I ran the tap, holding my mouth open under the stream of icy water until the bleeding had slowed right down. When I wasn’t in danger of looking like a vampire who’d just fed when I opened my mouth, I withdrew my head and glanced over at Huxley. He was still standing there, blood dripping down his face.

For fuck’s sake. I grabbed a handful of kitchen towels, and stalked over to him, shoving the towels into his free hand. “Apply pressure to your nose with these, idiot. Tip your bloody head back too.”

Surprisingly, he actually followed my instructions, probably because he was in shock or something. Pulling out a chair at the island, he climbed onto it and rested his elbows on the counter, keeping his head tilted back as he pressed the wad of kitchen towels to his nose.

I crossed back over to the other side of the island. The oven beeped, letting me know my pizza was ready, but I’d lost my appetite. After switching it off, I looked back over at Huxley. “Let me say one thing. You have a stupid fucking flimsy reason for disliking me on sight. But guess what—first impressions count, and yours was the worst first impression I’d ever had. And the second. And the third. And you know what I realised? I really

fucking dislike you. You're a complete wanker, and I want you to stay the fuck out of my way."

He lowered the bloodstained tissue, and his eyes fixed on mine, hate burning in them. "I fucking hate you. I don't give a shit that our parents are getting married; you're not and never will be my brother. Stay the fuck away from me."

Gathering up my laptop and schoolbooks, I gave him a cold smile. "It looks like we both want the same thing, doesn't it? You stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours." I headed straight for the door, and paused. "There's a pizza and garlic bread in the oven. Have it, or don't, I don't give a fuck. Your face has made me lose my appetite."

With that, I walked away.

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HUXLEY

THREE MONTHS LATER

Happy fucking wedding day. No, scratch out the “happy,” and add several more “fuckings” and it would be closer to the truth. I gritted my teeth, lifting my joint to my lips in an attempt to mellow my mood enough to get through this farce of a ceremony. My bastard of a father was marrying his *secretary*. Just how cliché could you get? And after throwing a world-record tantrum, complete with a screaming match and enough broken crockery to fill a mid-sized skip, my mother had waltzed out of my life. Hadn’t even given me the option of going with her. If I was lucky, she remembered to call every few weeks, but the last I’d heard, she was taking a trip to “find her inner child” or some shit, and apparently she couldn’t use a phone while she was... wherever she was.

I angrily exhaled a cloud of smoke, not giving a shit that the smell was permeating my suit. My dad was far more interested in his new wife-to-be than me, and after witnessing eight weeks of their nauseating behaviour, I’d got the fuck out of there. All summer, I’d rotated between friends’ sofas and spare beds, all the while resenting the fact that Cole fucking Clarke was tucked up all cosy in *my* house, playing happy families with his mum and my dad.

Why had my dad taken such an interest in him? He said it was because Cole hadn’t had the same privileges I’d had, and with his own dad a mostly absent figure, he wanted to try to make it up to him. Yeah, great, but he forgot about his own fucking son in the process, other than gifting me a car as

my graduation present, which was basically him trying to buy me off. And I didn't see June Clarke making the same effort with me. In fact, she'd hardly even spoken to me...okay, maybe because I'd made it clear that I didn't want her near me, but whatever.

Bringing the joint back to my lips, I inhaled deeply. At the same time, the door to the hotel room opened, and I steeled myself, biting back words I wanted to let fly. This wasn't my room, after all. It was just a room that the groomsmen were using to dress in, where the photographer kept popping in and out and making us pose like imbeciles.

The words I wanted to bite out died in my throat anyway as I saw who was standing in the doorway.

Cole.

I hadn't seen him since early summer when I'd moved out, taking care to only come back home when I knew he was busy with his volunteering or his new job in a club in Soho. Now, I couldn't help taking him in as I exhaled slowly, the smoke curling in front of me and making it look like I was seeing him through a mist.

The first thing I noticed was his dark hair, usually on the messy side, but now parted to the left in a boring-as-fuck, neat style that had the unfortunate effect of accentuating his features. His deep brown, thickly lashed eyes blinked the haze of smoke away as his lips curved into a lazy smirk. His tailored dark grey morning suit matched mine, which fucking sucked, because I couldn't deny he wore it better than me.

"My favourite brother."

"Not your brother," I ground out, giving him the finger.

"Black nails. Cute." He made a show of pulling his phone from his pocket and glancing at the time. "I'll wait to call you brother in about...hmm...forty-five minutes."

Before I could reply with a cutting remark, he strode over to me, plucked the joint from my fingertips, and took a deep drag, blowing the smoke into my face.

"Give that back. I need it. It's medicinal."

"Yeah?" He raised a brow. "In that case, I think I'll finish it up."

Then he was gone, and the only thing I could do was to punch the wall, wishing it was his smug fucking face.

The ceremony and speeches were finally over, and I was able to escape outside, avoiding well-wishers and other relatives I had no desire to ever see again in my life. Heading out onto the stone patio with a JD and Coke, I stopped dead when I saw Cole over to the left, deep in conversation with a cute guy with light brown, wavy hair. A weird feeling went through me. Almost like jealousy, except I knew better. I'd known for a long time that I was bi, but that guy wasn't my type at all. Still, it wouldn't hurt to find out who he was. Just in case.

"Cole." I lifted my hand in greeting, wincing internally as my bruised knuckles made themselves known as I stretched them out. It probably hadn't been the best idea to punch the wall, but it was the next best thing to punching Cole's face—which I still wanted to do. Strolling over to them, I watched the shock flare in his eyes as he took me in. Maybe I should've tried this sooner—faked playing nice to see what I could get out of it.

He recovered quickly, his gaze flicking to his companion before returning to me. "Ahhh. Huxley. My favourite brother."

I was temporarily struck dumb. He'd never said my name before, but the way it had rolled off his tongue so easily, like he'd been saying it for years... Gritting my teeth, I focused on the task at hand. The fucker was just trying to get a rise out of me by calling me his brother. "Stepbrother, you mean." I turned to his companion, holding out my hand. "I'm Huxley Granger. And you are...?"

"Elliot Clarke. Cole's cousin. My dad is his dad's brother." He gave me a small, polite smile, and it was clear that he had zero interest in me, which was good, because now I was here, I wasn't feeling any kind of way about him. My gaze returned to Cole, who was watching us both with his brows pulled together, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth.

There was something in his expression... I stepped closer to Elliot, and the second I did so, I saw Cole tense up out of the corner of my eye. "Elliot. I haven't seen you around before. Do you live locally?"

Shaking his head, he gave me another small smile. "Nope. Bournemouth. But I go to London Southwark Uni—do you know it?"

"LSU? Yeah." This time, there was nothing fake in my interest. "What's it like? I'm starting there this September."

His smile turned genuine. "It's good. There's a lot of clubs and societies and things if you like all that. Great facilities. Yeah. I like it."

"Good," I replied, briefly glancing back over at Cole, who was now

giving me a look that was definitely a glare. Returning his glare, I took a step back. “Nice to meet you, Elliot. Maybe I’ll see you around campus.”

As I turned to head in any direction that led me away from them, I made sure to brush past Cole, dipping my head to his ear. “Call me *brother* again, and I’ll knock your fucking teeth out.”

He huffed out a laugh, although it sounded a little shaky.

I didn’t bother to look at the expression on his face as I walked away.

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COLE

“Cole!”

I glanced away from Elliot to see my mum beckoning me towards her. I sighed, turning back to my cousin. “Duty calls. Sorry.”

He swiftly shook his head with a smile. “Don’t worry about it. I should probably text Ander back anyway—he’s been blowing up my phone asking how everything’s going.”

“Sounds like him.” Ander was Elliot’s best friend, and from what I’d seen of their friendship over the years, they were both obsessed with each other to a level that I could never contemplate with anyone. Then again, I’d never had a best friend, so who knew how best friends actually behaved?

Shoving my hands into my suit pockets, I headed over to my mum. I plastered on a smile when I drew closer, because despite my reservations about this whole thing—mainly Huxley, if I was being completely honest—it was clear to anyone with eyes that she was happy.

“Ah, Cole. The photographer would like to take a few photos down by the lakeside. David and I thought it might be nice to include a few family photos.”

Great. More time with Huxley. I kept the smile on my face and hoped it didn’t look too fake. “Okay, yeah. Where do you want me?”

“Just down here.” She pointed down the gravel path that wound down the side of the lawn in the direction of the lake. I took her arm as we walked down, helping her to balance. Those heels were not made for gravel. As we drew closer to the lake, I saw Huxley and his dad waiting with the photographer, who was kneeling down and changing his camera lens. He had

a bit of a pained expression on his face, and it soon became obvious why when I heard David's voice.

"...Smoking weed on our wedding day! All I ask is for you to behave for *one* day, and you can't even manage that."

I smirked, and at the same time Huxley glanced over at me, shooting me a savage glare. "Cole smoked too."

My smirk dropped, and I shook my head. "Smoke? Me? You must be mistaken." Okay, I'd made a point of taking a drag in front of him, but after that I'd put the joint out to save for later, and then I'd done my best to air out my suit and spray on some aftershave, and made good use of the toothpaste and mouthwash in the facilities the hotel had provided. Huxley hadn't even bothered to try and hide it.

"You know you did, you lying wanker," he hissed.

"Huxley! Please." David pinched his brow, huffing out a breath. "Can you just pretend to get on with Cole for one day? You're brothers now, so act like it."

"Yeah, come on, *brother*," I said, just to piss him off, and he gave me the middle finger, not even caring that his dad, my mum, and the photographer were all watching him.

"Huxley. That's enough." There was a finality in David's tone, and Huxley dropped his arm, his jaw clenched. David cleared his throat, giving Huxley a pointed look, before turning to the photographer. "My apologies. We're ready for the photos now. Where would you like us?"

The photographer slipped into professional mode, directing us to stand in front of the lake. I was on the end next to my mum, and Huxley was thankfully at the other end, next to his dad. My smile came easily as I imagined various ways that I could piss off Huxley. It would be amazing if I could just trip him up so he fell in the lake.

After the photographer had snapped a few photos, he studied them on the screen on the back of his camera, then gave us a thumbs up. I exhaled, relaxing. Now I could get away from Huxley and drink myself into oblivion.

Except my mum stopped me in my tracks, just as I was getting ready to make a break for it. "Cole? Huxley? Before you go, we'd like a photo of the two of you together. Just one."

I knew that the horror I saw in Huxley's eyes was reflected in my own. For once, we were both in complete agreement.

"Cole. Please." My mum's voice wobbled a bit and shit, I was going to

have to do this, wasn't I? I wasn't going to be the heartless bastard that ruined her day. I could suck it up and suffer Huxley for one photo.

I nodded at my mum and then walked over to where Huxley was standing. He watched me coming, his teeth gritted and his fists clenched like he was getting ready to punch me. Fuck, why did he look so sexy, all wrapped up in that suit with murder in his eyes? There was clearly something wrong with me if I was finding my step-wanker hot. I kept some distance between us, or I tried to, until the photographer instructed us to move closer. There was a slight smirk on his face, and I was betting that this was payback for Huxley's behaviour earlier.

"Closer." He was gesturing with his hand, and with a sigh, I stepped right up next to Huxley, so close that the sleeve of his suit jacket brushed against mine.

"You're a lying bastard," he spat between gritted teeth.

"Remove the word 'lying,' and you've just described yourself." I smiled widely. "It's so easy to smile around you."

He legit growled, like he was an animal. "Fuck off."

"Wanna know why? It's because I'm imagining pushing you into the lake." The photographer raised his camera, and I added, "Smile."

Huxley pasted a smile on his face that actually looked genuine, and I wondered whether he was trying my trick of imagining that he was pushing me into the lake. Why did other people get nice stepsiblings, and I ended up with the one from hell? I knew I wasn't doing anything to improve relations between us, but he was a complete and utter wanker...and okay, so was I, as it turned out.

"Miracles can happen." David stared at us, shaking his head. "Maybe now you two can be civil to each other, you can consider moving back home, Hux."

Huxley snorted. "Unless he's moving out, I'm not moving in."

David muttered something about "immature behaviour," which I agreed with, although I had to say, it was quite nice to not have to be on edge every time I left my bedroom. There was a tiny part of me that felt bad that Huxley had left his home because of me, though. A tiny part that I was able to ignore now that I had him standing next to me, all tense and bristling with hostility.

"Arms around each other," the photographer called, and I groaned. But I slid my arm around Huxley's waist, knowing that it would just make him more pissed off.

He stiffly placed his own arm around me. "Touch me again after this photo, and I'll break your arm."

"Do you think you could? How much effort would it take to actually break someone's arm?" I took a breath to smile at the photographer, imagining Huxley flailing in the lake and coated in algae, before I continued, "I think we'd be pretty evenly matched, probably. Maybe I'd break your arm first."

Thankfully, the photographer called out to say we were done with the photos, interrupting whatever comeback Huxley had. He shrugged my arm off and stormed away, and I watched him go with the tiniest feeling of guilt. I shouldn't have pushed him, not at my mum's wedding.

With a sigh, I turned to my mum and David. "I'm sorry. I wasn't helping the situation. He, uh, I shouldn't let him get under my skin."

David shook his head. "Huxley's always been hot-headed and a troublemaker. I don't blame you at all."

Yeah, but I wasn't faultless, was I? "Even so, I apologise."

Both of them smiled at me, and David stepped forwards to clasp my shoulder. "Thank you, Cole. You have nothing to apologise for. I only wish Huxley could be a little more like you. I wish he'd give you a chance."

Those words made me feel even worse. I had to leave. "Congratulations again. I'll, uh, leave you to the rest of the photos."

David hugged me, taking me by surprise. As he circled his arms around me, he leaned in, lowering his voice. "I don't expect you to start calling me Dad, and I would never dream of taking the place of your own father. But I'd like for you to see me as a father figure. As far as I'm concerned, I've gained another son, and I only want what's best for you."

When he released me, my mum was dabbing at her eyes, smiling. "Thank you for being so good about everything, Cole. I'm very proud of you," she whispered as I hugged her and kissed her cheek.

I needed a drink, because somehow, I'd managed to make myself look like a saint, and for Huxley to look even worse, and that guilt was rearing its head again. Making my way back up to the hotel, I headed straight for the bar, ordering a shot of vodka and tipping it back.

"Another," I said to the bartender, just as someone came up beside me.

"I'll have the same."

Huxley stood next to me. In the short time since I'd last seen him, he'd ditched his jacket, waistcoat, and tie, and now he was in his white shirt with

the sleeves rolled up, exposing the tattoos that ran down one arm. His bleached hair was mussed up like he'd been running his hands through it, and as he drummed his fingertips on the bar, his black nails glinted at me. Fuck me, he looked hot.

It still didn't negate the fact that I loathed him, though. It just meant that I had working eyes.

He shot me a sideways look that warned me not to mess with him, and I wasn't planning to. All I wanted was to drink until I forgot he even existed.

When the bartender set our shots in front of us, I raised my glass. "Wanna toast?"

His dark brows lifted as his eyes met mine. "To what?"

I shrugged. "To forgetting that this day ever happened?"

"I'll fucking drink to that," he muttered, raising his own glass. At the same time, we tipped our shots to our lips, and drank.

It was the second time today that we'd been in agreement, but I doubted it would ever happen again.

COLE

Yawning, I stepped outside the side entrance of Revolve, the club where I did shifts as a bartender. It was three in the morning now, and the only thing I wanted was to get back to the house and pass out in my bed.

I shoved my hand in my pocket, reaching for my phone to book an Uber. My fingers brushed against a crumpled slip of paper, and I pulled it out. The name “John” was printed in block capitals above a phone number. Maybe I should text him. He’d been cute, from what I could remember. As a gay man working in a gay club, I never had any shortage of numbers, but I took advantage of my opportunities less often than I suspected most people would.

As I pushed the paper back into my pocket, my phone began vibrating, making me jump a mile. My heart racing, I lifted it to see an unknown number, and I hit Answer straight away. As a rule, I didn’t answer unknown numbers, but if someone was calling me at three in the morning, I couldn’t take the risk of not answering in case it was important. My mum and David were off on their honeymoon, a month-long cruise, and if anything had happened to my mum...

“Hello?”

“Is that...” The voice at the other end paused. “Do you know a Mr. Huxley Granger?”

A shocked sound burst from my throat. *Huxley?* “Yes. He’s...he’s my stepbrother. What’s this—”

“Right. Are you able to get to Honeybourne Road? Mr. Granger has been in an accident. He’s quite shaken up. He asked us to call his stepbrother.”

Attempting to calm my accelerating heart rate, I tried to keep my voice

steady. “Yeah. That would be me. Cole Clarke. Is he okay? What happened?”

“It’s probably best if you get here as quickly as possible. Someone will be available to answer your questions.”

When I’d been given the exact location and I’d hung up the phone, I wasted no time in flagging down a black cab. Fuck waiting for an Uber, I needed to get to Huxley right now.

My hands were fucking shaking the whole way there, my heart beating out of my chest. The same question ran through my mind over and over as the cab rumbled through the quiet streets.

Why had Huxley asked them to call me?

Flashing lights cut through the darkness and my whole body tensed, my gaze scanning the road up ahead. Blue flashes lit up the night sky in front of me, throwing the buildings on either side of the road into sharp relief.

“This is as far as I can go. Police cordon.” The driver thumbed at the distinctive tape stretching across the road, flapping in the night breeze.

“That’s fine. Thank you.” Slipping out of the cab, I ducked under the tape, and stopped dead, taking in the scene in front of me.

Two cars. One flipped on its side, the underside of the car facing me. The other...my breath caught in my throat, my hand flying to my mouth as I took in the wreck that had once been Huxley’s black Audi S5 Coupe. From the back, before I’d crossed the cordon, it had looked okay, but as I forced my feet to move, I saw that the front was now a heap of twisted metal. The car’s hazards were flashing, combining with those of the police car parked at an angle across the end of the road.

“Sir! Excuse me! You need to stay behind the cordon!”

I was spun around by a hand to my shoulder. A policewoman was there, shaking her head at me.

“I—they—someone called me. Huxley. My, uh, brother. Th-that’s his car. The A-Audi.” I was stumbling over the words, my voice shaking like fucking crazy. As much as Huxley and I detested each other, I wouldn’t wish this on him. Fuck. He wasn’t *dead*, was he?

Through the glassy haze that had suddenly obscured my vision, I registered the policewoman’s face turn from stern to sympathetic, and the hand on my shoulder squeezed gently before she removed it. “Come with me.”

After saying something into the little walkie-talkie she had clipped to her chest, she led me over to an ambulance a little way from the scene of the

wreckage. The back of the ambulance was open, and a paramedic was there waiting for me. He gave me a smile, all friendly professionalism, and my pounding heart rate slowed just a little, because surely he wouldn't smile if Huxley was in a bad state?

"Mr. Clarke. Is it okay if I call you Cole?" he addressed me gently, and I nodded, swiping the back of my hand across my face to clear my vision. "Good. Your brother was in an accident tonight. He's going to be okay—it's a miracle, to tell the truth, that he's only escaped with some minor cuts from the glass and bruising from the airbags. Someone up above must have been watching out for him."

"What happened?" I scanned the paramedic's face, relief coursing through my body at the knowledge he was okay.

The paramedic glanced over at the policewoman, who coughed discreetly. "Drunk driver on a joyride hit his car."

"Shit. Okay. So he's okay?" I asked, just to make sure.

"He will be. He's been thoroughly checked out in the ambulance. He's very shaken up, and he needs someone to be with him, to make sure that he gets some rest and takes the pain relievers he's been prescribed. If the safety features in his car hadn't been so good, and if he hadn't had luck on his side...we might be looking at a completely different story."

"Okay," I said again. Fuck. My brain didn't seem to be working properly.

"Would you like to see him? He's been cleared to go home." Leaning closer, the paramedic murmured, "Between you and me, I'd prefer to take him into the hospital and keep him overnight for observation, but with the cuts they've made...unless we have a strong case for taking him in, he has to go home."

"No, it's okay. I'll, uh, sit with him. Make sure he's okay."

The paramedic smiled. "If only more of our patients had siblings as caring as you." *If only he knew the truth.* "If you're concerned at all, call NHS Direct, and if his condition worsens, dial 999."

"Uh..."

"He's going to be okay. It won't come to that, I'm sure of it." With those words, he directed me to climb inside the ambulance, where I got my first look at Huxley.

He was sitting up on the metal bed, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, sipping from a bottle of water through a straw. His face was drained of colour, with a grey pallor, and there were several small cuts on his

face. The skin around his eyes was a little swollen and red, and I knew that it would darken to a purple by tomorrow.

I stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say or how to approach him. Eventually I went for the simplest option. “Hi.”

His eyes finally met mine, and I was taken aback by the hostility in them, far stronger than the relief that had flickered in his gaze for the tiniest moment. I shouldn’t have been, because that was standard from him, but I thought that maybe the accident would have made him a little less... He’d chosen to call me, hadn’t he? Instead of one of his friends?

“You came?” he said, and there was a definite question in his words.

Had he thought I wouldn’t? Okay, we couldn’t stand each other, but there hadn’t ever been a question in my mind. The second I’d picked up the phone and heard what had happened, all I could think about was getting to him as fast as I could. “Yeah.”

“Just to make it clear,” he rasped. “You’re the last fucking person I wanted to call.” Dragging his hand across his face, he visibly winced, gritting his teeth as his palm skimmed over the cuts and bruises. He let out a frustrated huff of breath. “I didn’t have any other option. It was you or no one.”

I stored that information for later, when I could interrogate him about it when he wasn’t looking like he was about to pass out any minute. “Are you ready to go? I’ll get us a taxi.”

“Fuck’s sake. Where’s your car?”

“I was at work. I don’t drive there, there’s nowhere to park.”

He grunted, and that was a good enough reply for me. As much as I enjoyed mentally sparring with him, even I wasn’t enough of a dick to do it when he’d just had a traumatic experience. Pulling out my phone, I booked an Uber to take us both home.

“How’s my car?” was the only question he asked me during the otherwise silent ride back to the house. We’d gone out of the other end of the road, because I hadn’t wanted him to see the scene of the accident.

I swallowed hard, staring out of the window. “It was...it was wrecked.”

There was no reply, but when I turned my head and a streetlamp illuminated the inside of the car, I saw him bite down on his trembling lip, and a tear fall from his closed eyes.

COLE

Huxley had spent most of the next couple of days sleeping. I figured it was good for his recovery. I'd called the boss of my volunteer admin assistant job—hopefully eventually to be a paid job—explaining the situation, and lucky for me, he'd given me the okay to work from home. Even luckier, I wasn't scheduled to work any shifts at Revolve until the following week, so I was able to keep an eye on Huxley.

Not that either of us were particularly happy about the situation. Huxley was resentful as fuck that I was the one to be looking out for him, and I was resentful as fuck for the same reason. I hadn't yet asked him why he'd chosen me to call, despite his network of friends, and I hadn't even wanted to broach the subject because every time I'd seen him, our conversations consisted of me reminding him to take his medication and him giving me the finger or telling me to fuck off out of his bedroom.

Today, though, enough was enough. Two and a half days of rest was plenty. He was going to answer my questions, whether he wanted to or not.

First of all, I needed to sweeten him up. From what I remembered of the two-ish months we'd lived under the same roof, he was *not* a morning person. So I used the expensive coffee machine in the kitchen to make him a latte loaded with caramel syrup. By the way, his sweet tooth was the only thing sweet about him.

Entering his bedroom without knocking, I placed the mug of coffee on his bedside table. He hadn't bothered locking the door after the first night, when I'd threatened to smash his door in if he tried to lock me out. Just because I didn't like him, didn't mean that I was going to leave him alone. As it stood, I

had responsibility for him, no matter how unhappy we both were about it, and I wasn't going to be the one to explain to his dad why something bad had happened to him under my care.

“Big brother.” Standing at the edge of his bed, I smirked as I gently shook his shoulder.

He reacted instantly, springing up in bed with a growl, then grimacing in pain. “Why the fuck is your ugly face the first thing I’m seeing this morning?”

“I made you coffee.” I gave him a fake smile. “My face is not ugly, by the way. Are you jealous of the way I look?” I nearly said “not as ugly as yours,” but that would be a lie. Despite his perma-scowl and over-reliance on hair bleach, he was unfortunately blessed in the looks department. Not that I’d ever tell him that.

Instead of replying, he did his usual gesture of giving me the finger before grabbing his coffee. I noticed that his black nail polish was all chipped and messed up, and something about it seemed wrong. I ignored that thought, moving on to more important things. Taking a seat at the side of his bed, I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say anything, I found myself being shoved hard, crashing to the floor and knocking my head.

“You asshole. What was that for?” It took everything in me not to drag him out of the bed and pound him into the floor—with my fists. The only reason I held off was because he was injured.

“Stay off my bed.”

“Fine.” I picked myself up from the floor, shooting him a glare, and took a seat in his desk chair, wheeling it over so it was next to his bed. In the meantime, he’d arranged himself against the headboard, knocking back painkillers with the glass of water I’d left out for him last night.

“Why the fuck are you here? I know it’s not to bring me coffee. I’m fine now, I don’t need you playing nurse anymore.”

That was debatable. But on with the reason why I was here, he was right; it wasn’t to bring him coffee.

“I want to know why you chose me, out of everyone.”

His shoulders stiffened. Lowering the glass of water, he switched it for his coffee mug, drawing his knees up under the covers and hiding his face behind the mug. “You were my last and only choice,” he said flatly.

“But how? Surely you had friends you could call? Someone you like slightly more than me?”

“I like everyone more than you,” he growled. “Dad’s on his honeymoon, my mum’s off on her spiritual journey, and my friends...look. I was in a lot of fucking pain, okay? I didn’t want to be crashing on someone’s sofa or in a shitty spare bed with springs poking into my back. I wanted to be here, in my comfortable bed, with my own private bathroom. You being forced to be at my beck and call was an unexpected bonus.”

He’d spent most of the time sleeping, so I hadn’t exactly been at his beck and call, but whatever. I thought back over what he’d said. It made sense. “Okay.” With a shrug, I got to my feet. “Thanks for letting me know. If you’re feeling fine now, then you obviously don’t need me here anymore.”

I’d made it all the way to the open door when his voice sounded again. “Wait.”

I turned back to him, and our eyes met. He moved, and the duvet slid down and...fuck. Across that lean, lightly toned chest was a myriad of bruises in blues and purples.

“I’m not...I’m not fucking fine, okay,” he bit out. “But I don’t want or need you looking after me anymore. Go and do whatever shit you want, I don’t care.”

“Huxley.” I took a step towards him, trying to remember the instructions the paramedic had given us just before we’d left. “You need to apply compression to that bruising.”

Glancing down, he swore under his breath. He’d clearly been keeping those bruises hidden from me, because every time I’d seen him, he’d either been under the covers or wearing a T-shirt, but now there was no hiding them.

“I fucking tried, but—”

I held up my hand. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m gonna help you wrap your chest, and then I’m going to leave you. It goes both ways. You don’t want me here; I don’t want to be here. But, Hux, if you dare to fucking injure yourself any worse, and your dad finds out, I *will* kill you.”

It was only after he’d been staring weirdly at me for the best part of a minute that I rewound what I’d said to him. Shit. I’d called him Hux—where had that come from? We weren’t, and would probably never be, at the name shortening stage.

Ripping my gaze away from his, I crossed his bedroom and entered his en-suite bathroom to find the roll of stretch bandages. When I returned and took a seat on the edge of his bed, I steeled myself for him to kick me off

again, but he remained where he was, staring at a fixed point on the wall rather than looking at me. Which was good.

I unrolled the bandages, and then cleared my throat. His jaw clenched, but he lifted his arms enough that I could get the bandages around his torso. Shifting closer on the bed, I reached out. At the first contact of my fingertips on his skin, we both inhaled sharply. My heart rate was speeding up. I'd never been this close to him, never touched him without there being any hostility behind it. Carefully, I began to wind the bandages around him, doing my best not to touch him without a layer of fabric between my skin and his. When I'd finished, I wasted no time in shifting away from the heat of his body. Both of us were breathing more heavily than normal, and all I wanted to do was to get away from him. To purge my mind of the knowledge of his warm, smooth skin, the way his heart had beat under my palm as I was wrapping the stretchy fabric around him, the way his thigh had been pressed against mine, his breath hitting my hair as I lowered my head to fasten the bandages.

“Now get the fuck out of my room.” His voice was hoarse.

“Fuck you. I'm going.” Without another word, I launched myself off his bed and out of his door, making sure to slam it as I left. The crash reverberated around me as I stalked down the hallway, down the stairs, and then out through the front door. I had no idea where I was going—all I knew was that I needed to put as much distance between me and Huxley as possible.

HUXLEY

Cole stayed out of my way for the next few days. Sometimes I'd hear the shower in the upstairs bathroom, and occasionally I'd hear his footsteps padding past my room, but that was it. Every day, though, without fail, I'd come downstairs on a hunt for food, and find takeaway food in the fridge that I just needed to reheat. The fucker somehow seemed to know the foods I liked, or maybe it was just that the accident had left me with a new appreciation for all the necessities required to keep me alive. Things like food, drink, sleeping in a decent bed, weed, my guitar...

My guitar. It sat there accusingly, staring at me from the corner of my bedroom. I'd left it here when I'd decided to move out, knowing that I couldn't keep lugging it from house to house, expecting it to still be in one piece when I eventually decided to settle. I loved playing it—it was a form of stress relief for me, along with the weed—a way to balance the thoughts inside my head, to give me some peace. Even if that sounded weird, depending on the music I was playing.

With a sigh, I forced myself to pick it up. As soon as my hand closed around the neck, a lump appeared in my throat out of nowhere. Maybe this accident had fucked with my head more than I'd thought. Cole hadn't let me see the scene, but there had been pictures taken by the police, pictures my insurance company needed also, and yeah...I hadn't realised until the moment I'd seen them just how fucking lucky I was. How had I managed to walk away from that accident unscathed, apart from some shallow cuts and bruising that was painful as fuck but would soon be nothing but a memory?

The thoughts were too much to process. I sank to the floor, cradling my

guitar on my lap, and lost myself in the soothing process of tuning it. When it was ready to play, I ran my thumb over my guitar pick, gently strumming the strings as I tried to decide what to play. My fingers made the decision for me, playing the opening bars of “Somewhere Only We Know” by Keane.

As I strummed the guitar, I began to sing softly.

I was in the zone, and it took me a while to realise that there was another presence in the room. Raising my head, I saw Cole, frozen in the doorway, his gaze fixated on my guitar.

My fingers slipped on the strings, causing a screeching sound, and I growled in frustration. “What the fuck do you want? Get out.” Why had I left the door open?

He blinked, his eyes flying to mine, before he staggered backwards. “Sorry,” he whispered, and then he disappeared.

I tried to get back into the zone after that, but of course fucking Cole had ruined it. Giving it up as a lost cause, I made my way down to the kitchen for a snack, and my least favourite person was there, perched on a stool at the kitchen island, rubbing the spot between his brows as he stared at his laptop screen.

“Why do you have to do that here? There’s a desk in your room. Use it,” I said irritably, heading over to the fridge.

“I’m used to working in the kitchen. There wasn’t enough room for a desk in my old house, so I did all my homework at the kitchen table. I guess it’s habit that’s stuck with me, even now with this charity work.”

His voice was musing, and I wasn’t prepared to have a civil conversation with him at the moment. “Maybe you should make a new habit,” I suggested as I reached into the fridge for a punnet of ripe, red strawberries. Fucking delicious.

There was no reply, so I took that to mean our conversation was over. Good. I portioned out some of the strawberries to eat and grabbed a bowl from the cupboard. As I was running the tap to rinse them, I felt Cole’s eyes on me.

“What are you doing?”

I rolled my eyes. “Washing strawberries. What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Those are my strawberries,” he said, as if he actually had ownership of any of the products in my dad’s fridge.

“I don’t see your name on them.” Picking up the biggest, ripest

strawberry, I turned to face him and bit down into the soft, juicy flesh.
“Mmmm.”

He stared at me...at my mouth, and when my tongue came out to swipe across my lips, making sure I caught all of that delicious strawberry juice, I could've sworn his eyes darkened.

“They're mine. I bought them this morning.” His voice suddenly had a rasp to it, and why the hell did my dick decide that it would be a perfect moment to perk up?

“Too bad.” I lifted the remaining half of the strawberry to my lips, and then everything seemed to happen in slow motion. There was the scrape of a chair, and then Cole appeared in front of me, biting down on the strawberry that I was about to place in my mouth.

I forgot what words were, because *his fucking tongue was touching my fingers.*

He swallowed hard, lifting his head, and our eyes met for a long, charged moment.

“*Mine,*” he growled.

Then he swiped the bowl of strawberries from the sink and stalked out of the room, leaving me there fucking speechless and with a raging boner.

I had a text later on, after I'd had the most frustrating wank of my life because my dick did not seem to get the message that Cole was not only a fucking asshole, but he was also my stepbrother and therefore completely off limits even if hell had frozen over and he had been someone I was remotely into.

COLE:

FYI my mum texted to say she's going to call at 8pm our time.
Do you want me to tell them about the accident?

ME:

No. NO. Do not say anything. The insurance is paying for repairs and it's in my name. If my dad finds out, I will fucking make you pay

COLE:

Chill. Smoke some weed. Seems like you need it

I fucking hated this asshole. Just to piss him off, I sent him a picture of my empty bowl with strawberry leaves inside. After he'd left the kitchen, I'd taken the rest of the strawberries from the fridge and eaten them up in my room. They were my favourite fruit, and yet the experience of eating them had been ruined for me because every time I bit into one, I had a vivid image of him taking the strawberry from my hand with his teeth, his tongue swiping across my fingers. That had led to my dick getting even harder, hence my frustrating wank.

A minute later, my phone buzzed again, and I opened it up to find a picture that immediately made my blood boil. Cole was reclining on his bed, a joint between his lips, smoke curling lazily through the air. He'd included the caption "Thanks for rolling this. Saved me a job".

The bastard had stolen that from my stash.

So what if I'd had a few of his strawberries? He had to have gone digging through my drawers to find that, and that was a total violation of my privacy.

That was fucking it. Ignoring the pain from my bruises as I launched myself to my feet, I stormed out of my bedroom and down the hallway to confront my stepbrother.

COLE

I smiled to myself as I sent the selfie to Huxley. He was going to lose his shit, and I couldn't wait. It was time to get us back on an even footing after that weird-as-fuck moment in the kitchen. What had I been thinking? I fucking ate that strawberry from his fingers like we were in a bad porno. I wasn't sure who had been the most shocked—him, or me.

Predictably, there was a crash—Huxley's bedroom door opening—followed by footsteps stomping down the hall.

“Hi, brother.” I waved the joint at him, and I could almost see the steam pouring from his ears. His blue eyes were dark with rage, highlighted by the purple bruising around them, and his fists were clenched as he stormed over to my bed. Before he could take a swing at me, which I just *knew* he was about to do, I quickly set the joint down on the small plate I was using as a temporary ashtray-slash-burn protection thing, and then threw my body into a lying position. With the mattress there to absorb the blow, the punch wouldn't hurt as much. And as much as I wanted to fight back, I had to remind myself that Huxley had only very recently been in a car accident, so for now, I had to bide my time. Incapacitate him in the least painful way possible. Then give him the beating of his life when he was all recovered.

My sudden move caught him off guard, and his fist encountered empty air as he swung at where I had been just a second earlier, making him fall forwards. He threw his hands out to brace his fall, one landing on the bed right next to my head, the other landing on my shoulder, twisting it down into the mattress.

Despite being caught off guard, he recovered quickly, moving to straddle

me on his knees and delivering a solid punch to my stomach, making me gasp. “You fucking bastard,” he snarled. “I wish you’d just—”

All my good intentions went out of the window as I reacted on instinct even though the air had been knocked out of me. Bucking my body up to throw him off, I shoved hard at his bruised torso. He howled in pain, falling to the side and smacking his back into the wall. I felt bad for about two seconds until he threw himself back on me, his nails scraping down my bare arms. A sound came from my throat that was halfway between a cry and a shout. His nails were short, but it still fucking stung as they dug into my skin. I grabbed a handful of his stupid bleached hair and yanked as I got my legs around him.

“Fucking get...off,” he panted as I held him in place, throwing my arms around him to stop him from using his own arms as leverage...or to hurt me again.

“Why the fuck would I do that?” I kicked the back of his shin with my heel as hard as I could. It probably didn’t hurt much, but if it pissed him off more, it was a bonus.

His head raised, and for a moment that bruised, hate-filled stare was so close to mine, I could have counted his individual eyelashes. If I’d wanted to. His breath ghosted across my skin, and I smelled strawberries.

My strawberries. “You ate my fucking strawberries. I can smell them on your breath.”

“Well, I can smell my fucking weed all over you,” he ground out, and then he dropped his head.

Then, teeth were sinking into my throat, and the sudden shock and pain meant my grip on him loosened. He scrambled upright, breathing hard, and I just stared up at him, open mouthed. “You *bit* me? What the fuck?”

“I’ll do a lot worse than that when I’ve recovered.” His tone was a low, threatening rasp, and fucking hell, the sound went straight to my dick.

No. That was not happening, not now, not ever.

I quickly pulled myself upright, which unfortunately meant that he was suddenly sitting in my lap, and our bodies were way too close for comfort. Even so, I got in his face, my hair brushing against his forehead as I spoke through gritted teeth.

“Yeah? I’d like to see you try. I can and will fight back, and you’ll look and feel a whole lot worse than you do now. *Asshole.*”

He scrambled off me, wincing as he did so, his hand gingerly clasping his

chest. The remorse that I'd pushed away hit me again, along with a vivid flashback of his wrecked car and his face, pale and shaken, no matter how much he'd tried to hide it.

"Huxley. I—"

"Save it," he hissed, making his way to the door. "Just stay the fuck away from me, and don't take any more shit from my room."

The door slammed closed behind him, and I fell back onto my bed with a groan, throwing my arm across my face.

I had the feeling that I'd just made things between us a hundred times worse. How did I fix it? Did I even want to fix it?

It was no surprise that I hadn't been able to fall asleep. At two in the morning, I decided to go down to the kitchen and make a hot chocolate, something I vaguely remembered my mum doing for me a few times when I was little and had trouble falling asleep.

I flipped on the cooker hood light rather than blinding myself with the overhead lights, and screamed at a pitch I hadn't achieved since my balls had dropped.

Huxley burst out laughing as I collapsed back against the oven, my heart beating out of my chest at the sudden shock of seeing him standing there. I could only stare at him. I'd never even seen him smile, let alone laugh. It transformed his entire face. With the animosity temporarily gone, he looked... He looked like someone I'd— *No*.

"Why the fuck were you standing there in the dark? I'm too young to die of a heart attack."

He didn't answer, his laughter dying away as he appeared to realise that all I was wearing was a pair of tight black boxer briefs. His gaze tracked across my body as he shifted on his feet, and there was something in his eyes that made my breath catch in my throat. *Fuck*. I cast around for something that would get his eyes off me. As my gaze lowered, I noticed two things. Firstly, he was also in a similar state of undress. That would have been epically bad, for various dick-related reasons, but the second thing I noticed put everything else out of my mind. He was holding a bag of ice to his chest, and above the top of the bag, I could see the bruising, so dark against his pale

skin.

I'd hurt him there, when he'd already been hurt. I'd made it worse.

"Huxley. I'm sorry." My voice was scratchy and loud in the silence. "I didn't mean—"

"Forget about it," he snapped. "I did just as much to you. And I'm not gonna apologise for it."

"Yeah, but you were already—"

"I said, forget it." His jaw clenched. Turning around, he opened the freezer and placed the ice back inside. I didn't miss his wince.

I *really* hated feeling bad. Even though he'd been a complete and utter wanker, I shouldn't have done what I did. "Uh." Rubbing the back of my neck, I directed my gaze at the floor. "I'm making a hot chocolate. Want one?"

There was a long pause. His head was still buried in the freezer, but finally, I heard his quietly muttered reply.

"Okay."

Okay? To be honest, I hadn't actually expected him to agree. But he had, and now I...now I needed to get my fucking feet to unfreeze from the kitchen floor so I could get to the coffee machine to use the milk frother.

"Can't sleep either?" Why were words still coming out of my mouth?

He grunted in reply as he closed the freezer door. It was then that I noticed the glass of water and his painkillers on the kitchen island in front of him, along with a tube of bruise relief cream. His pointed glare warned me not to offer to help him with the cream, so instead, I got my legs to unstick from the floor and headed over to the coffee machine to make a start on our hot chocolates. I pulled two slightly chipped blue-and-white-striped mugs from the cupboard, both of which belonged to my mum and had come from our flat, and then got to work.

While I'd been occupied making the hot chocolates, Huxley had disappeared. Carefully carrying the mugs, I padded down the hallway to find him, heading for the lounge. The games room door was open and there was a sliver of light spilling into the hallway, so I changed direction.

According to David, when he'd shown me around, the games room had once been Huxley's playroom when he was a kid. As he grew older, they'd adapted it, and now the small room contained a huge TV and two games consoles, along with a large squashy black leather sofa, and a bookcase full of a combination of books and PlayStation and Nintendo games. The walls

had posters of bands and concerts, and a guitar stand was placed in one corner along with a stool, microphone, and small amp.

When I entered, I saw Huxley curled up on the sofa with the TV remote in his hand, illuminated by a tiny lamp on top of the bookcase. He didn't look up, but I knew that he knew I was there because his shoulders tensed.

"Here's your hot chocolate," I said, stating the obvious as I carefully placed his mug on the small coffee table in front of the sofa. When I straightened up to leave, he cleared his throat.

"I'm gonna watch something. You...you can stay...if you want."

Was this him accepting a tentative truce? I'd made him hot chocolate, and now he was inviting me to watch a film with him? Images of his bruised torso played through my mind, and I knew there was only one acceptable way to reply.

"Uh. Yeah. Okay."

His legs and most of his chest were covered by a dark blue chunky knit blanket, hiding his bruises. Even though I wasn't cold, I grabbed my own blanket from the basket next to the bookcase. Because sitting there in just my underwear was too much. It left me feeling too exposed—and not only literally. We needed the comfort of a barrier between us. Taking a seat on the sofa, I sipped my hot chocolate while he scrolled through the film selections. He didn't ask me what I wanted to watch, and I didn't offer my opinion. It was enough that we were here in the same room and not at each other's throats for once.

He selected *Bohemian Rhapsody*, muttering something about having seen it before and it not mattering whether he fell asleep, which I took to mean that I wasn't the only one having trouble sleeping tonight. When he hit Play, I stretched out my feet to rest on the coffee table as I cradled my mug of hot chocolate in my palms. I watched out of the corner of my eye as he took his first tentative sip of his hot chocolate, his lips curving into a tiny smile as he swallowed before taking another, larger, sip.

He liked it.

I forced myself to concentrate on the TV.

I blinked.

Then blinked again.

And again. This time it lasted longer.

I placed my mug on the table.

My eyes fell shut.

This time, they didn't open again.

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HUXLEY

My eyelids peeled open in time for me to see the end credits of the movie scrolling on the TV. Shit, I hadn't meant to fall asleep, and wait—what the fuck? I stared down at the head resting on my shoulder, soft, tousled dark hair catching on the stubble on my jaw. An arm was slung across my stomach, a warm weight that didn't hurt my bruises. How had Cole ended up over on my side of the sofa? It wasn't a big sofa, but even so...I would've thought that even subconsciously, we'd be trying to get as far away from each other as we could. Yet here he was, cuddling me without a care in the world, as if we hadn't been at each other's throats earlier today—yesterday? Whichever. The point was... I lost track of my thoughts as I stared down at him, his face relaxed in sleep, his dark eyelashes fanning out over his cheekbones, his chest rising and falling softly in his sleep. Speaking of his chest...the blanket he'd been under had slipped down to pool around his waist, and acres of smooth, tanned skin were exposed. Guess he'd been spending a lot of time sunbathing in the garden this summer. Why the fuck had I decided to move out again? I wanted to trace the ridges of his abs with my tongue, to—

Fuck. No. I jerked, physically trying to shake the thoughts out of me, but too late, I realised that I'd woken Cole. He grunted something unintelligible, his eyes slowly blinking open, his gaze soft and unguarded.

Then his whole body stiffened, his eyes widening. "Shit," he muttered, scrambling away from me and yanking his blanket up around his shoulders. His gaze bounced around the room, eventually settling on the TV. "Uh. Sorry."

That sleepy rasp in his tone did things to me that I really did not fucking appreciate, and I was glad that I was covered by a blanket. “S’okay.” I didn’t look at him either.

We fell silent, and I’d never stared so hard at film credits in my life. But now I took a sudden interest in the names of the gaffers and the grips and even the catering companies that were used. Anything was better than the alternative, which was to break this uncomfortable silence.

In the end, though, Cole was the one who broke it.

“Hux?”

“Yeah?” My voice came out way too raspy. The way he’d said my name, though...

“What happened that night?” His words were hesitant. “I...uh, you don’t have to talk about it. I just keep picturing your crashed car, and I just...” He huffed out a breath, shaking his head. “Never mind.”

My mind flashed back to that night, and I shivered, suddenly cold. “It was a blur. One minute I was driving back from a mate’s house. Then this car came out of nowhere, I didn’t even have a chance to avoid it. We collided. My car kind of jerked back really hard, and I remember the pop of the airbags and all this screaming metal. Then, I dunno, I must’ve blacked out for a minute because the next thing I remembered was flashing lights and being checked by the paramedics.”

I could feel Cole’s gaze on me, but I kept staring at the TV like my life depended on it.

“Were you scared?” His whispered question came from much closer than I’d been expecting, and I realised that I could feel his body heat against my side.

Licking my suddenly dry lips, I nodded.

“Y-yeah.” There was no disguising the crack in my voice.

He exhaled harshly. “Shit.” I heard him move on the sofa, his arm brushing against mine for a second, and then he said, “I’m...uh...I’m glad you thought to call me.”

There was no point in lying anymore, to him or to myself. “Me too.”

As soon as I’d managed to get the words out, his hand was lifting, his fingers curving around the edges of my blanket. “Can I see?”

All I could do was nod, and then he carefully lowered the thick fabric until my torso was bared to him. Even in this dim lighting, I knew that the bruises were stark against my pale skin. My hands fell to my sides, letting

him look his fill.

A finger traced across my sternum, Cole's touch so light and careful. "Does this hurt?"

I shook my head, swallowing around the lump in my throat. "No. The bruises...they don't hurt like they did to begin with. I'm so lucky that's the only thing I have to worry about. I was...I was so fucking scared. I thought... I thought for a second that I was going to die."

The finger tracing across my chest trembled. "Huxley. Look at me."

Slowly, I turned my head to meet his gaze, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. His brown eyes were wide and so fucking pretty, brimming with emotion. When he leaned forwards, I couldn't breathe, but he just wrapped one arm around my shoulder and gently pulled me into him. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and let him hold me.

"I'm so fucking glad you're okay," he said thickly.

I lifted my arm and tentatively placed it around his waist. My words were whispered into his warm skin, and they were the sincerest words I'd ever spoken. "So am I."

I felt him sigh against me, and then his hand stroked up and down my back, until I let myself relax into his body, realising that for the first time in a very long time, even if it was only for this stolen moment in the early hours of the morning, I had someone to lean on.

When I made it downstairs the next morning at around eleven a.m., Cole had gone into the office to pick up some samples of promotional material that his boss wanted him to work on—or so the note propped up against the coffee machine said. It also said that my lunch was in the fridge, which yeah, it kind of pissed me off that he was treating me like an invalid, but it also made me feel things that I wasn't used to feeling in relation to my stepbrother. *Nice things.*

Fucking hell. I needed to smoke some weed to take the edge off my thoughts. Probably wasn't a good idea with the painkillers, though, was it?

Fuck it. I'd have a small one, just to take the edge off.

I rolled a quick and messy joint, then headed out into the garden with my guitar and a notebook and pen. The sun was shining, but I sat in the shade of

the oak tree at the bottom of my garden. First off, I smoked the joint, propped up against the tree, music playing from my phone speaker. When the turmoil in my head was finally quiet, I began, strumming my guitar and stopping to jot down lyrics whenever they came into my head. I wasn't trying to write a song, but I found the process helped my brain to settle down. I had notebooks full of lyrics, unfinished songs, and music compositions. Maybe one day I'd find a good songwriter who I could collaborate with, make some music of our own.

I huffed out a quiet laugh. That wasn't likely to happen. I couldn't even pass my A levels, which was why I was about to begin a foundation year course at LSU in order to be able to even get onto a degree course the following year. How could I expect anyone else to want to work with me? Not that songwriting was work per se—unless you were getting paid for it—but a collaborative relationship required commitment, and my track record was shit.

Cole's record was almost as bad as mine. He'd barely scraped through his A levels, but a degree wasn't on his radar, so he had no reason to care about his results. As it was, he'd been able to charm his way into not one but two jobs, while I was still living off the allowance my dad was providing me with on the proviso that I took my upcoming course seriously and managed to pass all my modules.

I glanced down at my notebook, my eyes widening as I realised what I'd written.

Pretty brown eyes and a charming smile.

Fuck's sake. I drew a line through the words, then another two for good measure. Closing my notebook with a snap, I climbed to my feet. No more songwriting. Time for lunch, because that weed had made me really fucking hungry.

When I inspected the fridge, I found that Cole had made me a ham and mustard sandwich, and he'd also left me a small pot of strawberries. My face felt weird for a minute before I realised why. I was *smiling*. A small smile, but it was there.

As I was plating up my food, adding a bag of crisps from the cupboard, my phone buzzed with a text. It was Rav, one of my mates that I'd crashed with over the summer.

RAV:

Philips came through with the good shit. Fuckin buzzin. Wanna come over tonight to sample the goods?

I paused. Normally I'd be all over that. But I wasn't in the mood for it right now.

ME:

Not tonight but thanks for the offer

RAV:

Tom's bringing Michelle & her fit AF friends. Pills & pussy! You can't say no to that

Tempting, and I knew how the night would go down, because half of my summer had passed in a haze of pills and pussy and the occasional dick. But...something had changed, and I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

ME:

Thanks but I can't. Had a car accident & prob shouldn't take pills with the shit they prescribed me. Don't want to end up having my stomach pumped

It probably wasn't true because the pain relief was mostly extra-strong ibuprofen, but I was no doctor. Who the fuck knew how it would react? It was a good enough excuse as far as I was concerned, and it was the reason I needed to stay in.

RAV:

Shit. You OK?

ME:

Yeah all good. Nothing major

That was a half-truth, but Rav...actually, none of my friends were particularly close to me. Our relationships were mostly superficial, and therefore I wasn't interested in going into details. Rav was a good guy, although my dad would disagree because he was a "layabout with no prospects." But yeah, not close. He wasn't someone who'd hug me when I was feeling scared, not like—

I groaned loudly, thumping my head against the cabinet in front of me. My phone buzzed again, and I glanced down at the screen to see Rav had

written, *Next time*. Not bothering to reply, I carried my food upstairs.

As soon as I was set up on my bed, I picked up my phone again and typed out a message, hitting Send before I could talk myself out of it.

ME:

Thinking of cooking tonight. Do you have plans or do you want me to make extra?

The reply came through a few minutes later as I was biting into the soft, crusty bread of my sandwich, the chunky pieces of ham topped with the perfect amount of wholegrain mustard.

COLE:

Depends on two things. Can you cook and what are you cooking?

ME:

Scared I'll poison you?

COLE:

It's a distinct possibility

ME:

If I was going to poison you I'd do it in a way you weren't expecting

COLE:

Like what?

ME:

If I told you then you'd be expecting it

COLE:

That's reassuring

OK if you promise not to poison me I could be tempted... What are you cooking?

I read back over the messages. It was hard to tell a person's tone over text, but it kind of felt like he was flirting with me. Something inside me fucking flipped at the thought, and another part of me filled with panic. What was the protocol when your former or maybe still current adversary—who was also your stepbrother—flirted with you?

My fingers were already flying across the screen, ignoring the panicked part of my thoughts. I'd never had a text conversation like this in my life, but

that didn't mean I was going to stop.

ME:

It's a surprise

COLE:

I'm not convinced

ME:

You won't regret it. I'm good

COLE:

Big words. OK let's see if you've got what it takes to impress me. Should be back by 6

I glanced down at my tray of food, another small, unexpected smile tugging at my lips.

ME:

Bring strawberries

COLE:

I KNEW you'd eat the rest. OK see you later. Be ready to impress me

ME:

Oh I will

Throwing my phone down next to me, I leaned back against the headboard. Now I just had to work out how to cook an edible meal in the four hours before Cole came home.

Yeah. I was fucked.

COLE

When I entered the house, I could hear what sounded like the banging of pots and pans coming from the kitchen, accompanied by several swear words, all set to the soundtrack of “Bad Place” by The Hunna. Huh, Huxley liked that song too, did he? I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. It fit his general vibe, if that made sense. I took the opportunity to head upstairs to shower off the grime of the Tube and London’s streets, dropping my bag in my bedroom.

When I was changed into comfortable grey joggers and an old, faded green T-shirt, I made my way back downstairs. Huxley was next to the oven with his back to me, plating up something that smelled good into two pasta dishes. I forced myself to look away from him, instead focusing on the kitchen table where he’d laid out two place mats and cutlery.

I cleared my throat to give him some warning that I was there. “Hi.”

I wasn’t looking at him, but I still heard his sharp intake of breath over the music, telling me that he’d been surprised by my presence. “Hi.”

“Want a drink?” Keeping my voice casual was more difficult than I thought it would be, mostly because I hadn’t seen him since our unexpected hug in the early hours of the morning. I was one hundred percent certain that something between us had changed, but I was also very fucking sure that I wasn’t going to bring anything up unless he did first.

There was a minute of strained silence, and then he said, “Yeah, okay. There’s beer in the fridge.”

Glad of something to do, I went to the fridge and grabbed two cans of beer, decanting them into pint glasses. I carried them over to the kitchen table

and took a seat, fiddling with my phone while I waited for him to finish dishing up the food. Something told me that he wouldn't appreciate me offering my help.

He eventually approached the table with the two pasta dishes, steam wafting from the top of them. When he set them down, I got my first good look at what was in them. Egg noodles, chicken, what looked like green peppers, and maybe spring onions? I was impressed. This was already much better than I'd been expecting.

"It's a stir-fry. Uh. Sesame and soy sauce and honey. With chicken and peppers. And, uh, spring onions."

A smile tugged at my lips. "It looks good. Smells good, too."

When I darted a glance at Huxley, he was clearly tense, his mouth twisting as he eyed his own bowl of food. "It looks good," I said again, softly. His gaze flew to mine, and he breathed out heavily, before nodding.

"Yeah. I make this all the time. One of my, uh, favourites."

My tiny smile widened into a grin. He was clearly nervous and exaggerating about how often he made this, and it was so fucking cute—

No. It wasn't cute.

I picked up the chopsticks that had been laid next to the fork beside my dish and shoved them into the noodles. The chicken and sauce clung to the noodles as I brought them to my mouth, and I made sure to force my face into a neutral expression as I chewed.

It wasn't even necessary. Okay, if I'd been in a criticising mood, I might have said that the egg noodles were overcooked, as was the chicken. But honestly, it tasted good despite that. And even better for the fact that he'd voluntarily invited me to share his meal with him.

"This is good," I said around a mouthful of food, and instantly wished that I'd waited to swallow before speaking.

He smirked at me, seeming to relax. "Yeah? I told you I was good."

"You did."

His eyes met mine, deep blue depths that I knew I could easily get lost in, and I couldn't look away. Something was happening here, and it was making a combination of dread and excitement pool low in my belly.

"Have you, uh, spoken to your dad?" Changing the subject was probably the best idea.

He shrugged, his smirk falling away to be replaced with a frown. "A couple of times. I haven't told him about the accident, and I don't want to."

“I won’t say anything,” I reassured him around another mouthful of noodles. “It’s up to you if you want to tell him or not. You’re okay, so it doesn’t seem like there’s any point in telling him.”

“Thanks.” His voice was quiet. He turned his attention to his food, and we ate, the silence between us tempered by the music that he’d left playing. I was pretty sure we were both glad of it, because without it, the quietness would’ve seemed a lot more awkward.

Every now and then, he looked up or I looked up, and our eyes met. I knew my cheeks were flushed, but I was maybe eighty percent sure that his were too.

I had no clue what we were doing.

“Did you get the strawberries?”

It was an effort to lift my gaze from my pint glass, which I’d designated as a safe spot since I’d finished my meal. When my eyes met his again, I felt a jolt, like I’d been shocked with electricity. “I got them,” I said, and my voice was too fucking raspy. “I’ll get them now.”

Because I’d taken them upstairs when I’d come home, not wanting to intrude on his food prep time in the kitchen.

When I made it back downstairs, Huxley had cleared the table, and he had two plates laid out on the counter. “Brownies with the strawberries?”

There was something in his voice... “Are those hash brownies?”

He nodded, the corners of his lips kicking up into another almost-smile. “Wanna eat these and watch something while we get high?”

How the fuck had we gone from hating each other to this so quickly? However it had happened, I knew I didn’t want to go back to how we were before. “Yeah,” I said. “I’ll wash the strawberries and bring them in.”

The rest of the evening felt like a dream, a hazy cloud, thanks to the weed and the beers. There was the sweetness of the strawberries and the delicious chocolatey goodness of the brownies, combined with the high of the weed. The bitterness of the beer. The noises and colours of the TV, a distant presence that my brain couldn’t focus on. The warm, delicious press of Huxley’s body all up against my side.

By the time I went to bed, all I knew was that I was feeling more relaxed than I had done in a really long time, and that I was very fucking interested in the one person that I knew I wasn’t allowed to like.

HUXLEY

The club was busy, packed full of guys who looked like underwear models, and the music was horrendous. Fucking *Britney Spears* was playing, of all things. So why was I here? Because my stepbrother had texted me earlier, luring me here with promises of a surprise that I was apparently going to love. So far, all the signs were pointing to me not loving it. This place was not my scene. I preferred dark, dingy pubs, preferably with cold beers and a live band playing.

I pushed my way to the long, crowded bar, my gaze scanning the bartenders for Cole. When I spotted him, I sent a text.

ME:

At the end of the bar. My left, your right. Where's my surprise?

I saw his hand go to his pocket to pull out his phone, and my stomach flipped when his lips curved into a smile. This was not good. He raised his head, his eyes meeting mine, and his smile widened. I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from returning his smile. He was unfairly hot, but when he smiled, it did something to me that really shouldn't be happening.

When he reached me, I tapped my fingers on the bar top. "Where's my surprise? If the club is my surprise, I'm not impressed."

His gaze dropped to my hand. "You repainted them."

"Huh?" was all I managed to get out, before he was lifting my hand and examining my nails in the dim club lighting. My skin was prickling with... something. I didn't want him to stop touching me, and that shocking thought was enough to have me snatching my hand back.

“What’s with this music?”

He blinked a few times, still staring at my hand, and then lifted his gaze to mine. A smirk tugged at his lips. “Revolve theme night. Throwback Tuesday. Not to your taste, huh? There’s different music on the other floors.”

“This is not my scene. I’d rather—”

Leaning across the bar, he placed a finger to my lips, his eyes widening as if he couldn’t believe he’d done it, which made two of us. I...I wanted to kiss his finger—no, to pull him across the bar and kiss the smirk right off his tempting mouth.

He exhaled hard, dropping his hand. “Sorry. I wanted to guess.” His smirk reappeared. “Let me see if I get this right. You would rather be...in a pub. Probably one with a band with a sexy, growly guitarist playing alternative rock so loud you can’t hear your mates talking over the music. And...beer.” I stared at him, and he grinned. “Damn, I’m good. You’re so easy to read.”

My eyes narrowed, and I curled my fingers into a fist. I wasn’t actually angry, more like irritated with his smugness. “Nope. You didn’t get it all right. I like listening to a lot of different music, not just alt rock, and I don’t want it to be too loud to speak.” Not *all* the time, anyway.

“But I got the rest right, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” I admitted grudgingly. “Now, are you going to tell me what this supposedly amazing surprise is before my ears start bleeding from this music?” Britney had finished, but now we had some fucking awful dance remix of what might have been Katy Perry or Taylor Swift or some other singer I never wanted to hear again.

He rolled his eyes. “Stop being so sulky. Wait here.” When he turned away from me, his attention on whatever drink he was making, I took the time to study him, unnoticed. He was wearing a tight black sleeveless T-shirt with the club logo splashed across the front, which nicely showcased the lines of his fit body. His dark hair was artfully tousled, and his deep brown eyes were sparkling with humour as he smiled to himself. I bet he got hit on all the time working here. He was so fucking sexy.

When he returned, he placed the drink down carefully in front of me. “I call this one the Huxley,” he said.

“Excuse me?” I glanced down at the...whatever it was. A cocktail of some sort, in a tall glass with crushed ice. Smooth, jet black in colour, and garnished with a strawberry. When I looked back up at Cole, he was biting

down on his lip in a really distracting way.

“Uh. The Huxley. It reminds me of you. Same colour as your nails. Bitter coffee for your broody personality, a bite of ginger for your, uh, fiery moments, and sweet blackberry and raspberries for your sweet tooth. And vodka, because of those vodka shots we did at the wedding. It’s supposed to be garnished with blackberries or raspberries, but I used a strawberry because they’re your favourite.”

I wanted to kiss him more than I’d ever wanted to kiss anyone in my life.

I had to stop myself from wanting things I couldn’t have. Tearing my gaze away from his, I studied my drink. “Is this...how did you get it to be so black?”

“It’s a secret,” he said, leaning across the bar. “But if you behave, I might tell you.” Was he *flirting* with me?

Before I could come up with a response that didn’t involve me grabbing his stupidly tight T-shirt and pulling him all the way across the bar to attack his mouth, he was flagged down by one of the club patrons, a hot, shirtless guy with an amazing body. I watched as Cole gave him an easy smile, which the guy returned, batting his lashes at Cole, and jealousy coiled low in my gut. Fuck this. I didn’t want to be feeling this way.

To distract myself, I took a cautious sip of my drink.

Wow. It was good. Really, really good. After taking another, bigger sip, I pulled the strawberry from the rim of the glass and placed it in my mouth. Mmm. When I’d finished it, I glanced back over at Cole, still mixing drinks for the hot guy, and swiped my tongue across my lips. The bottle of white rum he was in the process of tipping up stilled in mid-air, his eyes darkening as his gaze went to my mouth.

Fuck. I discreetly adjusted myself in my jeans, glad I was pressed up against the bar so no one, especially him, could see the evidence of how he was affecting me. The hot guy said something to him, laughing, and he shook his head with a grin, returning his attention to the drink he was making. He swiped at the guy’s arm jokingly, and I gritted my teeth.

When he came back over, I’d managed to get myself back under control. Mostly. “Do you flirt with everyone like that?” I immediately wanted to take the words back.

He raised his brows. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothing,” I muttered. I shouldn’t have said anything.

“I flirt because it adds to the positive experience for the people that come

here, and it comes naturally to me while I'm working. It's fun. But that just now...that was JJ. He comes here a lot, and he flirts with everyone, not just me specifically. He's one of my cousin Elliot's housemates."

"Have you two ever..." I trailed off, not sure I wanted to know.

"Nah. I always thought it would be a bit weird, with him being my cousin's housemate."

Not as weird as wanting to fuck your stepbrother, though.

"He's not my type, anyway," Cole added after a couple of seconds.

I swallowed hard. "No? What's your type?"

We stared at each other for a moment, Cole gripping onto the bar counter so tightly I could see his knuckles standing out in sharp relief.

He cleared his throat, his dark gaze fixed on me. Damn those pretty fucking eyes. "Did you like the drink?"

My dick was hardening again, and I pressed into the bar, unable to adjust myself with his full attention on me. This was so fucking unfair, that he could affect me like this. "Yeah. What was the secret ingredient?"

He leaned right across the bar, his lips brushing against my ear, and I couldn't stop the shiver that went through my body. "Activated charcoal," he murmured, and those two words had never sounded sexy until he said them in that low, husky tone.

"I wouldn't have guessed that. What's your type, Cole?"

His lips touched my ear again, his breath hot on my skin. "I think you already know the answer to that."

"Hux, meet Tom." Cole's voice cut through the stupor I'd fallen into. I'd had three of those cocktails now, and to my horror, I'd found myself *humming along* with yet another Britney throwback. I couldn't believe it.

I was sitting on a stool at the very end of the bar, away from the crowds, and I'd spent ninety percent of the time I hadn't been drinking just watching Cole work. I saw several people try to get his number, but he turned all of them down, which shouldn't have made me feel as good as it did. Now I turned to the new guy. He was tall and pale-skinned, with jet-black hair that I was pretty sure was dyed. Tattoos snaked up his arms, and metal piercings glinted in his ears. He grinned at my perusal, sticking out his hand. "Huxley.

Nice to meet ya. I'm Tom."

I darted a look at Cole, who was also grinning. "Tom's your surprise."

My *what*?

Tom chuckled at my confusion. "I work here. Last week I mentioned to Cole that I was looking for a new singer and guitarist for my band. He told me that you were...what was it...a fucking amazing guitarist and you had an incredible voice, and that I'd be crazy to even think of picking anyone else."

Glancing back at Cole, I noticed his cheeks were flushing, and I was helpless to stop my smile. He'd thought of me? Even though that would've been before we'd been on more civil terms? "Yeah. I'm alright. Can you tell me a bit about the band?"

He took the stool next to me, and we fell into a discussion about the band and the music they were into. The band was named the 2Bit Princes and they played a mix of covers and original music. Apparently, they'd previously had a lead singer, but he'd moved to Manchester, and now they were looking for a replacement. As well as Tom, the other member of the band was a guy called Curtis who was a drummer and was also going to be starting at LSU this September. Tom was the songwriter and lead guitarist, and when I mentioned that I dabbled in writing lyrics, he seemed genuinely interested in collaborating on some of the songs with me.

Honestly, it sounded too good to be true. I'd been scraping by in life, and I'd never really given serious thought to doing anything like this, because it had seemed so out of reach for me. No one had ever encouraged me to go for what I wanted before.

But Cole had seen something in me.

He'd believed in me, even when no one else had.

COLE

Rubbing at my eyes, still half asleep even after a shower, I stumbled into the kitchen. Coffee. Need. Coffee.

My sleepiness was gone in an instant as I took in the person who currently had his back to me, swearing at the coffee machine while he slammed his fist down on the counter. “Fuck’s sake! Why won’t you just work, you stupid fucking piece of shit?”

I would’ve smirked at Huxley’s frustration, but I was too busy running my gaze over the lines of his bare back, down over his tight ass, currently covered in a pair of loose cotton shorts, and down those lean, muscled legs. Sexy as fuck.

I gritted my teeth.

Thou shalt not ogle thy stepbrother.

As I drew nearer, with Huxley still unaware of my presence, occupied with wrestling with the machine, I noticed that there were two mugs set out on the counter. The same blue-and-white chipped mugs that we’d used when I’d made him the hot chocolate.

My heart fucking skipped a beat, and it made me do something that I knew was completely, one million percent ill-advised, but I didn’t stop. I came up behind Huxley, planting my hands on the counter on either side of his arms and caging him in. He jumped a little, a gasp falling from his lips as his swearing stopped, mid-tirade.

“Having trouble with the coffee machine?” I kept my voice low, and Huxley shivered against me. Fucking hell, he was so tempting. I’d never allowed myself to entertain thoughts of just how hot he was before now...

okay, that was a lie, but right here, today, all my defences were gone, and my cock was in charge, apparently. “Need a hand?”

“Uh, yeah.” He cleared his throat, leaning into me just the tiniest bit, and I took the invitation for what it was, pressing against his back. As we’d established, my cock was more than interested, already hardening in my boxers, and he was going to become aware of it any second. But neither of us moved, and he cleared his throat again. “Yeah. Fucking machine.”

I laughed softly, balancing on the balls of my feet and angling my head to peer over his shoulder. His hair, still a little damp from his own shower, tickled the side of my head as we both looked at the machine. “Okay. First thing. You need to turn it on.” Flipping the switch to the On position, I heard the familiar beep followed by a whirr as it came to life.

“I should’ve realised that,” he muttered. “I’ve never...my dad bought this machine for your mum. We had one of those pod ones before.”

“It took me a while to work it out,” I reassured him, forcing myself to focus on the machine and not the way his back was so warm against my chest and the way my dick was pressing against the delicious curve of his ass. “Uh, so. Next thing. You attach the milk frother—” Good, he’d already filled it. “—and then you pick the coffee you want on this bit here.”

His finger swiped over the LED display, his head rolling to the side just enough that my lips would be brushing against his skin if I angled my own head any further. “Latte?”

“Is that what you want?” My head turned, my lips connecting with his skin in the barest touch.

He shivered again, subtly pressing back against my dick. He moved his hips in a small, circular movement, and I had to bite down on my lip to stop a groan from escaping.

His words came out low and raspy as fuck. “It’s what I was going to make for you.”

I really, really wanted to kiss him. To do way more than kiss him, if I was completely honest. To yank down those shorts and bend him over the kitchen table, pounding his tight ass with my hard fucking cock—

Shit.

With the final remaining bit of blood that hadn’t gone to my dick, I managed to get my brain to formulate a reply. “Mmm. Good choice.” What the fuck were we doing here? Were we really doing this? My brain was scrambling to catch up with the way we’d apparently done a one-eighty over

the past couple of days, but my dick was having no such trouble.

I let my mouth press a little harder, my touch purposeful. “Put the mug here and press for the latte.”

One of his hands slid slowly over mine. It trembled slightly. “That’s it?”

What had he just asked me? Oh, yeah. “That’s it.”

“Thank fuck,” he ground out, and then he was spinning in my arms, and suddenly my very hard dick was pressing against another very hard dick and — Whoa. Huxley’s mouth was on mine.

I stumbled, off-balance, but he grabbed me and yanked me into him, his hands gripping my back, his fingers digging into my muscles. When I regained my balance, I gripped the counter on either side of him again and kissed him back.

Oh. My. Fucking. Days. Soft. Wet. Warm. Addictive. Fucking delicious.

“Cole,” he groaned, and I had to kiss him again, pressing him into the counter, my tongue sliding against his as we kissed harder, deeper.

He broke the kiss, his mouth going to my throat, where he lightly bit down. His stubble scraped across my skin, and I fucking loved it.

I lifted a hand to the back of his neck, scratching my fingers across his nape, making him groan into my neck as he ground his hips against me. My dick was fucking leaking as it slid alongside his, I was so hot for him. “So this is mutual, huh?”

Raising his head, his gaze met mine, all heavy-lidded, blown pupils. “If by mutual you mean do I wanna get my dick inside you, then yeah, it’s mutual.”

I let go of the counter, finally getting my hands on his ass. Fuck, it felt so good. “I was thinking more that I’d bend you over the kitchen table and fuck this sexy ass that I can’t stop looking at.”

He moaned low in his throat, but then his brows lifted. “You can’t stop looking at it?”

It probably wasn’t a good idea to give him too much ammunition. “You were sticking it out when you were trying to work out the coffee machine. I couldn’t help noticing it.”

“Hmmm.” He eyed me, clearly unconvinced, so I kissed him again. It was better when he couldn’t speak. Better when neither of us spoke, probably.

“I wanna fuck you so hard,” I rasped against his mouth as I manoeuvred us over to the kitchen table, immediately failing at my plan of not speaking. It was like now the barrier of our animosity was gone, even if it only turned out

to be temporary, there was nothing stopping this insane attraction that had flared to life between us. But even so, this was a bad idea for so many reasons. But weren't bad ideas the best ideas?

I ground against him, my cock fucking throbbing against his. "This is such a bad idea. But I don't want to stop. I have to have you."

His teeth clamped down on my lower lip, sending a bolt of pleasure-pain down my spine. My dick was so hard it almost hurt. "Then fucking do it. One and done. Get this out of our systems."

We were on the same page. I spun him around, pressing down on his back to make him bend over. His ass stuck out perfectly, his shorts draping over it in a way that made my cock jump and my breath catch in my throat. Yeah, that was what I was talking about.

"Stay there." There was a condom and a sachet of lube in my wallet, which I'd dumped on the console table in the hallway yesterday. I ran for the hallway, hoping that he wouldn't change his mind in the minute I was gone. But I didn't have to worry. When I returned, he was still in place, his hands on the edge of the table and his back curved.

As I drew closer, he turned his head to look at me, his gaze going straight to the huge tent in my shorts, and his eyes darkened. "Excited?"

"Yes. But so are you." Reaching him, I curved my arm around his body, lowering my hand to his dick and rubbing my palm across the head. Even through the cotton, I could feel how much he was leaking for me, and it made me even hotter.

"Fuuuck. I don't even think I like you, but I fucking love what you're doing to me," he panted, pushing into my hand while I rubbed my own straining erection against his ass.

Ripping the condom packet open with my teeth, I circled my thumb around his cockhead. "We don't have to like each other to fuck. And like you said, this is a one and done."

"You make a good point. Fucking get on with it then."

Impatient. Then again, so was I. Wasting no more time, I released his dick and yanked my shorts down, glad I hadn't bothered with underwear.

"Shorts off," I instructed hoarsely, and he temporarily let go of the table to tug them down. Rolling on the condom, I stepped out of my shorts. I opened the lube packet, getting it all over my fingers and a bit on the kitchen floor, before I kicked his legs farther apart. What a sight. All that creamy skin, and that sexy, tight ass bared for me. It had clearly been way too long

since I'd last fucked someone, because all I could think about was ramming my cock inside him. I reminded myself that I had to prep him, and I needed to be careful of his bruises, but I'd never struggled so much to hold myself back.

He pressed back into my fingers as I opened him up way quicker than I usually would, his hands flexing against the wood of the table as he held on with a death grip. He lowered his head, exhaling hard. "Fuck me. Can't wait anymore."

"You read my mind." Withdrawing my fingers, I smeared the remaining lube over the condom and positioned the head of my cock at his hole. Then I pushed inside until I was balls-deep.

Fuuuck.

We both groaned. Huxley's ass was fucking heaven, so tight around my dick. I wrapped my fingers around his hip for purchase as I began thrusting in and out, the noises spilling from Huxley's mouth driving me crazy as I picked up the pace, pounding in and out of him. He arched his back a bit, changing the angle, and he gasped.

"Fuck. Yessss. So. Fucking. Good."

My thoughts exactly. How we'd managed to get to this point, I had no idea, but he was so fucking hot and tight around me, and the way he looked... the curve of his back, his fucking sexy ass that was taking my dick so well, his lean arm muscles tensed and holding himself up on the table as he took everything I gave him. Beautiful. The way the back of his neck already had beads of sweat, teasing the ends of his hair. It made me want to lick it. This man was fucking gorgeous.

My balls were already drawing up, and there was no way I was going to be the first to come. I wasn't the best at multitasking, but wanking a partner while keeping up a good rhythm fucking them was something I'd become quite proficient in.

Swiping my palm across the head of his cock, coating it with his precum, I wrapped my hand around Huxley's thick erection and began stroking him up and down.

"Good?" The word was punched out of me as I slammed back into him.

A low, desperate sound came from his throat that went straight to my cock, and I just *knew* he was close. I was too, balancing on a knife edge, but I really wanted him to come first.

"You're so fucking hot, Hux. Feel so good around my cock. Fucking love

your dick in my hand.” Words were falling from my mouth unchecked.

Huxley’s whole body stiffened, and his dick pulsed in my grip. My eyes fell closed as I finally let go, following him over the edge as I unloaded into the condom, still gripping his dick, my hand slippery from his cum.

So. Good.

But there was no time to bask in the afterglow. He was already pulling away from me, awkwardness descending between us, reality hitting hard as we both took in the fact that we’d just fucked in our parents’ kitchen at ten in the morning with the sun streaming through the windows and doors, and there was now lube and cum desecrating the polished herringbone flooring. And the table.

That wasn’t even the worst part.

No.

The worst part happened about two seconds after I’d pulled out of Huxley. His phone started ringing.

It was on the kitchen table in front of us. Maybe he was cum-drunk or something, so he wasn’t thinking straight, but he immediately swiped to answer it, and as he did so, I saw the name on the screen.

Dad.

Fucking fuck.

“Huxley.” David’s voice came clearly through the phone because I was standing so close to Huxley. With my softening dick in my hand and a condom full of cum. There were so many things wrong in this scenario.

Stepping away from where Huxley was slumped over the table, I dealt with the condom and then crossed back over to him so I could grab my shorts. I winced at the mess on the floor. I was so going to nominate Huxley for clean-up duty.

“Yeah...he...uh, he’s here,” Huxley was saying into the phone, shooting me a quick, panicked glance. My eyes widened and I shook my head, backing away, but it was too late. He’d already put the phone on speaker.

“Cole! You’re here!” My mum’s voice came through the phone. I gritted my teeth. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Huxley pull his shorts back on.

“Hi, Mum.”

“I’m glad we caught both our sons together,” she said, and I bit down on my tongue, so I didn’t give in to the sudden urge to laugh. Not that there was anything funny about the situation.

“This is an unexpected surprise. We have some news for you both.”

David came back on the line. “Unfortunately, we’ve had to cut our honeymoon short. There’s been a rather urgent situation at the office that needs to be managed delicately, and I have no choice but to be there to oversee things. We’ll be back tomorrow night.”

They said some other things, but my brain could only focus on the words *we’ll be back tomorrow night*.

When the call ended, Huxley dropped his head to the table with a groan, thumping it against the wooden surface once, then again for good measure.

“Great. They’ll be back tomorrow, and I found out yesterday that my car was written off. They can’t repair it. My dad’s gonna lose his shit when he finds out that I’ve wrecked it.”

“Do you think he’d react worse to that than finding out his stepson fucked his son?” I mused, trying to lighten the situation. Not that he’d find out—that would be a secret we took to the grave.

“Fuck off, you’re not helping.” Hux spun around, shoving at my chest, and I stumbled backwards, unprepared.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. Let’s think about this for a second.” My brain started whirring, finally recovering from the epic fucking I’d given him. “You had a private number plate, yeah?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay, so, we just need to find another car that’s the same model and colour as your scrapped car, and then transfer the plate to it. Your dad will never know.”

“Yeah, but that will take time. I don’t even have the insurance money yet, and who knows how long it’ll take to find a new car that looks the same?”

I stepped closer to him, needing to calm the panic flaring in his eyes. Fuck, he was so tense. Ready to explode any second. Carefully, I stretched out my hand and placed it on his arm, my fingers curling around his bicep. “Hux. We’ll sort it. We can make up a story about the car being in the garage for some reason to buy us time.”

His eyes met mine, his expression wary. “We?”

I nodded, lightly squeezing his arm. “Yeah. *We*.”

I still didn’t know what was going on between us or whether we even liked each other or not, but the aftermath of his car crash would be forever imprinted on my mind. There was no way I would let him face this alone.

HUXLEY

Yesterday had been...weird. I'd woken up, only concerned with making coffee. The next thing I knew, my stepbrother had his dick in my ass. Then I'd come harder than I could ever remember coming in my life, and just as I was basking in the afterglow, my dad had called and dropped the bombshell that he was coming home tomorrow—or today, now.

I dragged my plectrum across my guitar strings, the twang of the notes sounding loud in the quiet. I wasn't even in the mood to play, but I wanted to try and relieve some of this tension that was giving me the headache of the century.

Cole had fucked me.

We'd agreed it was a one-time thing to get it out of our systems, but here was the problem. He'd fucked me so good, I was already craving it again. What the fuck was that all about? I didn't even like him. Much. And more importantly, he was now officially my stepbrother, despite the fact that neither of us had a say in our new relationship status.

Cole Clarke.

He wasn't even my type. Aside from girls, I generally went for boys that were more like me. Fuckups. Outsiders. Not interested in toeing the line. Not that Cole was squeaky clean—in fact, I was more or less certain that he wasn't, based on the way that his A-level results had been subpar, his antagonistic temperament, and the fact that he smoked weed like a fucking stoner. But he was a good boy in my dad's eyes. A suck-up, as far as both our parents were concerned.

And...there was also the fact that he was fucking hot. There was no way

that I could deny it. I'd had a hard-on for Cole Clarke for way too long, and I needed to get over it. Now. Yesterday would never, ever be repeated.

My fingers flew across my guitar strings, and it took me a moment to realise that I was playing "Strawberries & Cigarettes" by Troye Sivan. Fucking strawberries. I'd never be able to eat them again without thinking of Cole. It still didn't stop me singing the lyrics, though, even if Cole was on my mind.

Maybe I had a problem.

There was a knock on my door, and I groaned, my head thumping against the wall behind me. The one person I wanted to avoid, and of course he was here.

I hadn't even answered Cole's knock, but he entered my room anyway. I did my best to ignore his sexy-as-fuck body, clad in loose black football shorts and yet another faded T-shirt that stretched across his pecs. This time it was a navy colour, and even though it made no sense to me, the colour managed to make his brown eyes pop beneath his thick lashes.

He hovered in my doorway. "Hi. Uh. Your dad and my mum will be back in a few hours. I tried to tidy the house, but do you want—"

His words were cut off by my mouth. Somehow, and I didn't know when, I'd laid down my guitar, climbed to my feet, and walked over to him. And now my hand was curved around the back of his neck, holding him in place while I kissed him.

I was kissing Cole.

His hands gripped my hips, his touch like a hot brand. I'd never had a kiss like this in my life, and never from someone I thought I hated up until very, very recently. Everything I'd ever done with anyone prior to Cole coming into my life had been based on mutual interest.

But now it was Cole, the person who'd been antagonising me for months.

And he was giving me the best fucking kiss I'd ever had.

"Fuck." He ripped his mouth away from mine, breathing hard. "I didn't mean to do that."

He didn't? I didn't. My brain scrambled for a reply, but I didn't have one.

Eventually, my brain rebooted. "Our parents come back today. We need to make sure that the house is sorted. Show me what's left and I'll help you."

It was a good enough excuse to avoid talking about what had just happened, and I was horrified that I'd kissed him so easily. Focusing on something else was what we both needed.

Cleaning up the rest of the house took a couple of hours. After we'd done the inside, we ended up in the garden, where I helped Cole drag the patio furniture back into place. The early evening sun bathed the patio with its rays, and as I watched Cole's muscles flexing, the sunlight caught his eyes, and my breath caught in my throat.

"Cole. Come here." My voice was low.

His gaze shot to mine, and he immediately dropped the cushion he'd been holding, stalking over to me. When he drew close enough, I grabbed a handful of his T-shirt and yanked him into me, slamming my mouth down on his.

Yes. This was what I needed.

Backing me up against the side of the house, his arms came around me, his hands threading into my hair and tugging my head back to expose my neck. Then his mouth moved to my throat, his stubble scratching lightly across my skin. "Hux. We shouldn't be doing this," he panted, grinding his erection against my thigh.

"I know." I closed my eyes as I rocked my hips forwards. "Can't stop."

"Cole? Are you here?"

We sprang apart, both of us breathing heavily, panic filling the space between us. That was Cole's mum's voice. *Shitshitshit*. Our parents were back early.

"Quick." Cole grabbed my hand, tugging me forwards. "Games room. Side door."

We made it into the games room and Cole got busy flipping the TV on while I grabbed the Switch controllers and booted up Mario Kart. He dived onto the sofa next to me, taking one of the controllers.

My heart was still racing, but my dick had deflated, thanks to the sudden scare we'd had. I glanced over at Cole, who looked a bit dishevelled but otherwise normal. I just had to hope that neither of our parents noticed anything odd about us.

The handle of the games room door turned, and I gritted my teeth, steeling myself. Next to me, I could tell that Cole was holding his breath, his whole body poised on a knife edge.

"There you are." Cole's mum appeared in the doorway, closely followed by my dad. Both of them wore wide smiles as they took us in.

"We should go away more often if this is the result." My dad laughed loudly. Cole and I didn't join him. "Look at the two of you getting on so

well.”

“Two brothers having fun together,” June added, and I saw Cole visibly wince out of the corner of my eye. I didn’t dare to speak.

After giving us a comprehensive rundown of their cruise, they eventually left us alone. Thank fuck.

Cole collapsed back against the sofa with a groan, rubbing his hand across his face. “That was way too close.”

“Way too close,” I agreed. “That can never happen again.”

He nodded. “Yeah, but what do we do about it? Because I keep wanting to kiss you. And more.”

That was true for me, but I wasn’t at a point where I could admit it out loud. I thought for a minute. “Maybe I should move back in. There’s a thing called exposure therapy, isn’t there?” My stomach churned as I made myself say, “This...thing between us, it’s just a temporary attraction. You’re not even my type.”

Biting down on his lip, he lowered his gaze so I couldn’t read his expression. “Yeah. It’ll fade soon enough. It always does.” A tiny smile tugged at his lips, although it seemed forced. “If you’re staying, I’m pretty sure I’ll stop finding you hot after a week or two when I’ve had to look at your face every morning over breakfast.”

“Same.” I nodded, ignoring the sick feeling in my stomach. “It’ll fade away soon enough, especially with our parents reminding us every five fucking seconds that we’re a family.”

Cole finally raised his head to meet my gaze, his expression unreadable. “I’m going to go now. Because I know you’re right, but I also know that I really want to carry on what we started outside. My willpower isn’t that strong, yet.”

He’d made it all the way to the door when I launched myself to my feet. My arm shot out and I grabbed him around the back of his neck, spinning him around to face me. His eyes were wide and full of emotions he was trying to hide. It fucking hurt to look at him, but I couldn’t look away. “One last kiss. And then we’re done.”

“Huxley,” he whispered, and I kissed my name from his lips, soft and slow and so fucking sweet, like I’d never kissed anyone before.

And then he was gone, and I was left alone.

COLE

Do you know what doesn't work? Exposure therapy. Not when it came to me and Huxley. It had been seven torturous days after he'd officially moved back in. Seven days of our parents talking about us being brothers and being a family, and I couldn't stand it. I wanted Huxley more than ever, and it took everything in me to hide it. Hux didn't seem so affected, but he'd spent a lot of time in his room with his guitar, so I couldn't help wondering if he was trying to avoid spending time with me. Every time I looked at him, I wanted to kiss him again, so I was doing my best to keep my distance unless our parents were there as a buffer. So although I wasn't sure if he was still into me or not, if I based it on the way I was feeling, he had to at least be finding it a bit difficult to be around me at the moment.

"Cole." My mum interrupted my thoughts, peering around my bedroom door. "You're not working tonight, are you?" I shook my head, and she smiled. "Could you come downstairs? David and I have something we'd like to speak to you about."

"Uh, yeah. Alright." Climbing to my feet, I followed her downstairs. David was in the living room, standing in front of the fireplace, but all my attention was taken by Huxley, who was sprawled on one of the sofas. I hadn't seen him since yesterday, and my eyes drank him in like he was a glass of water in the desert. Fuck, why did I want him so badly?

His gaze met mine, and a flush appeared on his cheeks. He bit down on his lip, quickly looking away. Yeah...I was pretty sure he was still interested in me. Which made it worse in a way, knowing we were both suffering.

"Ah, Cole. Take a seat." David pointed to the sofa Huxley was sitting on.

I took a seat as far from Hux as I could, while my mum crossed the room to stand with David.

When David had tugged my mum into his arms, he cleared his throat. “Now that the two of you are finally being civil and acting like the brothers you now are, we would like to try something new.” He paused dramatically. “Family bonding nights.”

Huxley and I exchanged wary glances. *What the fuck?*

David continued speaking, “I know that you’re both adults in the eyes of the law, but you live under our roof and until either of you move out permanently, you’re under our house rules.” His mouth twisted. “It’s not about us trying to control the two of you. It’s...I know that we haven’t been the most attentive of parents when you were both growing up—” He paused, his gaze darting to my mum, who squeezed his arm. “—but now we’re all together, we both want to rectify that. To build a family. While we were on our honeymoon, we discussed things, and the idea came to us.”

My mum picked up where he’d left off. “You’re brothers now, and we want to strengthen our relationship with the two of you.” Her gaze turned to me, wide and pleading. “We know that it’s difficult for you both, but we want to be a family.”

Fucking hell.

I nodded, because I couldn’t speak.

She gave me a smile. “We’re not trying to put rules in place, but we’d like to at least try this. Once every two or three weeks, we’d like an evening with us all together. Catching up on your lives. Perhaps playing board games or watching a film.”

Me and Huxley in the same room was bad enough, but a whole evening with our parents forcing us to act like the siblings we absolutely fucking weren’t?

Fuck my life.

David matched my mum’s smile as he removed his hand from around her waist. “On that note, I have a couple of surprises for you all.”

I tipped my head back against the sofa, waiting for whatever was coming next. It wasn’t like this evening could get any worse.

David disappeared, but before I had time to wonder where he was, he reappeared with a bag in his hands. He held it out to my mum, who gave him a questioning look as she dipped her hand into the bag.

She pulled out a framed photo. It was of her and my stepdad on their

wedding day, posing in front of the lake. They both looked so happy.

“Oh, David. This is beautiful.” Her fingers caressed the glass. “The pictures were ready much sooner than I thought they’d be.”

David shook his head. “Only a couple. I spoke to the photographer because I wanted you to have at least one when we returned from our honeymoon.” He reached into the bag. “This was the other one.”

Huxley and I both stiffened in our seats, because it was a photo of the two of us in front of the lake. We were both smiling, and even though I knew that moment had been filled with loathing, we looked so good together, I couldn’t look away.

“Our two boys. You both gained a brother that day.” David appeared in front of us, slapping Huxley and I on the shoulder, and I did my best to hide my grimace. Luckily, he didn’t seem to notice, because he took a step back, clapping his hands together.

“Now. Who wants to play Trivial Pursuit?”

The next morning, as I covertly eyed Huxley across the kitchen table because I couldn’t help myself, I took in the way his black eyeliner was smudged across his skin, like he’d rubbed his hands over his eyes. His face was paler than usual too, and when I lowered my gaze, I noticed his fingers drumming on the surface of the table, which made it seem like he was on edge. Shit, what was wrong with him?

David and my mum were eating breakfast with us, so I couldn’t ask him outright. Instead, I sent him a text.

ME:

What’s wrong? Don’t tell me nothing because I don’t believe it

He shifted in his seat, his hand going to his pocket, and his gaze dropped to his lap. He didn’t look at me, but a few seconds later I got a reply.

HUX:

Nosy fucker. Nothing’s wrong. Got to pick up my replacement car this morning

Oh. *Oh*. I immediately put two and two together. He was going to pick up

a new car, and it would be the first time he'd driven since the crash. No wonder he was on edge.

ME:

I'm coming with you. No arguments

I saw Huxley bite down on his lip when he read my reply, and there was a tremor in his fingers as he tapped out a response. Fuck. He played the part of being strong and untouchable, but there was a vulnerability deep inside him that just made me want to be his fucking protector or something. He didn't really need protecting, but he did need someone to lean on. And today, that person would be me. If he let me.

My phone buzzed.

HUX:

OK

I exhaled, relieved that he'd agreed without a fight. Quickly finishing up my breakfast and skilfully avoiding my mum's questions about my weekend plans, I dumped my plate in the dishwasher and made my way to my bedroom.

ME:

What time?

HUX:

20 mins. I booked an Uber

After a quick shower, I grabbed my phone, wallet, and sunglasses. I thought for a minute, and then headed to his room. There was no answer when I knocked, so I pushed inside, immediately spotting the item I wanted. *Huxley's guitar*. I carefully placed it inside its case and zipped it up, and then tugged the straps over my shoulders. There was an idea prodding at the back of my mind, and I didn't know if it would help, but I had a feeling it might.

When I saw Huxley waiting by the front door, he frowned at me, his mouth opening, but I shook my head at him. "Trust me."

He huffed out an irritated breath but remained silent.

Good.

Huxley's hands trembled as he placed them on the steering wheel.

"Hux." I curled my fingers around his thigh. "It's going to be okay. I'm here."

He gave a short, jerky nod, staring straight ahead with his jaw clenched.

"We'll go slow, okay? Follow the satnav instructions," I said, trying to keep my voice low and calm. It worked with spooked animals apparently, and Huxley may not have been an animal, but he was definitely spooked. I couldn't blame him. Scenes of that crash flashed through my mind for the hundredth time, and I unconsciously tightened my grip on his thigh. If I were his boyfriend, I'd—

Never mind that, because being his boyfriend wasn't an option. All I was here to do was to support him through this.

His breaths came hard and fast, and I rubbed my thumb up and down over the seam of his jeans. "We'll go slow," I repeated as he turned the engine on.

A choked noise fell from his lips that he instantly stifled by clamping his mouth shut, his fingers gripping the wheel like it was a lifebelt. When we began moving, I loosened my hold on his thigh, but kept my hand where it was. It felt like he needed it, needed to know I was right here with him.

His brow furrowed in concentration as he slowly and carefully navigated towards the outskirts of London, until we were seeing more greenery than built-up areas. I'd set the satnav destination to Coulsdon Common, almost on the border of Surrey, a huge green area far enough south of the centre that we could avoid the heavy traffic, and far enough that it would give him a chance to get used to driving again.

When we reached our destination and Huxley had cautiously parked, I took his guitar from the boot and set off, so he had no choice but to follow me.

"Where are we going?" His voice was a little breathless, and I really, really wanted to hold him in my arms and tell him that I was so fucking proud of him for not only facing his fears, but to drive all the way here. This infatuation I had for him wasn't going away anytime soon. And I couldn't really even call it an infatuation, because it was turning out to be so much more than that.

Why did he have to be my fucking stepbrother?

Sliding my sunglasses on to hide my eyes, I glanced over at him, hoping my voice wouldn't give away the feelings I was doing my best to push aside. "I thought we needed some fresh air." He nodded, accepting my response

easily.

When we'd been walking for a little while, I stopped. We were in an open space filled with tall grasses and flowers—maybe a meadow or something, I didn't know. The sun was shining, and there was no one else around other than a few dog walkers in the distance.

“Here,” I said, removing Huxley's guitar case from my shoulders and setting it down. “Let's sit.”

He flopped down onto the grass next to me, leaning back on his elbows. “Cole.”

I turned my head to meet his gaze behind the barrier of my sunglasses. “Yeah?”

“Thanks.” His smile was small but genuine. “I don't know how you knew when I wasn't even aware of it myself, but I really needed this.”

The way he was looking at me...

I wanted him. Way more than I'd realised. And I couldn't have him.

“I'm glad it helped.” My voice betrayed me, cracking at the sudden rush of emotions. Quickly turning away from him, I cleared my throat, attempting to regain my composure.

“Cole,” he said again, so fucking soft. “Look at me.”

“I can't.”

“Why?”

Moving into a seated position, I shoved my sunglasses up to the top of my head, my arms encircling my drawn-up knees. Burying my face in my arms, I let the truth fall from my lips, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. I couldn't keep it in anymore.

“I'm so fucking tired of pretending that I don't want you.”

I wasn't looking at him, but I heard his sharp intake of breath. He fell silent, and I pressed my lips together, my fingertips tightening around my knees, digging into my skin.

Sudden, small sounds filled my senses. A guitar case opening. A plectrum against strings. A heavy breath.

“Come here,” Huxley murmured, and I lifted my head. He had his legs stretched out in front of him, his guitar resting on his upper thighs, and his hand held out in invitation.

Swallowing hard, I unfolded my body, taking the invitation for what it was. I shifted into a lying position, and carefully balanced my head on his legs.

His fingers came down to carefully stroke through my hair. “Don’t think this is one-sided,” he said quietly. “I want you too. It’s been killing me to stay away from you.”

“What does that mean?” It felt like my voice was so loud, breaking the peaceful silence of this open space.

His soulful blue eyes met mine, and for once, he wasn’t hiding anything. “It means that I don’t think I can stay away anymore. I thought I could get over this, but you’re in my head and I can’t stop thinking about you.”

I reached a hand up, tracing it across his jaw, feeling the rasp of his stubble beneath my fingertips. “Me neither. I know we’re stepbrothers, but we didn’t ask for this. I want you, and you want me. Why shouldn’t we be together?”

We both knew why. Our parents. I was sure they wouldn’t understand, and with us all living under the same roof, things were bound to blow up. How could we tell them when we didn’t even know ourselves if this was something between us that would burn hot, but could burn out just as quickly? Was it worth the inevitable fallout? What would it mean for family relations if and when this whole thing crashed and burned?

Then there were other people. We weren’t even related, but there would be those who wouldn’t understand. Not that I cared what they thought, but our parents would.

Huxley sighed, his fingers curling around mine. He pressed my fingers to his lips, and then lowered my hand to rest on my stomach. “Let’s stay here and forget about the rest of the world for a while.”

Our eyes met again, and I exhaled slowly, pushing aside my worries. I kept on breathing in and out, slow and steady, until everything else faded away. There was just the two of us, here in this grassy meadow, with the rays of the late summer sun playing across our bodies. Me and the boy that I somehow, against all odds, wanted to be mine.

A smile curved over Huxley’s lips, and he looked so fucking beautiful. “That’s it. Breathe. It’s just you and me, Cole.”

“You and me,” I repeated, holding his gaze.

His fingers moved across the strings of his guitar.

The familiar opening notes of “Somewhere Only We Know” sounded, and then he began to sing.

THE END...FOR NOW...

Want more from Cole and Huxley? Their full story is coming in 2023. [Pre-order now!](#)

In the meantime, if you want a look into the future and the rest of the LSU world, check out the series:

Book #1: [Blindsided](#) (enemies/roommates to lovers)

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Becca Steele is a USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling new adult romance author. She currently lives in the south of England with a whole horde of characters that reside inside her head.

When she's not writing, you can find her reading or watching Netflix, usually with a glass of wine in hand. Failing that, she'll be online hunting for memes or making her 500th Spotify playlist.

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TRIGGER WARNING

The following contains spoilers.

If you're comfortable going in completely blind, feel free to skip to the next page.

Certain aspects of this story may be disturbing and/or triggering for some readers, such as: graphic language, explicit sex scenes, alcohol and substance abuse, addiction, depression, idealization of suicide, death of a sibling (off page overdose), violence between the main characters, and stalking/obsession.

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PROLOGUE

XAVI

I shouldn't be up here.

I made a promise to the only real friend I've ever had, one that's getting harder and harder to keep. I've thought about breaking it hundreds of times—at least once a day since the day she left me—but I've never actually had the balls to go through with it.

Tonight though...

Tonight feels different.

I feel different.

I'm in too deep this time and I just want it to stop.

No more fear. No more guilt. No more fucking misery.

With any luck, it'll just feel like...nothing.

Blackness.

The end.

Clutching the blindfold I've kept on me for almost two years, I'm straddling my motorbike on the edge of the bend in the road, facing the steep cliff overlooking the forest below.

Ride a motorcycle.

Jump off a cliff.

“That's two birds with one stone right here, babe,” I slur, laughing through the pain in my chest. I lean over to get a better look. “I'm gonna do it.”

But I'm not finished yet.

And this probably isn't what she meant when she wrote that list.

She didn't want to die. She *promised*, just like I did.

Lightning strikes above me, and I jump, shivering as I wrap my arms around myself. I hate storms. The rain hasn't started yet, but it's windy as fuck, especially up this high. It's so cold, I can barely feel my hands as I reach into my hoodie pocket. The bottle of whiskey I stole from my dad's office tonight is long gone, so I swallow a couple pills instead, then light the joint I rolled earlier and take a hit.

My filthy, unwashed hair blows into my eyes, blocking my vision, but it doesn't matter. I don't need to see anything. I just need to drive. Just a few more meters.

Come on, you pussy.

Come on, come on, come on...

My phone buzzes on the handlebars, and I almost ignore it this time.

Almost.

Inhaling more smoke, I squint at the text message on the screen, the paralyzing fear coiling around my lungs and squeezing as I look at the words. And then at the pictures...

Fuck, I think I'm gonna puke.

Swiping the message away, I don't stop to think about what I'm doing before I've got the phone pressed to my ear. He takes fucking forever to answer, but when he does, he sounds wide awake and highly amused, the sounds of the party he's at echoing in the background. "What do you want?" he teases.

"I need your help."

"Again?" I think he laughs, but I can barely hear him over the ringing in my ears. "You can't be serious."

"Please," I rasp, flinching at the next flash of lighting in the sky. "He... it's Nate."

He pauses, then asks, "Where are you right now?"

I shake my heavy head, feeling dizzy as I look around at my surroundings. "I..."

"Never mind. Fuckin' drama queen," he mutters. "Wait there. I'll be there soon."

After he hangs up, I pocket the phone and wait like he told me to, but I don't hold my breath. *Soon* could mean five minutes or five hours knowing him. He won't rush, because he doesn't really give a fuck about me. I don't blame him. I don't give a fuck about me either.

The rain starts, then pours, then pours some more. I'm soaked from head

to toe within seconds. I don't know how much more time passes as I smoke my joint, shielding it inside my hoodie to keep it dry. Once it's gone, I toss the roach away and tip my head back, taking one last look at the dark sky before I pull the blindfold into place.

I hear another text come through. This time I do ignore it.

Squeezing my handlebars, I use my feet to creep a little closer toward the edge.

Just twist it, Xavi.

Just fucking do it already.

Just fucking—

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XAVI

Two Years Earlier

I'm high at the hospital, stumbling through the never-ending halls as I make my way to the waiting room on the third floor. The walls feel like they're closing in on me, and I can barely see where I'm going, but I don't stop to catch my breath.

It won't work anyway.

I won't breathe right again until I know she's okay.

Please, I think to myself, over and over and over. *Please, be okay.*

When I finally get to where I need to be, I stop just inside the room, holding onto the vending machine on my left to keep myself steady. There are a lot of people in here, low voices and soft cries coming from...I don't know where, because my eyes refuse to focus on anyone but him.

Like magnets, they won't let him go.

He's sitting by himself in the middle of the room, elbows resting on his knees as he runs his thumb over the black ring he's holding—*my* ring. They must have taken it off her finger when they brought her in and given it to him. That's the only reason he has it. That *has* to be the reason. Because if he was the one who took it from her...if he was the one who found her like that...

I can't even think about it.

I don't say anything, but it seems I don't need to. It's like he senses my presence here, my heart stopping when he lifts his head to look at me.

Fuck.

He looks so mad at me, his usually light brown eyes now red and bloodshot, his short, dark hair sticking up at the top like he's been yanking on it repeatedly. His knuckles look busted too, like he's punched a few walls. Or people, probably.

I think he's been crying—which makes an ice-cold chill run down my spine; Nate Grayson never cries—but when he looks at me, there are no tears left. There's only hate and rage.

“Nate,” I hear myself saying, taking a slow, cautious step closer to him. “What happened?”

He just stares up at me, which is weird because it's usually me looking up at him. He's only nineteen—two years older than me and his little sister—but he's a tall motherfucker with a body built for basketball. He and I both know he could snap my skinny ass in half if he wanted to.

“Who called you?” he asks, ignoring my question.

“My dad,” I whisper. “He's on his way.”

He nods slowly, his hands shaking slightly as he continues to play with the ring. “Get out.”

I swallow and look over at his parents for the first time. His mom is sobbing into her hands in the corner, his dad on the chair next to her, gently rubbing his wife's back as he stares off into space.

“Nate...” I try again. “Please, just tell me wh—”

He's up and coming for me before I can finish, pulling on my jacket and then slamming me back into the vending machine, causing a scene. I wince and wrap my hands around his, holding my breath as he moves in closer, erasing the small amount of distance between us.

“Nate, let him go,” his mom says from the corner, sniffing as she looks up and wipes her eyes with her sleeve. “It's not his fault.”

“*Fuck that.* He's fucking high right now, Mom,” he growls, still looking at me, lowering his voice so she can't hear the next part. “You wanna know what happened, party boy?” he taunts, cruel and menacing. “You killed her. My sister's dead because of you.”

“No,” I choke out, shaking my head. “You're lying.”

She's not dead.

She *can't* be dead.

But he's not lying.

A broken noise escapes my throat, the tears bursting from my eyes, and I can feel him watching them fall as if he's fascinated by them. He's staring at

me again, his fingers clutching my shirt now, like he knows I'll fall apart if he doesn't hold me up.

I wish he'd let me fall.

"It should have been you," he says after a minute, granting my unspoken wish and letting me go.

I slide down to the floor, struggling not to throw up as I scoot away from him.

I didn't think it was possible to feel this much pain again, but there it is, eating me up and swallowing me from the inside out.

This feels worse than it did when I lost my older brother three years ago. At least when he died, there was nothing I could have done. I was just a kid, and he was killed in a car accident, dead before the paramedics even arrived at the scene.

But with Katy...I could have been there for her tonight. I could have stopped her from taking those fucking pills. I could have saved her. *Protected* her.

I somehow manage to pull myself back up to my feet, blindly feeling my way toward the door I walked through a minute ago. I don't want to leave my best friend here without saying goodbye—without telling her how sorry I am and how much I fucking love her—but he's not letting me stay. And even if I had the energy to fight him right now, I'd lose anyway.

"Xavi?" he calls, waiting until I turn my head to look him in the eye. "You're dead to me, you understand? If I ever have to look at your face again, I'll break it."

Sitting in a dark corner of the hospital parking lot, *mars* by YUNGBLUD is playing on repeat through my car stereo—the last song I remember her listening to before I dropped her off at home last night. I'm torturing myself, but I can't stop.

"Xavi!" she sings my name, her stupid laugh hitting my ears for the hundredth time in the last two hours. "You know I hate it when you ghost me like this. Where are you? I wanna go out. Call me right now or I'm going without you!"

The voice note ends, and I hit the play button on my phone again, tipping

my head back against the headrest.

Katy's blind—*was* blind—and even though she could text if she wanted to, she preferred using voice notes.

I stare at the roof and listen to her voice, my tears soaking my face and neck as I sip the bottle of vodka I found under her seat.

“Xavi!” she sings my name...

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NATE

Present

“I ’m just saying, guys are usually so much easier to fuck around with than girls,” Frankie rambles, holding on to my shoulder as I all but carry her out of my car. “They don’t ask for much. They hardly ever want anything serious. They just wanna get their dicks wet, right? I thought Myles was like that. But then he catches some freshman guy doing a body shot off my chest and he just loses it. Says I’m out here making a fool out of him or some shit. How was I supposed to know that’d make him jealous? I’m not his fucking girlfriend or his mother. You know what I mean?”

I don’t have a fucking clue what she’s talking about, but I still nod, helping her along towards the huge, six bedroom house me and my best friend, Carter, rented for college. I like it because it’s far enough from campus that I don’t have to deal with the frat boys I can’t stand, but close enough that it only takes me ten minutes to get to class and basketball practice.

It was only supposed to be the two of us at first, but then our teammate, Easton, got thrown out of his apartment by his girlfriend last year, so Carter thought it’d be fun to let him move in with us, the prick.

Frankie moved in just a few months ago. She was in a bit of a tough spot when I met her, so I told her she could stay a couple nights until she figured something else out. I’m still waiting for her to leave.

She stumbles, *again*, and I wait as she stops and angrily rips her heels off her feet. “Stupid shoes.”

“I don’t think it’s the shoes, Frank.”

“Eat my ass, Grayson,” she throws back, shoving the heels into my abs for me to carry them for her.

I shake my head and keep on walking.

It’s not even four in the afternoon yet, but this is what she gets for partying with the basketball boys all night and then continuing on for half the day. The break between New Years and the start of next semester is basically one long party in this town. A way for us to get it all out of our systems before it’s back to the grind next week.

My teammates love having her around because she’s cool as shit, but then this thing went down with Myles just now and Easton called me to pick her up before she cut the boy’s dick off and made him suck it in front of everyone. Her words, not his, apparently.

“Come on,” I urge, moving her tangled, white blonde hair out of her face so she can see where she’s going. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“But you said we were gonna party at home.”

“I lied to get you out of there.”

She looks at me like I betrayed her, and I let out a laugh, my head shooting up when I hear someone make a quiet, coughing sound. I was so focused on Frankie, I didn’t even see the dark haired guy leaning against the motorcycle parked beside Frankie’s truck.

I tilt my head to get a good look at him, then freeze where I stand. My lips part, and my blood runs cold as I take in his dark features, his shoulders hooked up to his ears and his hands tucked into his pockets. He looks nervous and awkward as he stares right back at me, but then something seems to dawn on him and he pales. “Fuck.”

His low voice snaps me out of my momentary state of shock, and I drop Frankie’s shoes to the ground as I move toward him. He curses again, stepping away from the bike to face me head on. He opens his big mouth to say something, but it’s too late for that. I’m already shoving my fist into it, knocking his stupid little ass to the gravel with one hit.

“Nate!” Frankie shrieks behind me, but I ignore her, too busy looking down at Xavi fucking Hart and wondering what the fuck he thinks he’s doing on my driveway.

He hasn’t changed much since the last time I saw him. He’s still just as short as he was when he was seventeen, his shaggy hair still the same shade of dark brown, a little darker than mine and my sister’s was. He’s wearing

dark ripped jeans and a black hoodie—no protective gear in sight—but there is a helmet on his seat, so at least I know he’s not a complete fucking idiot.

His eyes look a little clearer than they used to, a little bluer and brighter, but that doesn’t mean shit. He might not be on anything right this second, but this worthless little fuck-up could never stay off it for long.

I don’t even know why I care.

I *don’t* care.

Not one fucking bit.

“Get up.”

“Give me a fucking second, will you?” He winces, squinting at the gray sky above us.

Fucking pussy.

I didn’t even hit him that hard. Definitely not as hard as I did when he had the nerve to show up to my sister’s funeral. Or on her birthday a few weeks later when I caught him passed out on the ground next to her headstone.

When I look at Frankie, her jaw is on the floor and she’s staring at me like I’m someone she’s never met before. It’s not like she’s never seen me lose my shit—she knows how much of a hot-headed prick I am—but I get it. She doesn’t know about Xavi. To her, it probably looks like I just knocked this random kid out for no good reason.

“Who is he?”

“Go upstairs. I’ll be there in a minute,” I tell her, looking back down at Xavi to repeat myself. “*Get up.*”

Sighing, he swipes the blood off his lip and pushes himself up, wiping his mouth with his thumb when it just carries on dripping. He’s still got a piercing there—a little black ring on the corner of his mouth—and all I can think about is hitting it again. My face must show my intent before I can act on it, because he quickly jumps back a step and lifts his hands up in surrender. “Nate...”

God, I hate the way he says my name.

Frankie still hasn’t gone inside like I told her to, cursing me under her breath as she picks up her shoes. “These are Jimmy Choos, you know?”

“I’ll buy you new ones.”

“Nate.”

“*Frankie,*” I growl, turning to look at her again.

She frowns between me and Xavi, hesitating as if she’s unsure whether it’s safe to leave me alone with him. I try to tell her it’s fine with my eyes,

and she rolls hers, nodding as she takes the keys I hand her and stumbles over to the front door to unlock it.

“Fine. But if you kill him, you’re digging the hole all by yourself. I’m passing out now.”

“Drink some water first.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she calls, half waving at me over her head.

Once she’s gone, I take a step closer to Xavi and study his bloody mouth, watching the way he keeps poking at that goddamn piercing with his tongue. He’s lucky I don’t rip it out of his face and choke him with it.

“Why are you here?”

“I...” He stops talking, his features twisting with nerves as he rubs the back of his neck. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew *what*?” I grit out, losing what little patience I have left.

He takes a deep breath. Swallows it. “I’m moving in for freshman year.”

“The fuck you are.”

“Nate—”

“I said *no*, you little prick.”

No.

There’s no fucking way this is happening.

Our eyes lock as we stare at one another, and I already know what he’s thinking before he voices it. I can see the questions he has for me written all over his face. The need to know what the hell I’ve been doing for the last—

“Two years,” he whispers, finishing my thought. “You haven’t been home in *two years*, Nate. You don’t call or want anyone to come to your games. Your family’s worried sick—”

“Jesus, don’t you get it?” I cut in, grabbing his jaw to shut him up. “I don’t give a fuck, Xavi. I’m done with that town and every motherfucker in it.”

He frowns at that, looking up at me in confusion. “Since when?”

Since you, I think to myself, but I don’t bother saying it out loud. Still, I think he knows the answer, because he winces and tears his eyes away.

After Katy died, I fell off the rails and spent the better part of a month drowning in vodka and fucking everyone in sight. My dad came to me after I fucked the pool boy while his golfing buddies were in the house and told me it was time to cut the shit. I wanted to quit the team—to quit college altogether—but he wasn’t having it. His teenage daughter was in the fucking ground, but *life goes on* and all that shit. He’d never hit me before, but I

earned a back hand to the face for my attitude that day. Then he gave me a choice: be the star he raised me to be or check myself into rehab. I left the house that afternoon without saying goodbye to him. He showed up to my first few games after that, but I wouldn't talk to him or even acknowledge his presence there, so he eventually gave up trying. I assume he watches the games at home now, but I don't really give a shit if he does or not.

I've spoken to my mom on the phone a few times, but I haven't seen her in person since the day I left home for good, and I don't plan on doing so any time soon. That might make me a heartless asshole, but it's better this way for all of us. I'm not a very good person when I'm around them—when I'm around *him*.

I haven't been the same since Xavi took my little sister away from me and ruined my fucking life. Since my parents decided that yeah, Katy might be gone, but keeping up appearances is always most important. Since I became so broken with grief and disgust that I couldn't even stand to look at them anymore.

It all comes back to *him* as far as I'm concerned.

Everything is his fault.

And I fucking hate him for it.

Knowing what's coming, he snatches his jaw out of my hand, trying his hardest to get away from me. Before he can move, I grab him by the collar of his hoodie and punch him again, knocking him back into the side of Frankie's truck this time. My knuckles are killing me, but I don't care. I like the burn, especially when it comes from him. It feels like a drug. My first hit in almost two years.

"Don't even bother walking into this house," I say as I back up towards the front door. "Get your ass back on that bike, choose another school, and get the fuck out of my life."

But I already know he's not about to do any of those things.

Something's changed in his eyes since I saw him last. I can see it now. Just for a second, he's the old Xavi again—the one he was before Katy died. The bratty, defiant little bitch who never did a damn thing he was told. The way he's looking at me...

The kid's got balls, I'll give him that.

XAVI

The front door closes behind him, and I look away. “Fuck,” I whisper, cupping the back of my neck as I stare at the big iron gates I drove through a little while ago.

I thought I was ready for this, but after seeing him again, after getting my ass kicked *again* and finding out he had no idea I was coming...

“Fuck,” I repeat, digging my fingers into my throbbing eye sockets.

Maybe this was a mistake.

I should have just gone back to my hole where I belong.

Before I went to rehab three months ago, I was spending most of my time locked away in my bedroom at my mom’s house, blinds and windows closed, lights off. My very own pity party pad for one.

I took a year off after I graduated high school, because everything just felt so meaningless without Katy. It felt wrong at the time, and it still does, coming to the same college we were supposed to go to together. Hawthorne University—an elite campus for spoiled rich kids like ourselves, about an hour’s drive from our hometown. It’s not nearly far enough away if you ask me.

I’m not exactly here by choice, but I’ll admit it didn’t take much to convince me. Because deep down, I know she’d want this for me. She’d want me to do this *for her*. I never wanted to go—I’m not really the college kid type—but she begged and assured me we’d have the time of our lives. She had it all planned out. We’d live with Nate and Carter in their badass house off campus, whether they liked it or not, and then once they graduated, it would be all ours for our final two years. I eventually agreed because I’d

have done anything for her. I'd have followed her off a bridge if she asked me to. She was my best friend. My only fucking friend.

Dropping my ass down on the freezing cold ground, I lean back against the side of my bike and try calling the prick I already tried three times when I first pulled up. He was supposed to meet me here almost an hour ago.

He doesn't answer the phone, so I text him again.

XAVI:

Where the fuck are you, man?

I wait, but of course he doesn't reply.

Sighing, I pull my wallet out of my pocket and find the folded up strip of photos I keep tucked behind my cash. I told myself I wouldn't do this when I got here, but I can't help it. Looking at this calms me down just as much as it breaks my heart.

Careful not to crease it more than it already is, I run my fingers over Katy's beautiful face, remembering the day we took these pictures together. We were fucking around at the mall. She really needed to pee, and I thought it'd be funny to drag her into one of those old school photo booths and trap her in there with me. She was laughing so hard she was screaming, and she almost pissed herself right there when I pinned her to the seat and tickled her until she throat punched me.

She had a whole box of photos like these in her closet when she was alive, but I have no idea where they are now. I wasn't allowed in her house after she died. I don't know what her parents did to her room or what they kept and didn't keep. I have my own pictures, videos and voice notes stored on my phone, but this strip of photos is one of the only two physical things I have left of her, one of the only things I have that actually belonged to her.

My phone rings, and I swipe my eyes before I pick it up, deflating when I see it's my dad.

"Hello?"

"I told you I expect you to call me," he says as his greeting, sounding like he's distracted at work, as usual. "Are you there yet?"

"Yeah," I answer, picking at the stones on the ground between my feet.

I told him I was driving up here today, but he doesn't know where I'm staying. I told him it was handled when he offered to help me out with housing, and he surprisingly left it alone. He probably thinks my mom hooked me up with an apartment, which is pretty laughable if you ask me.

Mom can barely remember I exist most days, let alone rent me a place to live.

“What’s your place like?”

“Fine.”

“You don't sound very excited about it.”

“I’m thrilled, Dad. Really.”

“Watch the attitude, Xavier,” he warns, but I’m no longer listening.

I tune him out when he starts with his regular lecture. My thoughts drift back to Nate, and I turn my face to peek at the house behind me, wondering what he’s doing with that drunk girl he brought home just now. Frankie, I think he called her. She’s stunning, because of course she is. Ash blonde hair, big blue eyes, curves for days and a body I’m sure most guys would kill for a piece of.

“...stay out of trouble and do not embarrass me...”

I bet he worships every inch of her when he fucks her.

A sick thrill shoots through me, and I find myself picturing what he looks like when he’s on top of her. He’s probably taking his anger out on her right this second, brusing her thighs with his fingers and fucking into her as hard as he can, thinking of me as he does it...

I hear a deep sigh in my ear, and then, “Are you on drugs again, Xavier?”

“Fucking hell, Dad.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I told you I’m sober.”

“Addicts are compulsive liars. Do you really expect me to believ—”

“You know what? You’re right. I gotta go. My dealer’s on the other line.”

“Xavier.”

I roll my eyes and hang up the phone, tossing it down on my lap.

I should probably stop being such a brat to him considering he’s the one paying my tuition, but fuck it. No point in trying to be better for a man who knows I never will be.

It’s so much easier with Mom. She might not be the most loving parent in the world, but at least she’s not riding my ass twenty-four-seven. She’s a retired model, living her best life with the rock singer she’s dating who’s closer to my age than he is hers.

After my parents divorced when I was seven, she was granted custody of me and my older brother. I’m pretty sure she only fought our dad for us out of spite. She never cared enough to ask what we were doing or where we were doing it, but as we got older, we didn’t mind that so much. We used it to

our advantage and got away with murder.

My dad blames her for Blaine's death. Says the only reason he drove drunk that night was because she refused to try to control him like a proper parent would.

He treats me and her like the dirt beneath his thousand dollar shoes, like the *problems* he's forced to deal with, and then walks around with his nose in the air like he's some kind of saint—the man who's never made a damn mistake in his life.

What the fuck ever.

Are you on drugs again, Xavier?

I fucking wish, Dad.

Needing to do something else with my hands, I gently put the strip of photos away and pull out the half empty pack of cigarettes from my jeans. I take one out and stare at it between my fingers, slowly rolling it back and forth. It hasn't been that long. I can still remember the way it felt when the smoke would fill my mouth and travel down to my lungs. The way the nicotine would relax me. Maybe take some of the pain away, just for a minute or two.

My face hurts like a bitch, but I don't mind it. Everything always hurts on the inside anyway, so it's kind of nice to feel some pain on the outside again. Like maybe it'll override it if I concentrate on the throb in my nose hard enough.

It doesn't work.

I snap the cigarette at the roach and shove both pieces into my pocket, propping my elbows on my knees to drop my face into my hands.

And then I wait.

Again.

I swear I spend half my life waiting for this asshole.

NATE

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I stare down the phone in my hand, rubbing small circles over Frankie's ankle with my thumb. I checked on her as soon as I came inside, took her dress off her body, changed her into one of my old shirts, then force fed her some water. There was no bottle on the nightstand, so I know she didn't drink any like I told her to.

She's passed out again now. In my bed, as usual. She likes sleeping in here with me when she's drunk. Says it's just in case she pukes, she doesn't want her own room to stink of it.

Covering her feet with the blanket, I look over at the window, listening for movement outside. I haven't heard his bike start, so I know he's still out there.

Defiant little bastard.

Again, I squeeze my palm around the phone I'm holding, still trying to figure out how the fuck this is happening.

Why is he here?

Xavi's dad and mine are best friends, but even if I was on speaking terms with either of them—which I'm not—there's no way they'd send him to live with me. They both know how much I hate him. Everyone does. I've never tried to keep it a secret.

Not wanting to wake Frankie, I leave quietly and shut my bedroom door behind me, walking downstairs to the den at the front of the house. I can see him through this window without having to go right up to it. He's sitting on the ground next to his bike, elbows resting on his knees, using his forearms as a pillow, probably freezing his scrawny ass off. His face is turned away from

me, so I can only see the back of his head, making it impossible for me to know what he's thinking about.

I pretend I'm not wishing for him to turn this way so I can take a guess.

Looking away, I call the number I've been hovering over for the last thirty minutes. He answers on the third ring, but I speak before he can. "You're a fucking dead man."

"You got my gift," he says with a smile in his voice. I hear a car door open and close, followed by the roar of his engine starting. "Finally."

This motherfucker.

I clench my teeth, not even bothering to act surprised. This is some typical Carter Westwood bullshit. I've known him my whole life, and this isn't the first time he's pulled something like this on me. He loves fucking with people's lives, plotting and scheming and stringing them along like puppets, all for his own twisted entertainment.

Making my way over to the bar, I grab a bottle of vodka and uncap it one handed, not bothering with a glass. I tip my head back and swallow a big mouthful, trying to calm my racing heart. The alcohol burns as it goes down, just like I wanted to. I drink some more.

"Aw, you're speechless," Carter says when I say nothing. "It's okay. You don't have to thank me. Just throat my dick real good when I get home and we'll call it ev—"

"You think you're funny?" I growl, wiping my mouth with my sleeve. "The fuck is wrong with you, Carter?"

"Will you stop being so ungrateful? I did you a favor."

"How's that?"

"Don't play," he teases. "I know what you want. He's yours now, Nate. You can beat him, fuck him...kill him and be done with it if it's gonna make you feel better. Just *feel better*, so you can stop being such a moody prick and go back to being my best friend. You know, the one who knows how to have fun without acting like a mopey little bitch all the time."

"You fucking cunt."

"You wanna fuck my cunt?" he jokes. "Be home soon, baby."

"Carter—"

He hangs up on me then, dismissing me. The vodka leaves my hand before I'm thinking. The bottle hits the wall next to the window with a satisfying smash, pieces of glass flying everywhere. Although it's only satisfying for about three seconds.

“Fuck.”

Xavi’s head swings around towards the window, and I quickly jerk back into the shadows, closing my eyes as I knock my head back against the wall.

I changed my mind.

I don’t wanna see the look on his stupid fucking face.

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NATE

Three Years Earlier

Carter moans into my mouth, holding my upper arms to steady himself as I push him into my bedroom. I squeeze his hip and pull his head back by his dirty blond hair, demanding better access. He gives it over willingly, stumbling when his foot gets caught beneath mine.

“Why are we doing this again?”

“Because I didn’t want pussy tonight and you were the hottest guy at the party,” I answer, playing his game and feeding his massive ego.

He grins and kisses me hungrily, wincing when I tighten my grip on his hair.

“Jesus, Nate, *easy*,” he rasps. “You’re being too rough.”

“Fuck off.” I laugh, knowing he’s messing with me.

He chuckles darkly, and I turn us around to shove him back against my closed door. His hands go for my jeans, and I bite his lower lip, dragging it out between my teeth the way he likes it. He moans again, and I pull back to take my shirt off, tossing it down on the floor next to my bed. I go for his shirt next, smacking his fumbling hands away from my zipper because he’s taking too damn long.

I swear he does this shit on purpose just to piss me off.

We’ve done this a few times before, but we both know it means nothing. Just a way for us to let off a little fuckin’ steam from time to time.

Once I’ve got my dick in my hand, I grab the lube from the dresser beside us and use it to get myself slick, amused at the way he’s grinding into me

impatiently. I haven't even touched his cock yet, but I can feel how hard it is, poking into my hip beneath his pants.

"You ever gonna let me top you?" he asks, grunting when I grab a fistful of his hair and twist his head to the side, pushing his cheek into the wood.

"Stop fucking playing and turn around."

He smirks and does as he's told, both hands braced on the door frame, watching me over his shoulder as I push his jeans and boxers down over his ass. I squirt some more lube into my hand and find his hole with my fingertips, rubbing and pushing on it to open him up for me. I slide my middle finger inside and twist it around, not because it makes him feel good, but because it's necessary. I kiss him because it makes him feel less used, and sometimes I'll let him suck my dick for a while before I fuck him, but other than that, I always make sure it's quick and to the point. In and out. No strings, no drama.

Just as I'm about to line myself up, I hear a distant thud followed by a shriek, freezing when I realize it sounds like my little sister. Carter's eyes hit mine, probably thinking the same thing I am, and then we're moving. He yanks his jeans back up and I quickly tuck myself away, wiping my lube covered hands on my thighs before I swing the door open. He's hot on my heels as I all but run to her bedroom at the end of the hall, following the sounds coming from her en-suite bathroom. As soon as I step inside, I skid to a halt at the scene in front of me, frowning at the puddles of soapy water all over the floor.

What the fuck?

She and Xavi fucking Hart are standing in the huge, clawfoot bathtub in the middle of the room, fully clothed and covered in bubbles. "Move Along" by The All American Rejects is blaring from the waterproof sound system I got her for Christmas last year. She's singing the words at the top of her lungs, using the open bottle of wine she's holding as a microphone, laughing as he holds her arm up over head and spins her around like they're on a fucking dance floor. I see red then, realizing that must be why she screamed just now.

He let her fall.

She looks unharmed and free of any cuts and bruises, but still. He let my blind little sister slip and fall in the fucking bathtub.

God, I hate him.

The thick layer of black eyeliner she's wearing is smeared all over her

face, and I can't tell whether that's because she's been crying or because they've decided to turn the bathroom into a goddamn water park. Her dark hair is soaked, sticking to her skin, and it's only then I spot the faint outline of her nipples through the drenched white shirt she's wearing. I immediately cut my eyes to Carter, finding him already looking up at the corner of the ceiling, but I don't miss the amusement on his face like he knows I'm about to lose my shit.

"Katy!" I bite out, but of course she can't see or hear me over the music.

My nostrils flare and I walk over the sound system in the shower, angrily jabbing the touch screen with my thumb until I find the stop button. Silence cuts through the bathroom, and Katy jumps with a gasp, both her and Xavi spinning in my direction, her back to his chest. His eyes widen when he sees me standing here, and judging by the look on his face, he already knows exactly what I'm thinking.

I'm going to kill you.

"Xav?" my sister asks, voice shaking with fear. "What...?"

He blinks and leans down to speak in her ear, gently taking her forearms and crossing them over her chest. Whatever he whispers to her makes her face go pale, and then she blushes, tightening her arms over her body to hide her breasts.

She looks guilty as fuck, as she should. Our parents are out of town this weekend for their nineteenth wedding anniversary. Katy told me she was staying at a friend's house tonight, which I had no problem with. I fucking dropped her off at the chick's front door a few hours ago, meaning she played me and lied to my face. Left her imaginary little sleepover, met up with this little punk instead and brought him home with her. *Alone.*

"Nate," she says carefully, attempting to placate me with that doe eyed look she's been hitting me with since we were kids. "I—"

"Don't even try it." I shake my head, walking over to the bath to snatch the bottle of red wine from her hand. "Get out of there and go to bed. You're grounded."

She drops her jaw at that, her face reddening even more at the embarrassment she must be feeling. "You can't ground me, asshole," she hisses. "I'm sixteen."

"Exactly!" I yell at her. "You're *sixteen* and I come home to find you getting wasted on Mom's stash and doing fuck knows what with this loser." I swing the bottle in Xavi's direction with a sneer, more for his benefit than

hers. “What are you even doing with this guy, Katy?”

“He’s my *friend*,” she stresses. “He makes me laugh and he’s one of the only people who actually give a shit. He gets it,” she adds, muttering, “Unlike some people.”

“What?”

She snaps her mouth shut, wiping the sudden tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. I should feel like a piece of shit for making her cry, and usually I would, but I’m too fucking livid to care right now.

With one arm still covering her chest, she takes Xavi’s hand and allows him to help guide her out of the tub, stunning me because she never accepts help from anyone anymore.

He links their soapy fingers together as he carefully walks her over the wet tiles, side-stepping around Carter to get her to her bedroom door.

“You good?” he asks quietly, and I can tell he’s not asking if she can make it to her room without help. He knows she can do it. He’s asking if she’s good mentally, not physically.

She nods, giving him a small, half smile. “Night, Xav.”

“Night, babe.”

I glare at him when he calls her that, but he doesn’t look phased. The cocky little shit walks back over to the bath with that stupid swagger in his step and grabs his hoodie off the floor, throwing it on over his soaking wet body. “You should watch the way you speak to her,” he says to me, brave enough to look me dead in the eye.

“Get out before I throw you out the fucking window.”

He scoffs out a laugh and shakes his head at me, shoving his feet into his sneakers without bothering to dry them first. His devil may care attitude pisses me off—*everything* about him pisses me off. I take a step closer to him, gritting my teeth when Carter grabs my shoulder to stop me.

“He’s sixteen,” he reminds me, kneading his fingertips into my flesh, probably trying to soothe the tension in my muscles.

Knowing he’s right—I can’t beat the shit out of a fucking *child*—I grab Carter’s hand and pull him into me, his bare chest and abs pressed flush against mine. I’d forgotten we were still shirtless until he touched me, but now I use it to my advantage. I don’t miss the way Xavi’s tongue slips out to lick his lip ring as he bounces his eyes between us. Smirking, I pull Carter’s mouth to mine but keep my eyes on Xavi, using the only way I know I can get to him. I lick around Carter’s tongue and snake my hand behind his back,

sliding it down into his jeans to finger his already wet, open hole, picking up where we left off.

I ignore the way my dick gets harder at the flash of heat in Xavi's eyes.

Or maybe it's jealousy.

Probably a little of both.

Most people think he's only friends with my sister because he wants to fuck her, but I know better. I know what he really wants, and it fucking *kills* him that he can't have it.

"The fuck are you still doing here?" I ask him, purposely crooking my finger inside Carter to make him moan, licking a long line up the side of his neck.

Xavi's eyes narrow on me, but then he slides that easy grin of his back into place, making a point to lift his middle finger up before slamming the door on his way out.

Fucking brat.

"Baby boy got his feelings hurt," Carter jokes, a knowing laugh escaping him when I push his head back by his jaw and dig my fingers into his face.

"Shut up."

XAVI**Present**

“He really left you out here in the cold?” Carter laughs, grinning down at me as he takes in the bruises on my face and the blood on my chin.

“What did you expect, Carter?” I glare at him as I move to stand, ignoring his hand when he holds it out in offering. “You told me you wouldn’t blindside him.”

“And you believed me?”

Not really.

But what choice did I have? Carter did me a favor. He saved my ass, in more ways than one. And anyone who knows Carter Westwood knows he doesn’t do shit for anyone for free. This is the price I’m paying. Move in with them for my first year of college—or for what’s left of it, at least. I wasn’t in the best shape back in September, which is why I’m starting my freshman year in January.

“Come on.” He walks for the house and tosses me a key. “Your room’s upstairs, third door on the right.” He smirks over his shoulder. “Nate’s is the second.”

Of course it is.

I grab the one bag I brought with me and sling it over my shoulder. He opens the front door, and I hesitate at the threshold, running my thumb over the jagged edge of the key at my side. “He hates me, Carter.”

He stops and turns to face me. Slowly running his eyes over my body from head to toe, he nods as he takes in my appearance. “I think you’ll live.”

I fucking doubt it, but okay.

I follow him inside and through to the massive kitchen on the left, taking in the bright, white walls and the dark, wooden countertops, the sink free of dishes and the appliances all lined up just so. This place is spotless, but that doesn't surprise me. Nate's a clean freak. If he doesn't scrub this place himself, I'd bet money he pays someone to do it for him. Probably inspects every inch of the house from top to bottom every time he comes home.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing." I shake my head. "Where's your room?"

"Right opposite Nate's."

"What about the girl?" I ask, trying to act unphased as I set my bag down on the floor next to the island. "Frankie. Does she have her own room?"

"Yeah, but she sleeps in Nate's most of the time."

I nod and look away, annoyed at the stab of jealousy twisting my insides. "Right."

Carter smirks again and opens the freezer door, grabbing an ice pack and wrapping it up in a hand towel. "Here," he says, tipping his chin at my face as he passes it over.

I take it and hold it up to my cheek, watching as he wets another towel at the sink and walks over to me. My ass is against the counter, and then suddenly he's right against me, gently taking my jaw in his hand to wipe the blood off. I wince and turn my face away, taking the towel from him to do it myself. He grins wickedly as he steps away, hands raised in mock surrender. I narrow my eyes, still unsure what the fuck he thinks he's playing at. He's always loved messing with people, but this is fucked up, even for him.

"Why am I here, Carter?" I whisper, not wanting anyone else in this house to hear me. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's fun," he whispers back, mocking me.

He leaves me alone then, disappearing through the door without a backward glance.

Once I've finished cleaning myself up, I rinse the blood from the towel and ring it out in the sink. I'd rather not get my ass handed to me for making a mess, so I wipe up the water, then find the laundry room off the kitchen and toss the towels into the hamper.

Grabbing my bag, I don't dare check out any of the other rooms down here on my way back to the entryway. I walk up the staircase and along the hall, stopping outside the third door on the right.

He better not be fucking with me.

Carefully, as if I'm handling a ticking bomb, I twist the handle and peek inside the room, relieved when I find it empty. It would be just like Carter to set me up and make me walk into Nate's room unannounced.

Stepping inside, I quietly close the door behind me and place my bag down on the floor. The room is huge, just like Katy said it would be. The walls are white up here too, the hard floors a light, dusty gray color. The queen size bed is made up with gray sheets, topped with a fluffy gray throw blanket and matching pillows. There's a big ass TV on the wall opposite, a ridiculous walk-in closet Katy would have had no problem filling, and an equally big en-suite bathroom in the corner of the room.

Leaving my clothes on, I crawl into bed and lie on my side, folding my arm beneath my head. Then I take out my wallet and stare at the big ass smile on my best friend's face.

"I told you I'd come, babe," I whisper to her. "I'm here."

And I'm fucking miserable without you.

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NATE

“It stinks of vodka in here.”

My jaw ticks, but I don’t bother opening my eyes, my head tipped back on the couch in the den.

Frankie’s right. It does. I picked up all the broken glass and cleaned it up as much as I could, but I couldn’t get it all out of the carpet. The wall’s ruined as well. Now I have to wait until Monday for the cleaning crew and the painters to come and cover up the mess I made.

“What happened, Nate?”

I ignore her again, cracking one eye open when I realize she’s not gonna take the hint and leave me alone.

It’s only been a few hours since she passed out in my room, but she’s already freshly showered and dressed up for yet another night of partying. Her blonde hair is dead straight, the ends grazing the curve of her ass every time she moves, and she’s wearing a little black skirt with some type of bra for a top, black, spiky heels and a black choker thing around her neck. It looks like a dog leash to me, but I don’t dare point that out to her.

A memory comes back to me then, one of Xavi wearing something like that once while he was watching a movie with Katy. I remember thinking what a punk he looked like at the time, but now I’m imagining him wearing one again. Me hooking my fingers beneath the silk and dragging him closer. Making him my little plaything. My *gift*—

“You gonna share that?” Frankie asks, tipping her chin at the new bottle of vodka I’ve got wedged between my legs.

I pass it up to her. She grabs a couple glasses from the bar and pours

some out into each one, topping them off with some Red Bull from the fridge. She hands me mine, and I take it, eyeing her form over the top as I take a sip. “You goin’ out?”

“We’re going out,” she corrects me. “Go shower and get changed. You look like shit.”

“I’m too hot to look like shit,” I joke, but she’s not buying it.

She breathes out a sigh, her white painted fingernail tapping the edge of her glass. “Who’s the new boy?”

“Don’t.”

“Is he yours?” she asks. “Because if not, I—”

“Damn it, I said *don’t*,” I bite out, harsher than I meant to. “Stay away from him, Frank. Please,” I add, softer this time.

She stares at me a moment, searching my eyes for fuck knows what. She must see something there, because after a quick glance at my red, swollen knuckles, she nods once and says, “All right.”

All right.

If only it was that simple for my baby sister. If only she’d said *all right*, maybe I wouldn’t have lost her to him. Maybe she’d still be here. Maybe...

“Can I have another one?” I ask, holding my empty glass up.

“Nope.” She shakes her head, snatching it from my hand. “Shower. Now.”

I glare at her, and she grins, shaking her bossy little ass as she walks over to the mirror above the bar. I could tell her to go fuck herself, but I don’t do that. She’ll only stay in here and annoy me until I cave, which is why I decide to save myself the headache. Forcing myself to stand, I make my way upstairs. Checking to make sure no one’s around, I bypass my room and stop at the next one over, listening for movement inside. Hearing nothing, I silently open the door and peek through the gap. I expected him to be awake, but he’s not. He’s lying on top of the sheets in the middle of the bed, curled up into a little ball with his hands tucked up beneath his chin. Sound asleep as if he hasn’t got a fucking care in the world. My hand tightens on the door frame, and it takes some serious willpower not to walk in there, climb on top of him, and suffocate him with a pillow.

Too easy.

If I was gonna kill him, I’d make it hurt.

I’d make him fucking scream.

My heart beats a little faster, and I back up before I do something stupid. I

close the door with a soft click and make my way to the bathroom inside my room, peeling my shirt off before I turn the shower on. My fingers find the chain around my neck, and I reach up to undo the clasp, my eyes glued to the ring I've been wearing on my chest every day since the day I took it. I cried into my sister's shoulder that night and stole it from her limp, lifeless body, lying on the floor of that filthy, strange house I found her in.

I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't let her go with that piece of him on her finger.

Now I wear it as a punishment.

As a reminder and a promise.

I'll never forget what he did to her.

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XAVI

I t's dark outside when I wake up. I didn't mean to fall asleep, but a quick glance at my phone tells me it's almost nine, meaning I've been out for almost three hours.

Groaning, I push myself up on my elbows and roll out of bed. In the bathroom, I rub the grit from my eyes as I check myself in the mirror above the counter, hissing at the throbbing pain that follows.

I look like shit. And I definitely didn't ice my face for long enough.

Letting out a sigh, I brush my teeth, take a quick shower, and get dressed. I still look like shit, and my face looks even worse than it did before, but there's not much I can do about it now.

Running my fingers through my damp hair, I make my way downstairs. I'm starving, but it feels weird to have food delivered here, so I take my phone out and search for the closest pizza place I can drive to, stopping in the entryway when I hear movement in the kitchen.

Just keep walking.

I veer right, keeping my steps light as I peek through the open door. I don't know whether I'm disappointed or relieved when I see it's not Nate like I thought it was.

It's Easton Miller—one of the guys I recognize from Nate and Carter's team. He's got light brown hair and an easy-going smile on his face, busy on his phone as he sets his duffel bag on the floor by the laundry room. I try not to make a face as I take in the gym clothes he's wearing and the basketball he's spinning on his forefinger.

Of course there's another ball boy here.

I've gotten into countless fights with guys like this. Mostly back in high school, with the asshole jocks who used to think it was funny to put hands on Katy. They teased her, pushed her around and gave her hell every chance they got, so I gave it right back to them. Got my ass kicked more times than I can count, but I didn't let that stop me. Every time, I got right back up and kept on swinging until one of the teachers came along to break it up.

After it became clear they had to go through me to get to her, everyone at school thought we were dating. Even our parents thought there was something more going on between us. Probably because I've never bothered to tell them pussy doesn't make my dick hard. Not that I give a shit what they think. I'd just rather save myself the headache. Luckily for me, everyone I meet usually takes one look at me and just assumes I'm straight.

Almost everyone...

I clear my throat when I realize Easton's caught me standing here, his eyebrows pulled down as he studies the dark bruises around my eyes, then the black hoodie I'm wearing and the too big, holey jeans hanging off my narrow hips.

"Hey," he says cautiously. "Are you Xavi?"

I frown, unsure how he knows that. If Carter didn't even bother telling Nate I was coming, why would he tell this guy?

"Frankie texted me just now and told me you were here," he explains. "I'm Easton."

I nod, awkwardly tucking my hands into my pockets. I don't really know what to make of him or what Nate's told these people about me, so I just watch him for a minute, slowly backing up the way I came. "Okay, well, I'll just... uh, go—"

"You hungry?" he asks, holding up a bag of Chinese food before setting it down on the island. "I was starving after the gym so I got one of everything."

"Um..."

He begins taking containers out and opening them up, raising a brow at me as he leans over and taps the counter with a pair of chopsticks. "Sit down, Xavi. I don't bite."

Okay then.

I take the seat opposite him, and he opens the fridge, pulling out two beers. "Want one?"

My heart beats faster, and I swallow. "No, thanks."

There.

Easy.

Fucking breathe, man.

Easton shrugs as he puts one back and grabs me a soda instead, holding it up in offering. I take it and pop the cap off the top, watching as he dishes out enough food to feed a small village. He keeps looking at my face as we eat, and I can tell he's curious about the black eye, but he doesn't ask me about it. Instead he tells me about his classes and games and his spot on the team, talking my ears off about everything and anything. He's kind of nice, and I find myself more relaxed around him than I thought I'd be.

"There's a party tonight," he says as we begin cleaning up. "You wanna come?"

I automatically open my mouth to say no, but then I think about Katy, imagining her grabbing me by my hair and shoving my antisocial ass towards him.

I still hesitate, wanting to ask if he knows if Nate will be there, but of course I don't do that.

"Yeah," I tell him, forcing the words out around the lump in my throat. "I'll come."

"What happened to the girl you lived with?" I ask Easton, looking up at the house he bought me to as we climb the wide steps leading up to the front door.

The whole place looks like it's made out of glass and pearly white marble. I can see all the way through to the pool in the backyard, the bodies inside moving to the beat of the music pulsing from the house.

"She burned all my shit and kicked my ass to the curb," he answers, laughing lightly at the look on my face. "Don't feel bad for me." He shakes his head, pushing the front door open and allowing me to step in first. "I deserved it."

"Why?"

"I fucked her sister."

I raise a brow at that, turning to face him as I back up into the house. "You tell everybody you just met you're a cheating asshole?"

"Only the ones I *really* like," he jokes, slinging his big arm over my

shoulder and spinning me to walk me forward into the crowd.

I tense against his side, unsure what I'm supposed to do with my hands. His fingers squeeze my collarbone through my hoodie, and I fight to keep my dick in check, telling myself not to read too much into it. Not to think about the way his hot body feels against mine, or how that easy smile of his comes out to play when he looks down at me.

For the love of God, don't.

Don't start crushing on the straight basketball player who also happens to be one of Nate's best friends, you fucking idiot.

He steers me toward the kitchen, bumping a few fists and grinning at a few girls as we pass them. I stay wedged against his side and let him move me, nodding along as he points out a few of the guys on the team and tells me which positions they play. He tells me their names, and I don't bother telling him I already know them.

I'll keep that little secret to myself.

He starts talking to Bryson West—the guy whose parents own this house, as Easton told me. I look over at the pool through the window behind me, chewing my lip as I search for any exit points out there. There must be something. A side gate or—

“Xavi.” Easton shakes my shoulder, pulling my attention back to him and Bryson.

“Hmm?”

“I said you obviously don't like beer, so what's your drink?”

I shift from foot to foot and eye the several bottles of liquor lined up on the island, a small, tight-lipped smile on my face as I tell him, “Water.”

His brows crash in the center, but I've got to hand it to him, he sobers faster than I thought he would. “Okay. Water it is.”

He moves around me and grabs a bottle from the fridge, his back to all the people in here as he uncaps it and pours some out into a solo cup. I could drink it from the bottle, but I think he's doing that so I can blend in with every other drunk college kid here. He knows something's up, and he's trying to help me avoid drawing any unwanted attention to myself. Or maybe I'm just desperate for someone to give a shit and I'm reading too much into things again.

Probably.

He hands me my drink, and I lean back against the counter as I lift it to my lips, moving my eyes over all the people bumping and grinding on each

other throughout the house. It's been a little while since I've been to a party like this, but it's not all that different from the ones I used to go to back in high school as far as I can tell.

Alcohol. Drugs. Fucking. Bad decisions...

Nothing ever changes.

I spot at least a dozen couples tongue fucking each other, some making their way to the glass staircase in the corner. There's a half-naked girl lying on the dining room table on her back, a few guys around her snorting lines of coke off her bare flesh. I clear my throat and tear my eyes away from the scene, already regretting my decision to come here. I rub my chest with my knuckles as the panic begins to rise, stealing my breath and blurring my vision.

Damn it, I shouldn't be here.

I can't be here.

I can't, I can't, I can't—

"Hey." Someone's touching me. It's Easton, his hand clutching my shoulder again as he bends to level with me. "Dude, are you good?"

"Yeah," I breathe out, nodding, but then I'm shaking my head and backing away from him. "I just need some air. I'm gonna go outside for a sec."

I think he says something else, but I don't hear him as I turn around and all but stumble out the door. As soon as I'm out of there, I pull in a breath and let it out slowly. That helps, so I do it again, three more times until the mess inside my head starts to clear. I swallow some water and carry on walking, the loud music fading the further away I get from the source.

There are just as many people out here, if not more, but the groups are more spread out than they are inside, so it doesn't feel as crowded. Nobody pays me any attention as I lean back against the side of the house and scrub my hands over my face. Taking out my cigarettes, I thumb the pack open and slide one out with my teeth, my head lowered as I search my pocket for my lighter.

Fuck it.

Just one won't hurt.

I just need one fucking—

I feel more than see the glare on me the second I flick the lighter on, the flame hovering just a couple inches from the tip. Cutting my eyes up, I tense and release my finger, snatching the cigarette from my mouth before my arms

fall to my sides.

Nate's sitting on the other side of the yard, the neon blue lights from the pool shadowing his face and making his features look even darker. Frankie and the group of people with him are laughing and seem like they're having a good time, but his stare doesn't leave mine. Even when he knows I've caught him, he doesn't react or look away.

He looks furious, and he has every right to be.

I'm not proud of the person he sees when he looks at me. The cocky, stupid little shit I was two years ago. That guy was reckless and selfish and all he cared about doing was partying and chasing the next high. I hate him just as much as Nate does. For corrupting Katy. For turning the town's good girl into the horror story they all whisper about. For encouraging her, enabling her because it hurt less not to hurt alone.

It's all his fault.

My fault.

Swallowing, I duck my head like the coward I am and go back inside to find Easton. He's still standing in the kitchen in the same place I left him, surrounded by his friends and double the amount of girls who were here a minute ago. He sees me coming and takes the empty solo cup I'm holding, replacing it with a full one. "Don't worry," he says, leaning over sideways to shout over the music. "I made sure no one spiked it."

"Thanks," I mumble into the cup, not missing the eyes burning a hole into me.

Carter appears at my side then, drink in hand as he shamelessly checks out the good-looking guy standing a few feet away from us. The guy checks him out right back, and I shake my head with a barely-there smile. He makes it look so easy, being out. Carter might be an asshole, but I can't deny I respect the way he's happy to just be who he is. Nate's never really advertised the fact that he likes to hook up with guys as well as girls—his dad wouldn't allow it—but Carter genuinely couldn't care less what his parents, his coach, or anyone else has to say about him. He's always been that way.

"Having fun, Xav?"

"What do you want, Carter?"

"Nate's avoiding me." He feigns a pout, and I roll my eyes at his stupidity.

"That's probably because as soon as he comes near you, he's gonna kick your ass."

He laughs at that, glancing at something over my head as he moves toward his entertainment for tonight. “Funny, ‘cause it looks to me like he wants *your* ass a hell of a lot more than he wants mine.”

I ignore the way that fills me with both dread and heat all at once.

He didn’t mean it like that. He’s just trying to mess with me. Trying to fuck with my head and make me hope for something I have no business hoping for.

I feel heat at my back then, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up when I realize Nate’s right behind me. His hand comes into view as he rests it on the island next to my hip. “Why are you here?”

“I already told you—”

“I mean *here*, at this party,” he grits out, his mouth near my ear as he uncaps a bottle of something and pours himself a drink.

“Easton brought me.”

“Did he?” he asks casually enough, but I’m not stupid. He’s pissed and he wants me to know about it. “And why would he do that after we told him to leave your ass at home?”

“Maybe he likes me better than you,” I mutter. I know it’s not a good idea to provoke him, but I guess old habits really do die hard. “Katy always did.”

As soon as her name leaves my lips, he makes me regret it. He doesn’t seem to care who might be watching as he grabs a fistful of my hair and drags me outside, throwing me around like a rag doll. My back hits the marble wall I was leaning against before, the cup of water slipping from my hand and soaking us both. He doesn’t seem to care about that either, his huge body crowding mine as he forces me to meet his eyes.

He’s so close.

Too close.

What the fuck is he doing?

“Don’t act surprised, party boy,” he taunts. “You just asked me for this. Plain and fucking simple.”

Maybe he’s right.

I’ve earned his wrath, after all. It’s only fair he gives it to me.

I don’t even try to fight him off when he digs his fingers into my throat, making me choke and cough. He doesn’t let me look away from his eyes, and now that the initial shock of seeing him again has worn off, I...

Fuck, I forgot how much it hurts to look at him.

His thumb grazes the edge of my jaw beneath my ear, and I try not to

make a sound as he finds the small scar I got the day he found me sleeping next to Katy's grave on her birthday a couple years ago. I don't remember much about that fight—I was too out of it—but I do know that was the last time he saw me in person before today.

“Did I give you this?” he asks, still thumbing that same spot on my jaw.

I nod once, and a hint of a smirk touches his lips.

He likes that.

He's still holding me in place, but he's not hurting me anymore. Somehow this is worse, especially when I see the flash of amusement in his eyes, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking right now.

It's never mattered how hard I try to hide it. He's always been able to see me for what I am.

Broken. Pathetic. *Gay*.

My dick is hard for him, and I know he can feel it through our clothes. My breath quickens when he pushes his thigh between my legs, his mouth lowering until it's just an inch away from mine, giving me a taste of something I'll never have.

“You want more?” he whispers.

More scars or more...him?

I don't know what he means, but I find myself nodding anyway.

Whatever it is, I'll take it.

Slowly, he keeps hold of my face and wedges his free hand down between us, boldly palming my cock through my jeans. He strokes me through the material, and a shocked sound leaves my throat before I can stop it, my hips automatically bucking into his.

“Fuck,” I breathe against his lips. “*Fuck—*”

Something happens then, and he turns to stone against me. His head pulls back and he stares at my mouth, down at the fallen cup next to my feet, then back up to my face, his jaw locked as he studies every inch of me. I blink at him in confusion, my brows lowering at the sudden return of his anger. Not that it ever left, but this feels different. He looks like he's in pain, his light brown eyes glassing up as he searches mine.

“What...” he trails off, and then my eyes start to water too, the realization of what he's thinking carving off yet another piece of my heart. “What was in that drink?”

“Nate.”

“Fuck you, Xavi,” he says, his nostrils flaring as he backs away from me.

“*Fuck you.*”

“Yeah,” I whisper to myself, closing my eyes so I don’t have to watch him walk away and shove his way back into the house. “Fuck me.”

“I think I’m drunk.”

“You think?” I laugh, following behind Easton as he walks upstairs, bumping into the railing as he goes.

“Are *you* drunk?” he asks.

“Nah, man, I’m good.”

He hums and wraps his arm around my neck, pulling me into him until his cheek touches mine. Not for the first time tonight, I find myself wondering whether he’s just super friendly or if he’s into guys. I know he had a girlfriend, but he could be bi.

I wonder if he’s hooked up with Nate before...

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” I answer.

“Shit. I’m a bad influence, aren’t I?”

I smile and shake my head, not bothering to tell him he’s nothing compared to the real bad influences I’ve met over the years. The shitty people I used to call friends, same ones who got me hooked on cocaine and pills when I was barely fourteen years old.

“You’re underage,” he teases, his lips against my temple, and I swear I’m not imagining it this time.

I think he might actually be into me.

“How old are you?” I ask him.

“Twenty one.”

Same as Nate, I think to myself, because every thought I have tonight seems to roll right back around to him. I can’t get him out of my head. The way he was watching my every move at the party. The way it felt to be trapped between his body and the wall.

The way he looked at me when he realized I was sober...

Just as I think it, I round the corner to find the devil himself leaning back against my door frame. He looks tired, his eyes unfocused as he lifts the bottle of vodka he’s holding to his mouth. I haven’t seen him since he left me

outside earlier. Carter and Easton were still in the kitchen when I went back inside, but Nate was nowhere to be found. I didn't know where he went or who he was with, but now I'm assuming he came back here to get trashed on that bottle all by himself.

Easton trips on his own feet and laughs at himself, his arm still locked around my neck, lips on my face. I try to hold him up with my arm around his waist, but I don't think I'm helping much considering he's almost twice my size. He opens his mouth to say something to me, shutting it just as quick when his eyes find Nate's. The two of them seem to have some kind of wordless conversation for a second, and then Easton sighs and lets me go.

"I don't think he likes me very much tonight," he whispers in my ear, grinning as he walks backward into his bedroom. "Night, boys."

I don't mean to, but I find myself grinning as well, awkwardly dipping my head down to hide it. My face feels hot all of a sudden, and I hope Nate's too out of it to notice.

He's not.

He cocks his head at me and gestures to Easton's closed door with the vodka bottle. "Really?"

"What?" I ask, risking a glance at him from beneath my lashes. "I like him."

"You're pathetic."

My shoulders drop, and I avert my eyes, folding my arms over my chest as I stare at the floor next to his feet.

Ouch.

"Don't think you're something special. He's like that with everyone. At first," he adds cryptically. "I'd lock your door at night if I were you."

I laugh lightly at that, forcing myself to look up at him. "You make jokes now?"

"I'm not kidding."

We stare at each other a moment, neither of us moving or saying anything as we listen to Easton banging into something and cursing inside his room.

"What are you doing out here, Nate?" I ask softly, watching as he takes another drink.

My body inches forward like it wants to go to him—to try and comfort him or some shit—but I force myself to stay put, leaving a safe distance between us.

His brows dip and he looks around, like he's only just realized where he

is.

Blocking my door.

Waiting for me...

He says nothing, so I push a little harder. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to leave.”

But I’m already shaking my head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

I hesitate, unsure how to answer that.

“Xavi, I swear to god,” he warns. “Move the fuck out—”

“Or what?” I sigh. “You’ll kill me? Kick my ass again? I’ve heard it all before, man.”

“I mean it this time.”

“No,” I tell him, lifting my chin up in defiance. “You don’t.”

I’m not sure why I’m so confident about that. I just am.

His brown eyes darken, and I swear I can see the thrill in there as he steps closer, invading my space and smearing the tip of the bottle over my bottom lip. “You sure you wanna play this game with me, party boy?”

I flinch and turn my head away, holding my breath as he uses the bottle to bring my face right back to his.

There can’t be more than a drop of vodka on my mouth, but still.

It’s too much.

I quickly wipe it away with my sleeve, and he shakes his head at me in anger.

That was a test, and I’m pretty sure I failed.

“Lock your door,” he reminds me, and then he’s gone.

XAVI

I creep through the empty backyard and look at the house over my shoulder, chewing the inside of my cheek when I see Bryson West's parents standing in their kitchen. I was only here a few nights ago, but it looks like a completely different house than it did then, spotlessly clean and free of all the drunk college kids and the drugs, the bodies dry fucking each other on those very surfaces they're leaning on.

It would probably be easier to do this when they're not home, but Katy wouldn't have done this half assed. She'd have loved the thrill and the fear of being caught.

Stripping my clothes and boxers off, I set them down on the table Nate was sitting on the other night, shaking my head when I start to think about him again.

Stop it, Xavi.

This isn't about him.

Pulling the blindfold over my eyes, I cover my dick and balls with my hand and jump headfirst into the heated pool. Coming up for air, I manage to swim two lengths before I hear shouts coming from beside me. It's Bryson's parents, probably pissed as hell to find some naked stranger making himself at home in their fancy ass pool.

"Hey!" Mr. West barks. "What the hell are you doing?!"

I swing my head the opposite way and dive toward the edge, hauling myself up and out before I make a run for it. I don't get very far before I crash into a chair, bust my knees and fall on my ass, scrambling to get away from the hands trying to grab at my legs.

“You little prick.”

I kick him away and stand up. Feeling around for the table, I find my clothes and ball them up against my chest, hiding myself as much as possible as I sprint across the yard. I crash into something else and groan, laughing to myself as I clutch my aching ribs.

Jesus, how did she make this look so easy?

I’m running blind with my heart in my damn throat. By some miracle, I manage to find the wall I climbed to get in here and toss my clothes over the top, pulling myself up and quickly hopping down on the other side. I can still hear them both yelling at me as I snatch my stuff off the ground, rip the blindfold off, and run back to my bike parked on the side of the road down the street. I’m freezing and my teeth are chattering like crazy, but the adrenaline keeps me going as I shove my clothes back on and swing my leg over the seat, still laughing to myself as I speed away. I drive for a couple minutes with no destination in mind, just far enough away that I’m sure Bryson’s dad won’t catch up and beat the fuck out of me. Once I’ve pulled over, I dry my hands and pull out the list I brought with me, uncapping my red marker pen with my teeth as I find task number five.

Skinny dip in a stranger’s pool.

Crossing it out, I refold the paper and put it away, chest heaving as I swipe the wet hair from my forehead. Shoving my helmet on, I can almost hear Katy’s hysterical laughter in my ears as I start the engine and drive back to her brother’s house.

Being blind must suck.

My knees and elbows hurt, my ass and ribs feel bruised, and the inside of my thigh is dripping with blood. I didn’t notice it at the time, but I must have cut myself on something when I climbed back over the wall.

Limping into the kitchen, I grab an ice pack from the freezer and head back to the stairs, jumping out of my skin when Nate walks in through the front door.

“Jesus, fuck, you scared me.”

He stops in his tracks when he sees me, his eyes narrowing as he takes in my disheveled form.

He hasn't said a word to me since that first night in the hall. I don't even think he's looked at me once in the last three days. But he's looking now.

I'm not sure whether I should love or hate it.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I answer, probably a little too quickly.

He cocks his head and grabs the strap of the gym bag on his shoulder, eyes never leaving mine as he drops it on the floor. He's wearing a black pair of shorts and one of those tight, long sleeved gym shirts that clings to his skin, showing off every hard dip and curve of his upper body.

Don't look at his abs.

Don't look.

Don't—

I look, and he stalks toward me, lifting my chin up with his finger and making a point to close my open mouth.

Asshole.

"Why are you wet?"

My cheeks heat, and I fight a shiver as his warm fingers make their way across my icy cold face.

"I went in the pool."

Even though I'm not technically lying—I did go in *a* pool, just not *his* pool—I think he knows I'm hiding something. He doesn't call me out on it though.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asks instead, his eyebrows pulled down as he dips his head down to my leg.

I blink at him, confused at his concern for me. "Do you care?"

"Not even a little bit," he whispers, a wicked smirk on his lips as he shoves my face away and leans over to grab his bag. He shoulder checks me on his way to the stairs, almost knocking me over with the force of it. "Clean the blood off my fucking floor."

I catch myself on the railing, waiting for the sound of his bedroom door closing before I grab a rag from the kitchen and do as he told me to.

NATE

He doesn't lock his fucking door.

Every night since he got here, I've tried the handle and found it unlocked, sneaking into his bedroom to watch him sleep. Right now, I'm standing by the open window, smoking the cigarette I stole from the pack on his nightstand.

He doesn't even smoke.

I've seen him ripping up cigarettes and tossing them into the trash when he thinks no one's looking, but I haven't seen him actually light one up and take a hit.

I grit my teeth and turn my head to blow my smoke outside, remembering the first time I caught him and my sister behind the garage when they were fifteen, the little punks, laughing and whispering to each other as they passed a cigarette back and forth. I lost my shit and kicked him out of the house, but all he did was laugh. He was probably thinking *this is nothing, man. You should see what else I'm gonna get her hooked on.*

I wish I'd killed him.

I wish I'd have known back then so I could have done more to stop him.

I wish he was dead instead of her.

Flicking the roach outside, I close the window and move over to sit on his bed next to him, silently pulling the blanket down to reveal his body. Lying on his side with his leg hooked up, his lean arms are wrapped around his pillow, his dark hair hiding his face from me. He's wearing a tiny pair of shorts and a black, short sleeved crop top, the hem resting just below his sternum. I've caught him wearing skimpy little outfits like this a couple times

before, but only ever when it was just him and Katy. He'd never wear something like this in public. God forbid his dickhead father finds out he's got a queer little fairy boy for a son.

I graze my fingers over his stomach and up to his chest, stopping at the barbell I feel on his nipple. He's got both pierced, I realize, and I hate it.

I hate how hot he is.

I hate how hot he makes *me* as I swirl my finger over the metal.

He doesn't flinch, so I move my hand a little lower, not caring if he wakes up and catches me touching him. He sleeps like a fucking corpse, so it's not likely.

Grabbing his knee, I carefully spread his legs and squint into the darkness, studying the small bruises all over him, glaring at the fresh cut I find on his inner thigh.

I don't know what happened to him tonight, but I want to.

I want to know everything.

Lowering my head, I look up at his face as I run my lips over the soft flesh next to the wound, a low noise escaping my throat as I rub my hard dick beneath my sweats.

Fuck.

I don't know what's gotten into me.

This hate inside me feels like a living, breathing thing, and it wants Xavi Hart. Now that he's within reach, it wants to take him and own him, to pin him down and punish him for what he's done, to make him cry and beg for me to make it stop.

He suddenly hisses, and I look down, releasing him when I realize I was digging my fingers into the cut, hard enough to make it bleed again.

Still sleeping, he groans and rolls over onto his other side, knocking his knee into my head before he curls up with his back to me. I lean over him and chuck the blanket on the floor out of his reach, hoping he freezes to death.

I should leave now, but I don't.

I want to *know*, damn it.

Grabbing his phone off the charger on the nightstand, I unlock it with the passcode I guess on the first try. Katy's birthday. Same as mine.

Opening his recent call list, I scroll through and try to figure out if he was with anyone tonight. Of course the only people he's talked to in the last week are his dad, Carter, and a single call from Easton. He doesn't have any of his own friends, the fucking loser.

I go to his messages next, but there's nothing exciting there. The only one of interest to me is from his dad. He texted him this afternoon but Xavi never replied.

DAD:

Don't forget you have an appointment with your therapist tomorrow at nine a.m. Do not be late.

I scoff and open his alarm app, turning off the one set for eight in the morning. I put his phone back but don't put it on charge, picking up his wallet and snooping through that as a last resort. There's nothing in here either. Just a little cash and...

I blink and drop my elbows on my knees, my head lowered as I look at the pictures of him and my baby sister. My happy, grinning, *laughing* baby sister. Tears fill my eyes before I can stop it, and I lock my jaw, turning my face toward the boy sleeping next to me.

"I hate you so fucking much."

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NATE

“G od fucking damn it.”

My lips twitch at the panic in his voice, my hands wrapped around my coffee cup as I sit next to Frankie at the kitchen island. Carter’s sitting opposite us, shirtless and hungover, head lowered as he inhales the breakfast I made this morning.

I couldn’t sleep last night. When I can’t sleep, I clean. And when there’s nothing left to clean, I cook as much food as I can so I can clean all over again.

My friends aren’t usually up before noon when we don’t have classes to get to, but every time I cook, it’s like they sense the food and come running for it.

Xavi finally appears at the bottom of the stairs. I watch through the doorway as he paces and rips his hands through his hair. It’s after nine already. His phone keeps ringing in his pocket, but he’s ignoring it. He looks a little crazed, barely sparing the three of us a glance as he walks into the kitchen and crouches down to look beneath the freezer.

“What’s wrong with you?” Carter asks around a mouthful of bacon.

“I—” Xavi stops and does a double take at me, his face falling as he slowly rises back up to his feet. “Nate...”

“Party boy.”

He curses and bangs the freezer door with the edge of his fist, making my sleepy girl best friend jump beside me. With her fork halfway to her mouth, Frankie lifts her eyes and looks between me and Xavi, not moving a muscle. Carter’s mouth stretches into a slow grin, but I don’t look away from the

pissy little bitch behind him, dropping back in my seat as I watch the emotions flick across his face. I can almost hear the thoughts running through his head as he tries to fit the pieces together, his teeth grinding when he figures out what I've done.

That right there, I suddenly realize.

That's what I want.

I've barely gotten a reaction out of him before now. Every time I knock him down, it's like he's content to just lie there and take it.

Not this time though.

This time, he looks fucking *pissed*, and I like it.

I want more of it.

Leaning back a little more, I twist in my seat and widen my legs.

Come here.

I don't say it out loud, but his feet still move toward me like he heard the command. Slowly, he walks over until he's standing between my open thighs, fingers twitching restlessly at his sides.

We stare at each other for a few beats, and then he snaps, his small hands grabbing for my sweats to search my pockets. I snatch his wrists and twist, making him cry out as I pin them behind his back. With my other hand, I grab the hem of his shirt and pull until his chest bumps mine, my knuckles brushing the soft, warm skin just above his waistband.

Instead of fighting me back, he lets out a sigh and melts against me, a single, defeated tear slipping over his cheek as his body goes limp in my arms.

Fucking pathetic.

"I know you have them," he breathes out, his pulse beating fast against the side of his neck.

"Have *what*?" I ask, daring him with my eyes to say it.

He doesn't—not in front of Frankie and Carter—which is the only reason I don't shove my fist into that black eye of his and make him cry for real.

"Please," he whispers, just for me. "I'll do anything you want, just... please, Nate."

"Anything, huh?"

He nods, and I can tell he means it.

"What if I told you to pack your shit and get out of my house?"

"I'll do it," he replies. No hesitation. "I'll leave."

My eyes narrow, and I tug on his body again, bringing him in until his

face is right next to mine. Reaching into my sweats, I pull out the strip of photos I stole from his wallet last night, discreetly sliding it into the front pocket of his jeans. He sighs again, relieved, and I run my nose over the scar on his jaw line, enjoying the way he shivers against me.

I don't tell him to leave.

"*Lock your door,*" I whisper slowly, ensuring he understands this time.

He pulls back a bit and blinks at me, nodding mutely as he removes himself from my grip. I let him go, watching his back as he walks out of the kitchen and lifts his phone up to his ear, almost barreling into Easton as he goes. Easton grabs his sides to steady him, and Xavi mutters an embarrassed apology, dipping his head to hide his warm face as he walks out the front door.

Easton comes in and grabs himself a plate, still half asleep and smiling like a dumbass, his steps faltering when he catches the glare I'm throwing his way.

"You're *still* mad at me about the party the other night?" he grumbles, snatching a piece of bacon and tearing off a bite with his teeth. "I said I was sorry."

"I told you not to bring him."

"Carter told me you were kidding."

"Carter's a lying motherfucker."

Carter snorts, and I stand up to place my empty mug in the dishwasher, grabbing the back of his head and shoving it into his plate on my way out. He just laughs, shaking his head at me with that stupid, knowing grin still plastered across his face.

Later that night, I stare up at the ceiling and will myself to sleep, to forget about him and his crop tops and the piercings on his body, that damn cut on his inner thigh I can't stop thinking about.

Just go to sleep, Nate.

But I can't.

I have to know.

Climbing out of bed, I throw on some sweats and walk out into the hallway, my steps silent as I adjust the drawstring on my waistband.

Grabbing the handle on the door next to mine, I push down, my jaw ticking when it doesn't budge.

He locked it.

He actually locked it.

I don't know why I'm pissed all of a sudden.

This is what I wanted, isn't it?

So why does it feel like I just lost something?

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XAVI

College fucking sucks.

Classes started today, and I'm already regretting my decision to come here and try to get back to my life—or what's left of the mess I made of it, at least.

Not only am I a freshman, I'm also the new kid on campus, because I was too much of a fuckup to start in September with everybody else.

It's harder than I thought it'd be, having no friends and no desire to make new ones.

I'm studying business, just like my dad's always wanted me to. I've always wished I was good at something else—*anything* else just to spite him—but I'm not, so business it is.

I'm finally done for the day, but I'm not going back to the house yet. It feels wrong, being there alone. Partly because it's not mine, but also because the place is huge and kind of creepy. It freaks me out, feeling like I'm being watched all the time. Like there's something waiting around every corner, waiting to jump out on me and scratch my eyes out.

I shiver and wrap my arms around myself, keeping my head down as I make my way through the crowd and down the stairs. I planned on going to the library to study after class got out, but I'm not feeling it anymore. I haven't eaten since last night, so I decide to walk across the courtyard and grab something from the coffee shop next to the music building.

My chest aches when I spot the group of girls around my age walking by me with their instruments. If things were different, Katy could have been right there with them.

All her life, all she wanted to do was sing. And she was damn good at it too. She had this raspy, powerful voice that sent chills down my spine every time I heard it. I told her every chance I got that she'd make it someday, and I would be right there with her, always.

God, I fucking miss her.

I push through the door of the coffee shop and step inside. It's busy in here, but the line moves surprisingly quickly. It doesn't take long before I'm holding a steaming hot cup of coffee and a chocolate chip muffin. I thank the barista and turn around, freezing when I find Frankie sitting at a table in the corner with a guy and a girl I haven't seen before. Of course the only empty table in here is the one right next to hers. I consider bailing, but she's already caught me, one of those perfect little eyebrows of hers raised in a silent challenge. I'll look like an idiot *and* a pussy if I run out of here now.

Walking over, I drop down into one of the seats and take the lid off my coffee, scrolling through my phone as I blow on it to cool it. I try to mind my own business, but it's kind of hard when I can hear everything they're saying.

"Do you know him?" the girl asks, talking to Frankie, I'm guessing, but I don't hear her say anything back. "Damn, he's fine. Does he have a girlfriend?"

"He can hear you, big mouth," the guy mock whispers, and a small smile creeps across my lips as I bite off a piece of my muffin.

"Hey. Emo boy," she calls, and I turn my head to look her way, trying not to laugh when she smirks and wiggles her brows at me. "Hi."

I wave and lick the chocolate from my lips before I answer. "Hi."

"Oh fuck me, he's adorable." She feigns a groan, grabbing her wallet before she moves to stand behind me, leaning over with her hands on the back of my chair. "I'm Taylor."

"I'm Xavi."

"Can I have your number, Xavi?"

"Um..."

Shit.

I'm not about to tell her I'm gay, but I don't want to lead her on either. Even if she's fucking with me, which she probably is, I have no idea what to do or say right now.

I peek at Frankie, who's simply watching us as she sips her coffee, one leg crossed over the other, wearing these black tights and heeled boots that remind me of Katy. She didn't dress like that often, especially not in front of

her family because they would have had a fit, but I know she would have eventually if she'd lived long enough to tell them to fuck right off. We both would have. Me in my crop tops and chokers and her in her fishnets and chunky boots. Two little fuck-ups against the world.

Taylor scoffs behind me, and it's only now I realize I'm still staring at Frankie's legs.

"No fair." Taylor pouts, misreading the situation completely. "You always get them first."

Frankie shrugs noncommittally, still saying nothing. Taylor laughs goodheartedly before she and the guy walk over to the counter to get more coffees. Ears burning, I go back to my own coffee and continue eating my muffin, not missing Frankie's stare on the side of my face. I can tell she's got questions, but to her credit, she doesn't ask a single one of them.

"I was told to stay away from you," she says, breaking the awkward silence between us.

I frown at that, turning my head just enough to meet her gaze. "Maybe you should listen."

"Maybe," she echoes, running a long, black fingernail over the edge of her cup.

"What's he told you?" I ask, unable to help myself, but she just cocks her head at me.

Right.

Whether he's told her nothing or everything, there's no way she's about to sit there and repeat any of it to me. I barely know this girl, but I can tell she's loyal as fuck.

I still can't figure out what's going on between her and Nate—whether they're just friends, fuck buddies, or something more—and I hate it.

I hate how jealous I am of her.

Because whatever they are, she gets to have him in a way that I don't. She *knows* him in a way I never will. I met him first, but he and I might as well be strangers.

Frankie and her friends leave soon after that, and I make a point not to watch them go. I take my headphones out of my pocket and place them inside my ears. Sipping my coffee, I pick a random playlist on Spotify and hit shuffle, shutting out everyone around me and hoping they leave me alone.

Alone.

Just like always.

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NATE

“**S**ince when do you venture all the way over here?” Frankie asks, grinning at me over her shoulder as I follow her into the coffee shop.

“Shut up.”

She chuckles and moves up to the counter to place her order. Looking around, I find Xavi sitting at his usual table by the window, wearing a dark gray hoodie with the hood pulled up over his head. I force my face to remain cold and impassive as I watch him be, enjoying the way he shifts in his seat and pulls his sleeves down over his knuckles. His eyes crinkle at the corners when they find me, like he’s trying not to wince.

My face is a punishment for him. And if he insists on sticking around, I’ve got no problem going out of my way to make him look at it every chance I get.

“*Nate*,” Frankie says, probably not for the first time.

“Hmm?”

“What do you want?”

“Whatever you’re having is fine.”

She raises a brow at that. “A pumpkin spice latte?” she asks, and I scrunch my nose in disgust. “That’s what I thought.” She laughs. “He’ll have a cappuccino.”

Once we’ve got our drinks, we sit side by side at one of the empty tables in the corner, both of us people watching for a while as we warm our hands with our cups. We don’t say anything, but it’s not awkward. It’s easy with Frankie. Comfortable.

A group of people rush inside the shop, relieved to be out of the cold. I

don't miss the way the black-haired guy at the back of the group turns his head to look at Xavi, chewing his lip as he takes in his form.

"Does that happen everywhere he goes?" Frankie asks, subtly tipping her chin at Xavi. "Girls and guys?"

I nod, my hands clenching into fists on the table.

"He has no idea, does he?"

"Not a fucking clue."

It's always been this way. Even back in high school, the kid was oblivious to all the attention he got. He's oblivious now too, his head lowered as he tries to pretend he's not peeking up at me every five seconds to check what I'm doing. I like that I'm his sole focus, that he's clearly jealous of me and Frankie, but at the same time, that sad, broken look in his eyes makes me want to throttle him. All I can think about is forcing him to his knees, digging my thumbs into his jugular, and shoving my cock down his throat so hard he chokes on it. Taking him as hard and as roughly as I can and giving him something to really be sad about.

"Jesus, the way you look at him sometimes," Frankie mutters. "I wish someone would look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like they wanna fight me and fuck me at the same time." She smirks, and I smirk right back, leaning into her space and taking her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "You hate it, don't you?" she whispers against my lips, playing along like the good friend she is. "The way you want him. It pisses you off."

"Right now, the only thing pissing me off is you," I tell her, digging my fingertips into her skin, but not hard enough to hurt. Never as hard as I'd do it to Xavi.

"That's not very nice."

"I'm not a very nice person, Frank."

"I know," she says. "That's why you're my favorite."

A small smile touches my lips, and I tilt my head to the side, kissing the corner of her mouth. "Is he gone?"

"Mhmm."

My smile slips free, and I kiss her cheek this time. She playfully pushes my face away, and I drop back in my seat, resting my arm on the back of her chair. Lifting my coffee up to take a sip, I laugh under my breath as I watch Xavi storm off through the courtyard.

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XAVI

I t's the first basketball game of the new year tonight. As usual, the stands are filled with people, the excitement rolling off the crowd as they watch the Hawthorne boys move around the court. They're undefeated this season, well on their way to winning the championship for the fourth year in a row. Me and everybody else in this gym know they have Nate to thank for that. He might be a bad-tempered, miserable asshole, but he's fucking good at what he does. *Really* fucking good.

His black and red jersey clings to his body like glue as he bounces the ball and wipes the sweat from his forehead. I stick to the shadows like I always do, hood pulled low over my face as I sit at the back with my elbows on my thighs, my hands linked together between my knees.

I know it's practically a sure win—they're up by thirteen points with less than four minutes left on the clock—but I'm still nervous, my eyes constantly cutting between Nate and the scoreboard as I dig my fingers into my knuckles.

He doesn't know I still come to his games. Katy started dragging me along with her back in high school so I could tell her what was happening. Even after she died and I was drowning myself in my own misery, I kept coming. He might not have seen me since that day at the cemetery, but I've been seeing him. Every game for the last two years—except for the twelve weeks I was in rehab—I've been right here, watching his heart break with every shot, that light in his eyes fading more and more as time went on. It wasn't long before the light went out completely and never came back.

He used to love it down there. I know he did. But he doesn't get excited

about it anymore. He doesn't celebrate on the court after a win—or off the court, as far as I know. It makes him look like a dick, to his teammates, his coach, and his little fan club, but I get it. Why does he get to live his dream when Katy doesn't get to live hers? It's how I feel too. About everything. Getting sober and coming to college... listening to her favorite songs... life in general...

It's not fucking fair.

The final buzzer sounds just as Nate slams the ball through the hoop, and then the crowd around me are on their feet, popcorn and drinks flying everywhere as they shout his name over and over. Carter, Easton, and the rest of the team are all grinning, jumping around and slapping each other on the back after yet another win, but not one of them tries to touch their captain. They know by now to leave him be and let him do his own thing.

Nate walks toward the edge of the court, and the coach grabs him, smiling proudly as he squeezes his shoulder and leans in to say something to him. Nate nods repeatedly, but his attention is elsewhere, only half listening, by the looks of it. Even from all the way up here, I can see the sharp lines of his jaw, the small tick there as if he's grinding his teeth together. He's been doing that a lot tonight, looking up at the stands...

Is he looking for me?

Not possible.

Shaking my head, I turn around and sneak out of the gym. Once I get to the parking lot, I get on my bike and make the hour drive to the cemetery in my hometown, sitting down at Katy's grave to give her a play by play of the game, just like I always do.

When I get back to the house later that night, the driveway is full of cars and there's a raging afterparty going on inside. I take my helmet off and walk through the open front door, stepping back when a blonde girl wearing a white bikini almost runs into me, squealing out a laugh as Easton chases her.

"Hey," Easton calls to me, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "Don't even think about it."

"What?"

"All you do is mope around in your room. Go have some fucking fun for

once.”

“I don’t *mope*.”

He shakes his head at me with a smile, tipping his chin toward the den. “There’s a girl in there who won’t stop asking about you.”

“What girl?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, burying his nose into the blonde girl’s neck. “She’s tight with Frankie. Brown hair, big mouth, no filter. Her name’s Tia or something like that.”

“Taylor,” I correct him, remembering the girl from the coffee shop the other day.

“Yeah, her,” he says, wiggling his brows. “Go get her, *emo boy*.”

My eyes widen slightly, and he laughs at the look on my face, guiding the girl he’s holding back toward the pool with his hands on her ass and his lips on her chest.

I chew the inside of my cheek and glance between the den and the kitchen, choosing the kitchen. Despite what Easton said about me having some fun, I don’t plan on staying down here long. These aren’t my friends, and this isn’t my scene anymore. I just want to see Nate, to know what he’s doing and where his head is at after the game.

I sidestep my way around a group of people standing by the island, recognizing a few of the boys from the team passing out tequila shots. I shake my head when they offer me one, grabbing myself a Coke from the fridge and twisting the cap off the top.

Nate’s not in here with them, but as I make my way across the hall, it doesn’t take me long to find him. He’s sitting in the corner of the den, a far-away look in his eyes as he lifts a glass of clear liquid up to his lips. He looks...sad. Tired. Lonely even though he’s surrounded by people. And it breaks my fucking heart.

I don’t move from the doorway, not wanting him or that Taylor girl to know I’m here, but of course it doesn’t work out that way. As if sensing my presence, Nate rolls his head on the back of the couch, watching me as he swallows his drink and pours himself another.

Always watching...

A gorgeous brunette girl—one of the cheerleaders, I think—leans over the back of the couch to say something to him, and he nods as he reaches back for her hand and guides her around, pulling her into his lap. My stupid heart sinks, and I break eye contact first, freezing up when two muscular

arms come around me from behind.

“Did you have fun watching us tonight?” Carter asks, his breath tickling my ear. “I know you were there. You’re always there, aren’t you, Xav?”

“You don’t know shit.”

“Sure I don’t.”

I try to maneuver myself out of his grip, but he doesn’t let me get far, his fingers wrapping around my arm as he drags me out of the room. I stumble as he pulls me back toward the entryway, up the stairs and down the hall until we get to the bedrooms.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my stomach twisting with nerves.

Is he sending me to bed or *taking* me to bed?

Easton told me upstairs is off-limits when they throw parties, so there’s no one up here, but still. Anyone could wander up and see him with his hands all over me.

“Helping you,” he whispers, caging me in against the wall. “Just relax, baby boy. Trust me. This won’t take long.”

“Carter, stop.”

“That’s not what you said last time,” he teases, louder than before. “Remember how I made you come so good you cried? I can do it again if you want.”

Embarrassment courses through me as I remember the night he’s talking about. The night I almost offed myself on the edge of that cliff three months ago.

His hands grab my waist, and I’m about to fucking punch him, but I don’t get the chance before he’s being yanked away from me by the back of his head, his ass hitting the floor with a crash as his best friend punches him instead.

“Jesus, Nate,” I hiss, eyes wide as I look down at the blood dripping from Carter’s nose.

“You fucked him,” he says as he walks right into me, his chest bumping mine.

“I...”

“When, Carter?” he bites out, and it’s only now I realize he’s not talking to me, even though his eyes haven’t left mine yet.

“Dude, will you chill?” Carter laughs as he sits up, catching the blood in his palm. “I didn’t touch him until after he was eighteen.”

“After my fucking sister died,” he growls, turning away from me like he’s

about to go for him a second time. “I’m gonna kill you.”

Without thinking, I reach out for him and fist the front of his shirt, pulling him back until he’s against me again. His nostrils flare as he glares down at me, his hands clenched into fists on the wall on either side of my head.

It’s probably not a good idea to touch him right now, not when he’s this out of it, but I don’t care. I want his attention on me—just me. Fuck Carter and his stupid fucking games.

“Just let him go,” I say quietly. “Please.”

His glare deepens, but he surprisingly does as I ask, neither of us moving as Carter stands up and smugly brushes the imaginary dirt off his chest. “You’re welcome,” he mouths to me, winking as he disappears around the corner.

I sneer at him before looking up at Nate, staring into his bloodshot eyes as his hands move down to my waist. He grabs me there like Carter did just minutes ago, only harder. I try not to moan at the contact, my heart beating like crazy in my chest.

“I could have punched him myself, you know?”

He breathes out a laugh, but it’s not a nice one. He’s laughing *at* me, not with me. “Oh, yeah?” he asks. “And why would you have done that?”

“Because I don’t want him.”

He says nothing for a second, his grip on my waist tightening as he stares at my mouth. “What *do* you want, party boy?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know.”

His forehead touches mine, and I curl my fingers into his shirt, bracing myself for whatever comes next. Just when I think he’s about to do something crazy, like kiss me—or hit me—a rough, broken sound leaves his throat, and he tears his face away from mine. “*Fuck.*” He looks disgusted. With himself or me, I don’t know. Probably a little of both.

He suddenly snatches the Coke from my left hand and glares at it, launching it down the hallway as hard as he can. I jump when he faces me again, swaying on his feet a bit as he grabs two handfuls of my hair and yanks my head back, making me wince.

Shit.

Shit, he looks mad.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

I don’t know what I was thinking.

“You’re scared,” he says.

“You’re drunk,” I say back.

But that’s not the problem.

The problem is I’m *not*. I’m sober and he hates it. He doesn’t understand it and it’s killing him.

“Tell me why, Xavi,” he says, his voice full of pain and torment as his eyes flick between mine. “Why do you get a second chance? Why do you get to live while she’s buried in the fucking dirt? It’s not fucking fair.”

I swallow, remembering how I thought that exact same thing just a few hours ago.

“I know,” I whisper, barely audible over the crack in my voice. “I’m sorry.”

“Just tell me why,” he repeats, losing his temper. “Why do you get to be better?”

“It’s not like that. I...” I shake my head. “I hate myself for what I did to her, Nate. What happened to Katy...I know it’s my fault. I didn’t quit the drugs because I wanted to turn my life around after she died. I did it because they make me feel...”

“*What?!*” he shouts, making me jump again.

“Nothing,” I choke out, sniffing as a stray tear falls over my cheek. “They make me feel nothing, okay? Not doing them makes me feel it all. All the pain and the guilt and the fucking misery. I’m sober because I deserve it. Because it hurts more.”

He blinks at that, his gaze following the tear as it drops off my chin. “You wanna hurt?”

I nod, my vision blurring, and a slow smirk touches his full lips, right before he pulls my face up and crashes his mouth into mine.

NATE

I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I'm too drunk to think twice about it. I want him beneath me and I'm done pretending otherwise. At least for right now.

Without breaking the kiss, I shove him into my room and slam the door behind me. My teeth latch onto his bottom lip as I walk him over to my bed, sucking on his lip ring the way I've thought about doing since the first time I saw it on him.

That was years ago.

Fucking *years* I've wanted this.

He holds on to my neck for balance as I pop the button on his jeans, pushing them down over the tight, round globes of his ass. His dick is as hard as mine is, our lower bodies rutting against each other as we kiss like wild animals.

"Nate," he rasps. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I still don't know, but I don't feel like telling him that.

Instead of answering him, I pull the zipper of his hoodie down and shove it over his shoulders. "Take it off," I demand, my hands going back to his jeans.

He obeys and strips his t-shirt off as well, tossing it on the floor before running his fingers through the hair at the back of my head. It tingles where he touches me, and I fight a shiver, licking into his mouth to get to his tongue. He gives it to me, tipping his head back with a moan when I rub his dick with my hand over his boxers.

"More," he pleads, and I shake my head at him, squeezing his ass with

my free hand as I tease my thumb over the wet tip.

“Shut up and take what I give you.”

He whimpers, grunting when I shove him back and push him down on my bed. I remove his jeans and boxers and toss them onto the pile of clothes on the floor, pausing when I get a proper look at the piercings in his nipples and his leaking cock resting on his lower abdomen. He’s bigger than I thought he’d be, longer than even me and just as thick.

I raise a brow at him, and he grins like the cocky little demon he is, leaning up on one elbow as he gives himself a slow, teasing stroke. “You just gonna stand there eye-fucking me all night or you gonna do it for real?”

Grabbing him by his hair, I pull him up to sit on the edge of the mattress. He yelps out in pain, and I push his face into my hip so he can’t see the small hint of a smile on my lips. “I thought I told you to shut up.”

“Make me.”

Unbuttoning my own jeans, I pull my dick out and rub the tip over his soft, slightly flushed cheek. He starts to say something else, but I don’t let him, tilting my hips to shove my cock into his big mouth. I don’t give him a second to get ready. Using my grip on his hair, I pull his head back and forth and fuck myself into him, groaning at the feel of his wet, warm tongue sliding over the underside of my dick. He gags and chokes on it, digging his short nails into my waist. He’s not pushing me away though. He’s trying to pull me closer, *taking* it because he knows he fucking deserves it.

“Little fucker,” I grit out, pushing in deeper until I’m hitting the back of this throat. “Look at me.”

He does, and I almost come right then at the look in his eyes, the tears streaming over his cheeks as I steal all the air from his lungs.

I don’t usually give a shit about getting my dick sucked. With most of the other people I hook up with, I get bored with the foreplay and get it done as quickly as I can. Or just skip it all together. Guy or girl, as long as we both get off quick, I’m happy. But with Xavi...I could stare at his pretty lips stretched around the base of me all night.

I stop moving before I come too soon, my breaths shallow as I run my thumb over the black ring at the edge of his mouth. Gaze locked with mine, he moves his hands around to my ass, a wicked little gleam in his blue eyes as he throats my dick all by himself.

“Fuck,” I choke out, wrapping my fingers around his neck to stop him.

He smirks up at me, and I push him down on his back, crawling up onto

the bed between his legs. He wipes the spit from his mouth with the back of his arm, and I take the second to look down at his naked body. He's small, but not as scrawny as he once was. He's filled out a little over the last couple years, still lean but with more muscle. More dips and ridges I want to sink my tongue into until he's desperate and begging for me.

Next time, I tell myself, blinking the thought away just as quick.

No.

There won't be a next time.

Xavi coughs beneath me, and I loosen my grip on his throat, removing one of my hands to grab a condom and the bottle of lube from my nightstand. Coating my fingers, I reach down between his legs and rub his hole, watching his mouth part as I push the middle one inside him. With my left hand still pinning him down by his neck, he holds on to my wrist, rolling his hips up into me as I finger him open.

Fuck me, he's so hot.

I've always known it, and it pisses me off. Thinking about how many guys have wanted him like this, have *taken* him just like this like he's theirs to take.

He's not fucking theirs.

That familiar anger bleeds into my veins, and I roughly flip him over onto his stomach, shoving his face into the pillow so I don't have to look at it. He catches himself on his elbows, spreading his legs and arching his back to rub his wet hole over my bare dick. My head rolls toward my chest as my body moves to meet his, my thumbs spreading his cheeks as I slide my length back and forth between the crease of his ass. My nostrils flare at how good he feels, my hate and this desperate need for him consuming me all at once. Fresh out of patience, I wipe my fingers on my jeans and tear the condom wrapper open.

"Wait." He looks at me over his shoulder, his cheeks glowing the way they do when he's acting shy or embarrassed about something. "I'm negative. If you want to..."

I cock my head at that, my dick throbbing in my hand when I realize what he wants from me. He wants me to fuck him bare. He wants to feel special, like this isn't just another meaningless hook-up I'll forget about by tomorrow morning.

"You think you mean more to me than the strangers I fuck right here in this bed?" I ask as I roll the condom on, leaning over him until my chest is

pressed against his back. “You don’t.”

His face falls, and I smirk at the hurt in his eyes.

“You think I trust an easy little slut like you?” I taunt him even more, coating myself with lube before I rub the tip over his hole. “Not a chance in hell,” I whisper into his ear.

He cries out when I push into him, gritting his teeth and shoving his face back into the pillow. His tight heat surrounds me, burning me from the inside out, and I swallow the groan creeping up my throat, laughing when he reaches up and tries to yank on the short hair at the top of my head. He’s upset now, trying to hurt me like I hurt him.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard you’re gonna feel me for a week,” I inform him, even though he already knew that. “You ready?”

“Fuck, just... give me a fucking second.”

“You’ve got five.”

He lets out a whine and uncurls his tight fist, lightly raking his nails over my scalp as he takes a few long, deep breaths. I have to fight another groan, pressing my face against the side of his neck to hide the way my body reacts to his.

I could blame it on the fact that I’m drunk, but I’d be a lying motherfucker.

The way I feel about him... that’s all me.

“Time’s up, party boy,” I mumble into his warm flesh.

And then I do exactly what I said I would. I finally let go and fuck him as hard as I can, locking one arm beneath his stomach with the other resting next to his shoulder. He chokes on his own air and tips his head back for me, exposing the erratic pulse thumping beneath his skin. Unable to help myself, I open my mouth and sink my teeth into the spot, fucking loving the way he writhes and moans beneath me as I mark him for all to see. Carter, Easton, Frankie’s horny fucking friend who thinks she’s got a chance at taking a piece of him—they’ll all know who’s been here next time they see him. They’ll know who he belongs to.

“Mine,” I whisper into his neck. “All fucking mine now.”

“Jesus Christ, *Nate*,” he whimpers my name, curling his fingers around the sheet.

“What?”

“I never thought this would happen,” he admits. “Not in a million years.”

“But you wanted it to,” I point out, remembering all the times I caught

him staring at me while he'd be hanging out at my house, the looks he'd give me when I passed him in the halls at school. "You've always wanted this, haven't you, party boy?"

He blushes but nods, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth.

"Is it better than you imagined?"

"Yes."

"Better than my best friend?" I ask, my lip curling with a snarl as I rock into him faster.

"Fuck. Yes," he rushes out, his voice strangled. "So much better."

"Good boy." I bite down on his earlobe, feeling him shiver against me before I pull my dick out of his ass. "Turn around."

He rolls over onto his back and wraps his legs around my hips, eyes hooded as he runs his hands over my chest through my shirt. He's so goddamn sexy, laid out naked and bare beneath me while I'm still fully clothed.

He lifts his ass up, seeking my cock, but I grab his inner thighs and squeeze, pushing him back down into the mattress. Bending over him, I slowly lick his body from the tip of his big dick to the base of his throat, then dip back down to swirl my tongue around the metal in his nipples. He moans loudly and grabs the back of my head to hold me down on him, his other hand sneaking up beneath my shirt to rub my abs. Our sweat slicked bodies slide together as he pulls on the hem, impatiently shoving it up my body and over my head. Probably not a good idea, but I'm too much of an evil bastard to stop him.

Once he's got my shirt off, he tosses it on the floor and spreads his fingers out across my back, hooking them over my shoulders to sink his blunt nails into my flesh. He finds the chain around my neck, just like I knew he would, then freezes, his eyebrows crashing together as he stares at the ring resting on the center of his chest—*his* ring.

His lips part, but no words come out. Then his teary eyes hit mine, and my cock aches with the need to be buried back inside him.

Fuck, I love it when he cries.

He glares like he heard me, quickly reaching for the necklace like he's about to rip it off. I snatch his wrists to stop him, pinning them to the sheet above his head. "Don't touch."

"You son of a bitch," he says through his teeth. "That's mine."

"Not anymore."

Another glare, his breath quickening with a mixture of sorrow and anger. “I hate you.”

I chuckle and press my lips to his, smirking when he locks his jaw and turns his head away. I release his hands and grab his face, pulling him right back to me. “Kiss me back or I’ll make it worse.”

A pained noise leaves his throat, and he opens his mouth, allowing me to suck on his tongue as I reach for my cock. His head falls back when I push back into him, our teeth clashing together as I wrap my hand around his neck and use his ass like it’s my own little fucktoy.

All the nights I watched him sleep, *this* is what I thought about. Pinning him down and taking what I want from him. Making him pay. Making him break. Fucking with his head and his heart and his body all at once. It’s what I crave most in the world. To see him fall apart, piece by piece until there’s nothing left of him.

Shaking like a leaf, he digs his heels into my ass and his fingers into my sides, encouraging me to take him deeper. Knowing he’s close, I slide my hand down between our bodies and wrap it around his dick. He’s leaking all over us both, moaning on every rock of my hips as I hit his sweet spot over and over again.

“Oh my—*God*,” he chokes out. “Shit, Nate.”

“I know,” I say softly, watching his body move as he grinds his ass up, fucking me back. “Fuck. Keep going just like that. You look so fucking hot like this, baby.”

He blinks and stares at me for a second, then he grabs my face and kisses me like he’s starving for me. Our tongues glide together as his cock pulses in my hand, his ass clamping down on my dick so hard I’m seeing fucking stars. He cries out into my mouth and comes all over himself, locking his arms around my neck and his thighs around my waist, clinging to me like he never wants to let go.

I don’t know why that’s what sets me off, but it does.

With our foreheads touching and our moans mixing together, I pull out and get rid of the condom, jerking my release onto his cock and abs, dirtying him up and marking him again. He grins up at me, and I grin back. Looking down between us, I run my thumb through our combined cum and lift it up to his lips, pushing it into his mouth to feed it to him. He licks and sucks on it, swirling his tongue around to make sure he gets it all.

“Dirty little boy,” I tease, pulling my thumb out before kissing him again,

swallowing the taste of us both.

I smooth my hand over his outer thigh as we come down, nuzzling into him and keeping our bodies as close as possible. He lets out a long, tired sigh, his smile slipping slightly as he grazes his fingers over the chain on my collarbone. Softening my eyes, I use my other hand to brush his dark hair from his forehead.

“You still hate yourself?”

He nods, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“Good,” I whisper, feeling him tense beneath me. I tighten my fist in his hair and yank his head back, my mouth pressed against the hard line of his jaw. “Now get the fuck out.”

To be continued...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bethany lives in South Wales with her husband, their six year old son, and their brand new baby boy. She loves books, tea, oversized hoodies, and Machine Gun Kelly, although her husband is still pretty mad about that last one. When she's not writing, she's either daydreaming about all the crazy characters inside her head, reading, or raiding Amazon for pretty paperbacks to hoard.

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LIES OF OMISSION

C. LYMARI

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PREFACE

How much would you be willing to pay for freedom?

To obtain peace, you must first shed blood, but it wasn't always going to be your own.

Freedom came from a mouth filled with lies. A body coated in deception and the hearts of those you trusted the most.

I've learned that freedom wasn't freedom if you lost yourself along the way.

I sighed as the morning light filtered through the high windows. My fingers itched as they tried to reach the pristine skin next to me. It was soft and smooth but also taut and filled with hard edges in all the right places.

A part of me didn't move from fear that the moment I did, *this* would be over. That the fantasy we were currently living would shatter around us. Everything would go to hell today, and it was making me sick. It was still too early in the morning, judging by the sun's rays, but soon the clock would strike eight, and all the walls that had crumbled down last night would let the floodgates in.

Not being able to stand it anymore, I tentatively reached for his hair. It was still messy from how much I kept pulling it last night. A soft moan escaped him, and my cock twitched.

I can get hard at the worst of times: check.

I was really hating myself. Slowly I got out of bed, careful not to disturb him. The floor was a mess, with all of our clothes scattered everywhere. Something tightened in my chest at the sight of my jeans and t-shirt lying with his pants and dress shirt. The reminder that we came from two different

worlds were evident in everything we did in life.

Even at school, when we had our uniforms on, he always wore them better than I did. I fumbled through life while he barreled through with no fear. I would not be in this predicament if I were more like him. Grabbing my discarded jeans, I went to the bathroom. I washed my face and gripped the edge of the sink. My phone was burning through my pocket. I dreaded taking it out and looking at it. My time here was coming to an end.

“Maybe in another life, little cub,” Sal smirked at me as he walked away.

You could say this was that other life and things were still as fucked up as they had ever been. Knowing I had to face the music and live with the consequences of my actions, I pulled open the door, only to stop dead at the sight before me.

Sal was already awake. He was leaning back on the pillows. His chest was still bare, and I could see all the contours of his abdomen. The perfect sculpted V that I had the pleasure of tracing was mocking me. His chest rose as he inhaled the cigarette and then exhaled as his face filled with smoke. Allowing me a moment to school myself before I saw the face I was about to betray.

The smoke cleared out, and Sal looked at me. His eyes were no longer warm, but icy. The smirk he gave me was nothing like the one from last night that had me giving in to what I knew was a bad idea.

“Do I have time to eat breakfast before the police come and arrest me?”

He knew all along.

I was fucked.

THEODORE

Senior Year High School

My stomach churned in pain as bile rose in my throat. My breathing was unnerving and jagged as I regained my breath. The once-cold tile was now warming under my cheek. I needed to get up, but I could not find it in me to do it.

I hated this school.

I hated my classmates.

Most of all, I hated myself for being weak.

The first bell rang, and I knew I needed to get it together so that I could make it to the first class of senior year. I heard the stampede of my classmates rushing to make it to theirs. I took a deep breath and then sat up slowly, testing to see if anything was bruised but luckily, not this time. That was enough of a pity party. I grabbed hold of my bag and then went to the mirror. A bit of blood was on the corner of my mouth, and my lip had torn from me biting it.

After washing my face, I ran my hand over my brown curls and sighed. I didn't know what my father thought he was gaining by sending me to this school. He built his empire by being a sanctimonious asshole. What did he expect by sending me to the school where half of the student body was associated with families he had sent to jail?

He had many plans for me; he wanted to rebuild the Lyons name, and I was the perfect pawn to get him that. But if I did as he asked, he promised me my freedom, which was the only thing I had to hold on to. Far worse things

have been done in the name of freedom, so I wasn't worried about what it would do to me as long as I got rid of my father.

I looked down at my watch and saw that it was about to be five minutes past the first bell. If I waited any longer here, it would just be worse. I would be marked as a tardy, and if I got too many of them, I could get expelled, and then what just happened would be nothing compared to what my father would do.

Jefferson Private Academy was one of the wealthiest schools in the country. The only reason I got in was because of my last name. You see, names meant something in this country. They held prestige. We were all dogs with a fancy pedigree.

My heart skipped for a second when I noticed someone coming from the corner of my eye. Their steps were barely audible, but I should have expected that from the person turning down the same hallway as I was.

Salvador Zinnetti, or as everyone called him, Sal, was coming my way. He was tall, taller than my five-foot-nine, but maybe that was because he was thin and looked regal. He was the outcast of the Zinnettis when it came to looks. They were all dark and tan, while he had favored his Scandinavian mother. He had pale skin that looked like porcelain at times, high cheekbones, and eyes that were a cross between blue and gray. His face was always impassive. Rumor had it that his mother died a little after giving birth to him. His father's incarceration was the thing that made headlines. I was sure he would not be showing his face back here, but he still marched these halls as if he owned them.

You guessed it, the judge to sentence his father was my dad.

My skin prickled as I realized we would be crossing paths. I already had one beating today, I was not in the mood for another. I gulped as we passed next to each other. I didn't want the prick to know I reacted to him.

He hadn't done anything to me—yet—but he also hadn't stopped his friends and family from threatening me like I was their personal punching bag. So, in my book, he was guilty by association.

I lowered my head and kept chanting to myself just to lay low and not make contact. After I passed the halfway mark, I couldn't help myself and looked, and instantly regretted it. He was walking at a much slower pace than I had been. As if he felt my eyes on him, he craned his neck toward me, and I braced myself for his vengeance.

People did terrible things all the time, but when they got caught, they

wanted a sacrificial lamb to blame, and lucky for me that I was right here.

The asshole was smirking at me. I felt a chill run down my spine as I got caught in his gaze. It's like he knew I was waiting for him to pounce for what my father did to his, and he got off on the idea that he had me on edge. His gaze was predatory, like looking into snake eyes. I broke his gaze, but not before I saw his smirk turn more taunting.

I gulped.

If he wanted revenge, this was his last time to take it because I was getting the hell away from everyone after this. My father had reigned over me until I turned eighteen. After that, I didn't care what I had to do to get out from under his thumb. The streets sounded like heaven compared to living in his mansion.

What the hell was wrong with me? *Last time to take it?* Maybe he just didn't care for that petty shit. I imagined the Zinnettis had more pressing matters at hand. When I made it to my classroom, the door was already closed.

"One more year," I whispered before I pulled it open.

Having been in this school, I was already familiar with Mrs. Knowles. She was middle-aged, dark-skinned, and had aged very gracefully, but that didn't mean she wasn't scary when she wanted to be. She looked at me apprehensively.

"You're late, Mr. Lyons," she chastised me, but I saw the pitying look on her face as her eyes raked me over.

"Sorry." I shrugged it off. There was no need to lie and tell her it won't happen again when we both knew it would, but there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. When your family donated thousands of dollars to the school, it made you untouchable.

My classmates turned to look at me, and I heard a few chuckles and whispers. My mask was already in place, and I quickly scanned the room to see if there was anyone I knew there. My friend Lea cast a small smile my way. She was seated toward the front, and all those seats were already taken. Squaring my shoulders, I made my way to the last row, where there were still a few seats empty.

I could do this. Just one hundred and eighty school days to go, and I would be free.

Mrs. Knowles started to pass out the syllabus when the door opened again. I didn't bother to look up. My body was beginning to ache now that I

had sat down, going off fight mode.

“Mr. Zinnetti, class started ten minutes ago,” Mrs. Knowles bit out. You could tell she wasn’t a fan, which almost made me smile.

My body shivered, wondering which one of the four Zinnetti spawns was in my class, although I already had a sinking feeling.

There was Sal, Armando, Cristian, and Carolina—but it wasn’t her.

I didn’t bother to lift my head but instead just looked up, and sure enough, Sal was there.

“My apologies, it won’t happen again,” he arrogantly told her.

His voice was thick but not rough, and his underlying accent was there. Which I’ll admit I found somewhat funny. I knew his family had been here for a generation already, but they acted like they had just migrated from Sicily.

Mrs. Knowles didn’t fawn over him as the other teachers did. Instead, she pointed her tan finger toward me, and my saliva became thicker when our gazes met for the second time today.

Why did she point at me?

Fuck.

Then my paranoid ass realized she wasn’t pointing at me but at the seat behind me. He grinned at his friends with that lazy arrogance that he seemed to always have and slowly made his way toward my row.

If I had been looking down, I would not have realized that it wasn’t that he was walking slowly, but rather he was treading carefully. It looked like he had some type of swagger, but watching his footsteps, I could see he was trying not to limp.

My eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

Did he get in a fight before coming here? And if he did, why did I care? I shook my head, ridding myself of these thoughts, but it was idly timed because it was done when he was right next to me.

The first thing I noticed was his smell. It reeked of expensive cologne and a hint of smoke.

“You have a problem?” he drawled.

My head quickly shook, and when he saw that I wasn’t going to give him a verbal answer, he proceeded to sit right behind me.

My neck felt hot, and I tried not to shift as the class went on. I could hear him tapping his pencil impatiently as he waited for class to end. Or how he moved his legs and purposely hit my chair each time he did so. I fisted my

hands on my desk, not daring to speak up and tell him to stop.

When the bell rang, I sighed in relief.

Class one of one hundred and eighty school days: done.

I was about to reach for my backpack, when I heard him shuffling out of his chair. I waited to see his shiny loafers pass before I packed my shit.

My body froze the moment I felt his hand on my shoulder. My blood began to race, and although I knew he wouldn't be as crazy to do anything with everyone watching, especially a teacher, I still couldn't calm my thumping heart.

"We're going have a fun year, little lion," he whispered, causing shivers down my spine.

I watched him walk away, wondering if I had just made it up. My cock had twitched, and I didn't know if it was because I was so scared I almost pissed myself or if his voice had turned me on.

Day one of one hundred and eighty, and I was already fucked.

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THEODORE

By lunchtime, my body had calmed down. Either that or I had accepted my fate. Senior year was the silver lining. They could do whatever they wanted, but as soon as my graduation cap touched the floor, I was done, and I was out.

Lea was already sitting down at what we considered our table. It was all the way back by the back entrance. There wasn't enough daylight to reach it, and it was by the trash cans. Not the best spot, but everyone left us alone.

As soon as I neared, her head snapped up, and her eyes narrowed. Those blue eyes would be a lot more mesmerizing if it weren't for the thick glasses that obscured them.

"What happened this morning, *Theodore*," she snapped at me as if this morning's activities had been *my* fault.

"I was ambushed, *Leanna*," I spat back.

She let out a resigned sigh and started to take out books from her backpack. "I know, Teddy, and it's all just so freaking unfair."

It was, but that was life, wasn't it? A series of unfortunate events and all of us just coasting by, hoping that it all got better at some point.

Lea didn't care for social norms. I had known her longer than I did everyone at this school. Our fathers were friends, and she didn't have to tell me that her dad was a dick. *Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are.* That right there said it all. Lea looked prim and proper all the time. When she was around her family, she forced herself to have a stick up her ass to fit in with them.

We both wanted an out, and the only answer we found was finding solace

in each other. At first, I felt guilty for using her for my benefit because the last thing I wanted was to hurt the only real friend I'd ever had.

The first time I tried to kiss her was back in freshman year, and she stepped back with confusion on her delicate features. "I thought you were gay?"

All the blood had drained from my face. Early on, I knew I wasn't attracted to girls. There was never a stage in which I was confused about my sexual identity. I liked girls; they were pretty and soft, but they didn't appeal to me on a sexual level.

Lea had seen the terror on my face and immediately hugged me and told me she would never tell anyone. Our fathers were conservative as it got, so she knew having my father accept me was never going to happen.

So we both just let our parents assume there was more than friendship between us just so we would be left alone—and so far, it had worked.

"Just let it go, Lea," I told her as I looked around the lunchroom. "It's our senior year, and we promised ourselves we would at least try."

That seemed to cheer her up a bit. As the daughter of the senator, she got a bit more leeway than I did. Just a bit, because if her father caught wind of bullying, it would rain hell in this school. The ammunition he could get if he found out it was the kids of his political rivals.

This school seemed to have something for everyone.

Just then, the doors opened, and Carolina walked in, followed by her brother and Sal. Maybe not everyone. The Zinnetts seemed to answer to no one, much to my father's dismay.

Where Lea was prim and proper, Carolina was wild and free. Her uniform was one or two inches above what was acceptable. Her heels were so tall that I wondered how she got around them all day. No guy dared say anything to her for fear of dealing with Cristian. Sal and Armando were seniors, while Cristian was a junior and Carolina a sophomore. I looked around, but I guess the other Zinnetti must have had a different lunch than them. I shuddered, just thinking that today might have been different if it had been Cristian who'd been with me in that hallway.

He was more unrestrained and ready to go to war for his family than the rest of them.

"Oh great, they're here," Lea murmured, sounding less enthusiastic than I did.

"If we want food, we need to get up now," I told her as my stomach

began to grumble.

She looked at the line and at the Zinnettis who were chatting at the back.

“I’m not that hungry,” she lied.

“Is your mother making you diet again?”

Hurt flashed in her eyes, but otherwise she didn’t say more.

At times like this, I often wondered what kind of parent my mother would have been. I mean, her dipping out back when I was seven did say a lot, but a part of me never blamed her. She saw an out from Dad and took it. *Good for you, Mallory.*

“Come on, we need food,” I told her as I motioned to the line, glad more people had lined up.

Lea scrunched her nose but otherwise followed me. Four people stood between us and them. If Lea was uncomfortable, she didn’t show it. I was so distraught about the Zinnettis’ presence that I didn’t notice the person in front of me.

Shit.

My stomach was still sore from where the asshole hit me in the morning. He was a little sophomore prick who was mad because his daddy was sent to jail for embezzlement. High white-collar crime. He was friends with a few seniors, and they jumped in on his brilliant idea. Everyone loved doing bad shit, but no one wanted to get caught, and there was where I came in.

The little prick noticed me, and he seemed to grow ten inches taller with his chest puffed out. Lea immediately narrowed her eyes when she saw the way he looked at me. She came to stand closer to me as if I needed her to defend me.

“Round two, Lyons?” the little prick taunted.

Lea narrowed her eyes at him, and a devilish smirk crossed her face. “Is this the little shit who had the small dick?”

His eyes went wide.

“Not small, more like a micro dick. He didn’t know how to fuck.”

A throaty laugh filled the air, but we ignored it as the asshole’s face got red in anger or embarrassment. It certainly didn’t help that his friends snickered.

“Aww, Tommy,” Carolina cooed. “Now I get why you’re always so obnoxiously loud.” She gave him a pitying look and focused on his crotch. “To make up for smaller things.”

Thomas, that was the fucker’s name. He was red as his friends all laughed

at him. He took a step forward, but Cristian immediately put his arm around his sister.

Thomas's jaw went slack, and then he turned to look at me, promising me retribution. My response was to give him a lazy dismissal. Bullies like him got too comfortable tormenting others but never knew how to act when someone else knocked them down.

Unfortunately for me, I made the mistake of looking ahead, and my gaze collided with Sal. His hands were in his pants pockets, and a smirk was on his face.

I didn't have to be able to read minds to know what he was thinking. He was going to have even more fun breaking me now.

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THEODORE

By the time Friday came along, I was beginning to breathe a little bit easier. No one else had come for me. Thomas was still licking his wounds. I imagine being humiliated by someone as gorgeous as Carolina would sting his pride.

When I came downstairs so I could wait for Lea in the driveway, I stopped at the last stair at the sight of my father at the dining table.

With one hand, I held on to the strap of my backpack while I put the other in my pants pocket. I hoped I looked a bit restrained like Sal did and not a nervous mess. *Don't say my name. Don't say my name.* I was almost by the door.

"Theodore," he called out for me.

Fuck.

"Father," I said, turning around and mustering a grin. Maybe it was too much; he had to know it was fake.

My father just looked at me. His upper lip curled in disgust at the sight of my hair. "That's how you went back to school?"

I held in my sigh and the urge to run my hands through my messy locks. When I was younger, I tried to be everything my father wanted, but that wasn't me. It wasn't until I got to high school and saw the other students. I realized what he was searching for. My father wanted the epitome of masculine energy. He wanted a son who was broader, more manly, a sports star, but instead, he got stuck with me.

Average height, lithe body, curly hair, and dimples. He either disliked the fact that I looked like my mother or that I was graceful in a way he figured

women only were. Judge Lyons wasn't stupid. He probably had an inkling that I preferred to be the one to take it rather than give it, but there was no evidence, and as long as I clutched onto Lea, he figured she was the best kind of beard there could be.

"The girls like it," I shrugged, which wasn't a total lie. Girls told me all the time—well, the ones that talked to me. I made the mistake of tugging my hair, and images of *him* pulling it while he fucked my mouth came to mind.

His eyes flashed, and I waited there, waiting for him to call me out on it. Sometimes I wanted to get caught in my lies. For someone to call bullshit on my "perfectly" crafted life. To watch as everything around me came crumbling down. Lies were an invisible rope that, with time, began to choke you.

"Why aren't you signed up for debate this year? With the elections coming up, it will be at its prime. Schools will take that into notice."

Right. Future politicians were playing at lawmaking, trying to emulate Mommy and Daddy. My mouth was set, trying to figure out the best way to answer my father.

"I already spoke with Mr. Olson, and he has agreed to let you back on the team."

My stomach sank.

Fuck.

I opened my mouth in protest, but my father stood up, and I tentatively took a step back. He wouldn't hit me. He was too wise and cautious to hurt me where it was visible. He knew financially where he had me. For fuck's sake, he didn't even let me have a car, so I wouldn't attempt to run away. He counted on the fact that Lea picked me up.

"You will rejoin the team, and maybe depending on how you do this year, we can talk about that other school you were thinking about."

Hope soared through me.

He would let me go to the West Coast. Was this some sort of sick joke? I gulped, knowing what would happen if I joined speech and debate, but then I reminded myself that I had one hundred and seventy-six days of school remaining. Compared to the rest of my life, that was nothing—right?

"Okay, I'll stay after school."

He didn't give me a pleased smile. He just nodded and walked away. When I stepped outside my driveway, Lea was waiting for me.

As soon as I slid inside her passenger seat, she knew I was in a mood.

“That bad?” She scrunched her nose.

“I have to join speech and debate again,” I croaked.

Her eyes went wide, and she gasped.

“You can’t!” she shrieked.

“If I do it, he’ll let me go to Sandford.”

She hit the steering wheel.

“Augh, this is so unfair, Teddy. We were doing so well. Senior year, make it through, and then freedom.”

“We?”

She shook her head, not wanting to talk about it. Which I totally got. Being in speech and debate was not ideal. It was more of a regression, but sometimes we had to take two steps back before taking four forward, right?

By the time we got to school, my mind had cleared a little, and I had gaslighted myself into thinking everything would be okay. Lea and I walked to class together. It was better to get to class before the bell rang. I blended in with the masses better and avoided one-on-one time with my classmates—especially the ones who wanted to get buddy-buddy over my dad's verdicts.

Per usual, I was already in my seat by the time Sal walked in. He always walked in a few seconds late after the bell, causing our teacher to huff in annoyance. I was sure he did it on purpose as some kind of power play.

His Ferragamo shoes were the first thing I noticed when he walked by me, followed by his distinctive smell. The cologne was mixed with another thing, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was or why it smelled so alluring.

Since Monday, I had been on the edge of my seat, holding my breath for his next move. It was anxious energy, but a part of me felt a thrill. He took his seat and then stretched his left leg, coming to the side of my desk.

Irritation coursed through me. He had more than enough space, but it was the little things he kept doing to assert his dominance over me, and a part of me itched to prove him wrong and wipe that smirk off his face.

“You need to cut your hair.”

I froze.

Surely Sal wasn’t talking to me, right?

Shivers spread through my body when I felt the tip of a pencil scratch the nape of my neck. My back involuntarily arched.

My response was to sit straighter and scoot forward and away from him.

All I could hear was a chuckle. It was soft but strained. My nails were

pressing into my palms as I squeezed them and concentrated on that pain rather than doing something stupid.

This morning my father had presented me with an out, and I would be a fool to throw it away.

When the bell rang, I stayed seated, waiting for Sal to leave before me, except now he was taking his sweet fucking time. I could see Lea give me an exasperated look from the doorway, telling me to hurry up.

She was right, I needed to get out. The loud clatter of books dropping had me turning my head. Sal's shoulders sagged, and he looked down at his fallen books as if they weren't worth the amount of effort it would take to pick them up.

I didn't know why I did it. But my feet started to move before I could even register what I was doing. Next thing I knew, I was picking up his mess for him. Some type of truce, maybe? I didn't bother to overanalyze it. I got up and handed him the books. He took a deep breath and winced as he held his hand out to grab them.

My head cocked to the side. Watching his movement reminded me of Monday, that slight limp that was there. No one would dare touch him here, not when his whole family would probably kill whoever that did.

"Are you expecting a thank-you, Lyons?" he asked between gritted teeth.

I shook my head, but was left wondering if he said that in pain or because he loathed me.

THEODORE

By the end of the day, I was exhausted and relieved to finally have the weekend to relax and stop being on guard. My encounter with Sal had my mind otherwise preoccupied with what would be happening after school.

Lea was at my locker thinking. "I'll go with you."

"I don't need you to babysit me, Lea. I can take care of myself just fine."

She rolled those blues at me.

"I don't enjoy getting beat up, but we know it's the easier option. If I fight back, what does that accomplish? Not just another beatdown but also my father's wrath. Besides, your mother let you skip this year because she's attempting to make a lady out of you."

"Fuck you." She grinned as she shoved my shoulder. "I really don't want to do this stupid debutante shit," she groaned. "Sometimes I wish I could be a boy. My brothers have it easier."

I raised a brow at her.

"Your brothers are expected to go into politics whether they want to or not."

Whether I wanted to or not. The only difference was that I could maybe pick what college to run away to in the meantime. Perhaps it was a bad idea, but I figured that if I got much-needed distance from my father, it would somehow make my balls grow ten times their size and just tell him to fuck off.

"I don't even get that option," Lea spat. "No speech and debate for me because prepping me to be bimbo arm candy is more important."

"They can't prep you for something you already are," I teased with a

laugh. When I started laughing, she began to punch my shoulder with both her fists.

“Is there anyone that doesn’t beat you up, Lyons?”

Both Lea and I turned to look at the mocking tone that came behind us.

Sal was smirking at me. My stupid stomach dipped, and I cursed myself because this was not supposed to be how I should be reacting. He looked good. His uniform tie was now loose with the top button of his shirt undone. Next to him was Armando. Our gazes locked, but unlike Sal, his face was not mocking nor smirking, it was blank. His eyes went from mine dismissingly to Lea. I saw him do a quick sweep and then turn around like he couldn’t be bothered with us.

“Anyways,” Lea said, recovering much quicker than I had. “You want me to come back and pick you up?”

I shook my head.

“I can Uber home,” I let her know.

She nodded.

I began to walk away, but she held on to my sleeve. “Theo.” Not Teddy, so this was her being serious. “Don’t let yourself go back there, okay?”

“It’ll be okay, I promise,” I lied with a wink, hoping it made it more believable. Or maybe I wanted to believe it as well.

The speech and debate classes were held in the lower levels. When I made it to the double doors, I took a deep breath before I walked in. Truth be told, I loved coming here. During freshman year, this place was my safe haven. Everyone in this class was in my father's social circle. It allowed me to get away without actually going anywhere. As my father's career grew, so did the disdain outside of these walls, but here, it was okay because we were all on the same side of the law—*the right side*. Being on the ‘right’ side didn’t matter in this school. Not when everyone either wanted to sleep with or be friends with the ‘enemy’ because having a friend like that would benefit you down the line when you had to toe the gray line for your career. So when I was made a pariah, everyone followed the lead. But somehow, here it was okay because here they knew what the right thing was.

Then last year, everything changed.

Shaking my head, I pulled open the door, knowing I was already late.

“Ah, Theodore, there you are.” William Henderson greeted me with a saccharine smile covering the poison in his eyes. “You will need to stay after class to go over a few things since you missed the summer meetings.”

I was so fucked.

“Sounds good,” I managed to choke out as I went for my seat.

My mind was spinning, I just knew I needed to get as far away as I could to think. I used to like sitting in the front rows. Relished in having the attention this place provided. With ease, I pulled at my tie, trying to let more oxygen in. As if that would help my brain articulate better thoughts.

Someone pulled a chair out for me, and without thinking, I sat down as I regained my breath. I couldn't look up, and I didn't want to see if Mr. Henderson was looking at me.

Not that I needed to see, for I could feel the burn of his stare penetrating every inch of my body that had already forgotten about him.

William Henderson, or Will as everyone in here called him because he liked to be on a more personal level with his students. He was the ‘cool’ teacher. Someone we could all look up to because he was us—or who we would be in a few years. His father was in the DC political clique. He got this job as a way to enrich his résumé. Twenty-four years young with piercing hazel eyes, dark hair, all the proper schools and etiquette, plus looks that rivaled a model's. He was charming and intelligent, and he was also gay.

A fact that not everyone knew because you know he had responsibilities, and as much as everyone wanted to believe that there was a change, and we were evolving, the elites and the politicians sure praised that change but didn't apply it.

I gave myself a mental pep talk and dared myself to look up.

Fuck.

He was looking at me.

I shouldn't have been surprised. At first, I thought he was finally the friend I had been looking for. Lea was great and all, but she didn't have a dick, so she didn't get half the shit I put up with. He was nice to me, a little touchy-feely, but when you didn't get love anywhere else, it kind of felt nice. So, I let myself believe he was just *friendly*. The first time he flirted with me, I couldn't believe it. It had felt nice, and it went without saying that it wasn't exactly easy to explore my sexuality in these circles.

William had the same idea.

In a couple of months, he went from being a friend to my everything. But making someone your whole world when you were nothing in theirs wasn't healthy at all. My cheeks burned, and my throat constricted with humiliation at the way I let William treat me.

Discussions went back and forth until class ended, and I let out a relieved sigh. I grabbed my things, ready to bolt out, when the person next to me blocked my path.

“Where are you running off to, cub?” Sal raised a brow at me, and every nerve in my body was already a live wire, just intensified.

He had been the person to pull the chair for me. I looked around the room as people started to clear out. Sal was here with his cousin Armando. If I weren’t already in a hurry and perplexed at being here, I would have found it odd that they, out of all people, were here.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

“I’ll be waiting for you in my office, Theodore,” Willian said as he walked to the back door that led to his office.

Shit.

“Move, Zinnetti,” I spat.

This caused him to raise a brow at me.

“Getting a little brave, aren’t we?”

Maybe I was. Or I was backed up in a corner, and I just retaliated. I put my hand on his chest to push him out of the way, which caught Sal by surprise. Two things I immediately noticed after I felt how nice and firm his chest was: first, I watched with fascination as my pale hands pressed against the navy-blue blazer of his uniform, and second was an involuntary hiss confirming my earlier suspicions.

He struck out in an instant. His eyes were cold and detached.

“What the hell are you doing, little lion?”

Before either of us could answer, William Henderson came out of his office looking pissed that I was making him wait.

“I don’t have all day, Theodore.”

One hundred and seventy-six days, and I was royally fucked.

THEODORE

Humans were like chess pieces. Everyone had a role to play and a different role depending on the person they were playing with. I was a pawn to almost everyone I knew. It was something I had made peace with, but when I learned my place from the man across from me, well, it stung.

To make someone your whole world only be a fleeting moment in theirs was a hard pill to swallow.

“You wanted to see me?” I managed to say without making eye contact.

Will put one hand inside of his pants pocket and the other one he used to tap against the wooden desk.

“You didn’t answer any of my calls this summer.” His voice was firm with a hint of agitation.

This made me angry. He called three times, and that was it. As soon as summer rolled in, he let go of whatever it was that we had. As fucked up as it had been, it still stung to know I was temporary, even if I should have found relief in it.

“That was intentional,” was my curt reply.

His brow furrowed in frustration.

“Your father wants you to get caught up with the meetings that you missed. I expect you to stay after school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays after our meetings.”

My jaw clenched.

“I’m sure I didn’t miss that much,” I bit out, finally meeting his gaze.

William rounded the desk. His stance was predatory toward me, and both my hands curled into tight fists. I needed to get out of there, but I couldn’t

show my hand yet. William knew what he was doing, and one word from him and my dad would be on my shit. And if I told my dad the truth, that I let him bend me over his desk last summer, he would beat the shit out of me for being gay first and second for not being a fucking top.

William's hands came to my face and cupped it gently, but his eyes said something else.

"I've missed you, Theo," he murmured as his face got closer.

"If we are all done, may I leave?"

He stroked my cheeks, and a part of me jolted from the touch—the connection—while the other recoiled as bile made its way up my throat. "We were so good together."

His lips touched mine, and every part of me froze. I was no longer staying still in wonder and awe but in desperation and anxiety.

"I'm sure your fiancée is waiting for you," I managed to choke out without moving my lips. The last thing I wanted was for him to think I was kissing him back.

One of his hands found its way under my uniform blazer, trying to dig up my uniform shirt. "You know better than anyone that it's a business deal."

An unamused snort made its way out, and he pierced me with those chilling eyes. Maybe I let myself believe that, and I told myself that, for once, I was someone's priority and that he kept me hidden because he cared.

It was all lies.

Will deepened the kiss and I felt nothing other than dread and discomfort. Lea would be proud of how wrong it all felt. Not satisfied with my answer, he held me and bit my lip hard. I groaned in protest, and he used the opportunity to slide his tongue into me.

Fight back.

I knew I couldn't win the war I currently had on my hands, but that didn't mean I couldn't win this particular battle. I fisted his collar, and he took this as a sign that I was giving in, but instead, I pushed him back. His back hit the desk, and it infuriated him that *I* rejected him.

"Theodore," he warned.

My chest was rising and falling rapidly. I needed to get out, but I was rooted in place.

"Keep your distance, or I'll tell your father about us," I threatened. I wouldn't do it, but he didn't know that. He had as much to lose as me. "I'll tell the school. They might not believe me, but we both know the rumors will

kill you before you even make a name for yourself.”

William just smiled as if he had accepted a challenge.

“I’ll see you on Monday, Theo.”

I ran out of the room before my bravery disappeared. My breathing was jagged as I made my way down the halls and to the student parking lot.

I needed to escape. This would all be over soon. I really should have let Lea come pick me up. I pulled my phone out, intending to get an Uber to come to pick me up. I could hide somewhere while it arrived, and hopefully Will didn’t come looking for me. He wouldn’t risk it if the staff was still at the school, and he had his reputation to worry about more than he did me.

I was too distracted that I didn’t hear the footsteps that followed me. Or the heat of an all-too-knowing stare.

The mocking whistle startled me, and my head turned back with a vengeance.

Sal stood behind me, the epitome of calm, cool, and collected. Those eyes were silently laughing at me.

“Where did my brave little lion go?” He smirked at my disheveled state.

I was still out of breath from running away from one predator, right into the arms of another.

“What do you want, Sal?” I questioned while taking a step back, but since I was by the steps, I was forced to take one down. Now I was forced to look up to the asshole.

He took a step forward, and I winced when he pulled one of his hands from the confinements of his pants pockets. His eyes flashed, but he didn’t drop his arm. A jolt went through my body as his thumb traced my bottom lip slowly. When he pulled back, there was blood on it.

Would he ask me about it? Would I lie?

My breath hitched when he brought his thumb into his mouth and licked the blood clean.

“That’s unsanitary,” I breathed.

Why would he do that? And why did my dick like it? My mind raced to try to remember if I had ever seen Sal with another guy. There were girls around him, they fawned over all the Zinnettis, but I couldn’t pinpoint the one that had been his.

“Did Henderson do that?” He got straight to the point. He cocked his head and raised a brow, waiting for my answer.

“No,” I lied. I didn’t owe him anything. “Are you going to get your

revenge on me now?”

He seemed surprised and amused by my own question. His eyes went from my head down to my shoes, then up again slowly.

“You’re a fucking mess, Lyons.”

My cheeks warmed at his insult. When he sidestepped me, I finally let a relieved breath out. His hand wrapped around my arm and started to pull me with him.

“What the hell are you doing?” I barked as he dragged me down the rest of the steps.

“You don’t have a car. I’m taking you home,” he stated. My eyes were glued to where he was holding me and dragging me away, not keeping up with the fact that my traitorous feet were already going along with him.

His car, although luxurious, was still sensible. He didn’t go for the fast cars that his younger cousins favored. He had a matte black G-Wagon with tinted windows. A classic but somehow still somewhat odd.

He didn’t stop until we were at the door, and he opened it for me and then pushed me inside.

“Inside,” he barked.

I opened my mouth to protest.

“In, or I’ll tell everyone you’re fucking Mr. Henderson.”

Shit.

Why did I let my walls down? Something on my face must have given me away because Sal smiled, and it was vindictive.

“You know, I almost wished I was wrong,” he admitted.

I knew I threatened Will about exposing him, but having it come out of Sal Zinetti’s mouth would be so much worse. Everyone would believe him, and the rumors would make my father even more enraged if it came from him.

Would he snap and kill me? As much as my knees buckled with fear, an odd sense of peace also washed over me at this fucked-up situation and the out it might give me.

“Get. In,” Sal gritted.

Numbly, I did as he asked. The first thing I noticed was the smell. Like a new car and expensive cologne, and a hint of weed. His scent was all over the vehicle, and not only did my sense of smell like it, but my cock did too. I shifted before he jumped in so my hard-on wouldn’t be all that obvious.

I patiently waited for him to turn on the car, but he seemed to be deep in

thought.

“How long?”

“What?” I questioned as I ran a hand over my curls.

Sal cut me with a glare. “Don’t play dumb, little cub. How long has that asshole been molesting you.”

My breathing hitched, and my head swiveled his way. I opened my mouth to deny it, but Sal raised a brow.

“You have bite marks on your lower lip.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I felt the need to add. If only to make me feel better. Sal didn’t say anything. He just kept looking at me, waiting for me to answer his question. “We had a thing last year.”

Sal reached for the glove compartment, his hand passing my chest briefly. He pulled out a silver box and opened it. Inside were three rolled-up blunts.

“And he’s not happy about not being able to tap your ass anymore?”

I winced at his choice of words.

“What am I doing here, Zinnetti? Are you finally going to get your revenge on me? What my dad does isn’t any of my business, and even if it were, it’s not like I can stop it.”

Smoke was blown in my face, and when it cleared out, my gaze was locked with Sal’s amused smirk.

“You have a lot to say today,” he drawled.

“I’m tired,” I told him honestly.

“I’m going to help you, little lion, but I want something in return.”

And that’s how I discovered that some things came at too much of a price.

SALVADOR

Present Time

“**Y**our father must be proud,” Judge Lyons sneered after my court hearing. “Following his footsteps. Can’t say I’m surprised. Sooner or later all of you Zinnettis will fall.”

My face stayed stoic, not to reveal a thing. People let their guard down when they thought they had beaten you, and I just needed him to give me something useful. I had been on this wild-goose chase for a hot fucking minute. A fucking breakthrough was all I was asking for. No matter how much it was on the tip of my tongue to tell the judge just how a few hours ago I was fucking his son. My silence was not because I was trying to protect the coward little shit. If the courtroom had been packed, I would have told him just how much *his* Theodore loved it when *I* fucked him.

I could only imagine the smile gracing my lips was nothing short of feral. My little cub changed the rules of our game, and as soon as I was out, I would be dealing with him.

Judge Lyons’s gaze was on me, and all I could see was hatred. I cocked my head, trying to find a resemblance to Theodore, but it was barely there.

“See you soon,” I mocked as they led me away.

With cuffed hands, they dragged me to the back, where I would be transported to the correction center. Waiting in the back for me was Armando. He looked pissed at what was going on, but we both knew this was the only chance we would get for some real answers.

“You look tired,” I told him as soon as he got near me.

“I don’t have time for your bullshit, Sal,” he spat. “We’re not ready.”

I shrugged.

“I mean, the timing isn’t right, but we got this opportunity, so let’s not waste it.”

Armando’s glare was amusing at best. His fucking plan went out the window the moment Theodore decided he was done being a pawn. A part of me was proud of him for putting himself first, even if it came at the cost of my freedom.

“You are taking this a lot better than I thought.” Armando eyed me warily.

“I got laid last night. I think it’s the sex glow.” I smirked at him, and the fucker punched me.

He cleared his throat when he saw one of the guards coming. “Tell my old man I send my regards. Give at least three months to get shit sorted.”

I was barely nodding as they started to escort me away. Everything was done quickly, smoothly, and, most of all, quietly, which only confirmed what Armando and I already knew. There was a rat in our family, and it had been there for a long time.

Once I was seated, ready to be transported, my mind reeled back to last night. I hadn’t seen Theodore since our high school graduation. I needed him to leave because I saw that he wanted to stay, so I did the only thing I could think of to get him to go.

A dry laugh escaped me. It worked out a little too well if my current predicament was anything to go by. Now here we were five years later, and it felt like no time had passed between us. Seeing him yesterday had been a fucking shock. I should have stayed away, but I was never quite good at doing that either.

“Cops are here,” Cristian spat as he walked inside the security room.

Armando and I immediately switched our conversation to something else. It wasn’t that we didn’t trust him, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“They’re not going to find anything,” Armando told him with a lazy drawl.

Cristian huffed. “I know that. It’s just so fucking annoying.”

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. His temper was getting on my nerves. With his father currently in charge of the family, our future wouldn’t

bode well if Cristian were to be at the helm. He was a spoiled little shit that didn't care for his future or ours.

"Who's here?" I asked Armando.

He went about switching the cameras to see how many cops had come and how many were on our payroll, when the sight of curls caught my eye.

My heart sped up, and before I could school my reactions, I was taking the computer mouse away from Armando.

"That's the judge's kid, isn't it?" Cristian perked up. His bloodlust had someone in sight. My hand went to his shoulder and pushed him back down.

"I'll deal with this," I said without looking at either of them. Although I could feel Armando's gaze on me, he didn't have to tell me this was a bad fucking idea because I already knew that.

Before anyone could question me, I walked out of the door and made my way down to the lobby. I was like an addict chasing his drug of choice after a relapse.

I scanned the club as soon as I made it to the main floor, and I found him instantly by his fucking hair. Adrenaline started to spread through my veins. The last time we saw each other, things hadn't ended on good terms, but maybe it wasn't too late to rectify a few things. Theodore Lyons was at the bar looking as out of place in my domain as I felt whenever he was near. He was a bit taller than what I remembered, but not by much. His hair was still curly, but shorter. It suited him and made him look a bit older. His cheeks weren't as rounded, a bit hollower, but there was still something soft about him. The cop uniform amused me. Not the route I thought he would take, especially since his father would assume it was beneath them, but I was proud of him for sticking it to Judge Lyons in his own way.

"Can I help you, little lion?" I whispered when I was standing next to him.

Even in the loud club, I heard his sharp intake of breath.

He had to have known I would be here, and that was fucking with my head. Theo slowly turned his head toward me, and those brown eyes were hesitant as they took me in.

"Zinnetti," he said with a head nod in acknowledgment.

I laughed.

"So, I'm no longer Sal?" His jaw clenched. "Although I did prefer it when you called me God." His nostrils flared, and I bit back a smile. Anger was better than not feeling anything at all, right? "I'm not sure blue is the

right color for you,” I teased as I leaned against the bar.

I signaled for the bartender to come since Theo had failed miserably to get his attention.

“Drinking on the job?”

He inhaled and exhaled. When the bartender did come, he asked him a few questions regarding a call they had come to answer. Apparently, someone made a phone call about a couple of douches slipping pills. The bartender looked at me as if asking for permission since we liked to take care of things like this in-house. With a subtle nod, he gave Theo the information he needed.

Once that was done, he waited a second before he turned around.

“It was good seeing you again, Theo,” I told him, and I meant it. I turned around, ready to go back to the security room, when his hand wrapped around my arm. My skin felt alive at that second. It was better than any high I had ever felt.

I didn’t say anything. I just raised a brow. I was tired of hearing myself talk, and I just wanted to listen to his voice.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out, as if he was trying to work something out.

“I get out of work in two hours.”

My heart was stammering.

“And I care why?”

The indifference in my tone surprised even me.

“My car has a flat.” It was a lie, but I didn’t call him out on it. He rattled off his precinct number and then left without another word.

It left me restless, but in an hour and a half, I was already out the door. He didn’t say a word when he climbed into my car. My phone kept pinging with text messages and calls from Armando. I looked at them but otherwise ignored them.

“Your place or mine?” I asked between gritted teeth, feeling angry.

It was irrational, but after years this wasn’t how I envisioned how our first meet would go. If you’d asked me this morning, I would have told you that I hadn’t even considered this a possibility, but here we were, and whether I should or not, I was about to give in.

“Y-yours,” his voice wavered, and I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

We made it to my condo in no time. He followed quietly behind me as I opened the door. Once he passed the threshold, I snapped. My hand reached

to his shoulder and turned him around. His brow furrowed but did nothing when I brought him closer to me.

There were no words I could say at this moment. I brought my lips to his and relished the taste of him. Deception tasted like heaven on his lips. His back hit the wall with more force than necessary, but that didn't seem to bother him. His arms wrapped around my neck, and a part of me felt lighter. My hand made its way to his hair and gripped those soft curls. He let go of my mouth with a soft moan.

A trail of clothes followed us as I guided him to my bed. My cock was throbbing, and I knew his was too. It wasn't going to be a quick fuck, and a part of me needed to see him laid out just for me.

"I'm not going to be gentle," I told him between kisses. The backs of his legs made contact with my bed.

Theo bit my lip softly.

"I know."

Fuck.

I pushed him back and admired the view. He was still thinner than me but more in shape than he had been. He had a four-pack that was not fully defined. I could see his dick tenting his boxer briefs and pre-cum already leaking. No one has looked as good in my bed as he had. I leaned in and put my hands on either side of his head.

"You missed my cock, little lion?" I smirked.

He didn't answer me, but he also didn't stop me when I began to kiss his neck. I brought one of my hands down to his chest and began to explore my way down the contours of his body. My lips grazed his chest and licked his nipple, and he let out a soft little whine, somewhere between a moan and a laugh.

"Still ticklish," I murmured more to myself than him as I kissed lower.

With my tongue, I traced the lines of his barely-there abs. Theo's breathing was jagged, and I could hear him panting. I kissed lower until my fingers traced the elastic of his boxers. He shifted his hips to allow me to remove them.

"Are you going to hold on and wait for me, or will you shoot off as soon as I put my mouth on you?"

His eyes were blazing with lust. Theo licked his lips as I hovered over his dick.

"It was only once," he breathed.

I smiled as I licked the head. He hissed.

“Sal,” he choked out, and my chest got tighter.

He watched me as I took him deep into my mouth. My hand cupped his balls, and his hips lifted as he tried to fuck my mouth.

I let him go with an audible pop and finished removing my clothes. I reached for the drawer beside my bed and pulled out lube and a condom.

Theo’s eyes flashed, and I knew that look well. I smirked at him.

“I’m clean if you’d rather I fuck you raw.”

He swallowed but shook his head. “It’s none of my business.”

Right. Tonight was a one-time thing.

Before the moment could be lost, I got on the bed and began to kiss him again. His lips were still soft but not dainty. Theo wrapped his hands around my shoulders and started to explore my body. My hand snaked down between us and took hold of his cock, jacking him off. He moaned around my lips, and I used the opportunity to sneak my tongue in. He loved with when it overtook all of his senses.

“Look at you,” I groaned. “You’re so fucking desperate for it.”

My mouth found that space on his neck that made him wild. His hips rose, seeking for more.

“I wanna touch you too,” he said as he tried and failed to grab my dick.

“Soon,” I told him as I leaned back.

I squirted the lube on the palm of my hand. There was hesitation in his eyes as I took hold of my own dick, but his mouth parted when I started to jack us off at the same time.

“Sal...more—fuck.”

I let go of him before he could come. Instead, I spread his legs out more and added more lube to my fingers. I held my breath as I pushed a single digit into him. He gasped for air, and my cock throbbed. I fucking loved that noise. Something between pain and pleasure. Like he couldn’t get enough but was hesitant to take it.

I fucked him with one finger, then two. By the time I added the third in he was writhing.

“Oh God,” he groaned when I pressed on his prostate.

His body, although it had changed, was still familiar to me. As if I could forget all the ways I could make him beg for me.

“What are—” I kissed him, not being able to get enough. I maneuvered us until he was straddling me.

His hands were on my chest, caressing me while I tore the condom packaging with my teeth.

"You're going ri—"

"I don't care," I groaned when he touched my dick. Swatting his hand away, I made quick work of the condom.

Theo tried laying back down, but my fingers dug into his hips.

"You wanted this, little lion, now fucking take it."

He looked at me, and a swirl of emotions went through him. I held my breath, hoping he didn't back out and call it quits. The moment one of his hands touched my abdomen and the other reached behind us, I felt a dreadful sense of peace. That calm before the storm. He rose and guided my dick to him.

"Sal," he moaned as the head of my dick penetrated him.

I hissed in response.

"More," I begged.

Both his hands held on to me as he worked himself down my shaft.

"Sal," he whined. "I can't."

He pushed himself more, but he was still struggling.

"It's too much," he explained, and I snapped.

With my hands firmly holding his hips, I thrust, and he let out something between a moan and a hiss.

"Stop saying you can't," I groaned against his neck before thrusting my hips toward him, "when we both know how well you can take it."

I wrapped one hand around his waist while the other cupped the back of his head.

"Look at me," I demanded.

Tears were in his eyes, his mouth swollen and parted, but his dick was still hard against my stomach.

"You're perfect," I admitted.

"Sal," he said my name softly. It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was enough.

"Fuck me," I commanded, and he did.

It was so easy to move our bodies in the way that we knew we would fit perfectly. With every thrust, I couldn't tear my eyes away. Watching the way he whimpered and moaned, how his eyes fluttered.

"Oh, God." Theo threw his head back as his legs began to shake.

"Just like that," I managed to choke out. "You're taking me so well—"

fuck, you're tight."

"Sal, I need—"

"I know," I hissed into his mouth. "I'm right there."

I let go of the hand that was buried in his hair, already missing having his curls all over my fingers, and instead I wrapped it around his dick.

"Sal," he moaned my name.

"Let go for me, Theo."

At the mention of his name, he made a mess of my chest, and I flipped us so I could finish on his.

Once we were finished, his eyes had gone soft, and that anger I had felt returned.

"Sal," he began to say, but I didn't want to hear it. It was better not to say anything at all.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Theo," I soothed him even though I wanted to wring his fucking neck. Instead, I kissed him softly as every message Armando sent me came front and center. I wrapped my arms around him, lulling him to sleep as I stayed awake all night, wondering what I would do with him.

Well played, little lion. Well played.

He literally fucked me over.

Nothing like some alone time to get all my affairs in order.

I threw my head back and laughed because of all the uncertainties I had, one thing I was sure of.

Theodore Lyons was mine.

TO BE CONTINUED

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudia lives in the Chicagoland suburbs. When she's not busy chasing after her adorable little spawn, she's fighting with the characters inside her head.

Claudia writes both sweet and dark romances that will give you all the feels. Her other talents include binge watching shows on Netflix and eating all kinds of chips.

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NEVER WILL I EVER

CE RICCI

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While this is technically a standalone and can be read entirely separate from any of my other works, I would highly recommend reading *Don't You Dare* first. Avery is portrayed as somewhat of an antagonist in *Don't You Dare*, and this is his "redemption" story. One plotline directly feeds the other in cause and effect. The majority of the events within *Don't You Dare* happen prior to the beginning of *Never Will I Ever*, and that includes the shifted state of Kaleb and Avery's relationship from acquaintances/teammates to enemies.

Also, it's important to note this is not a standard novella, but the beginning of a full-length novel. Therefore, there is **no conclusion** at the end of the allotted length for the anthology. Consider it a teasing taste of what's to come from Avery and Kaleb's story later in 2023, which can be preordered [here](#).

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PROLOGUE

AVERY

Three Weeks Ago

“I take it you know why you’re here?”

My gaze lifts from my lap, where it was trained on my interlocked fingers to keep from fidgeting. Too bad all it’s actually achieved is making my hands clammy with a cold sweat while I’ve been sitting here, silently waiting under the penetrating scrutiny of Foltyn College’s Dean.

Dean Ian Marshall.

Also known as one of the few people in the world who is capable of scaring me as shitless as I am right now.

“The photo, sir,” I manage past the knot the size of a baseball lodged in my throat.

“It’s more than just the photo,” Dean Marshall says, the deep timbre of his voice leaving little room for debate. “It’s your intentions behind your actions that are the issue. Something I think you’re all too aware of.”

More cold sweat seeps through my clothes as his words slice through me, and it’s only now when I realize the true gravity of what I’ve done. By having the photo of Keene and Aspen kissing added to Keene’s slideshow shown on the scoreboard for Family Night, I might as well have signed my own death sentence. Or at least the death sentence of my baseball career.

My silence is drawn out too long, and it must make him impatient, because the frown-lines creasing his forehead deepen. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself? Any reasoning behind your actions?”

Plenty.

But coming out with them now, especially to the Dean, will only look like a last ditch effort to keep from being punished.

Self-preservation calls for me to lie instead. Tell him I didn't do anything with malicious intent, and do my best to salvage what I can from the wreckage I've caused. Too bad for me, the truth is plain as day, and lying about it now would only serve to dig myself an even deeper grave than the one I've already begun to bury myself in.

What I can offer Dean Marshall is the truth. Or as much of it as I'm willing to share.

"I regret my actions, sir," I start, doing my best to keep my voice steady. "They were done out of anger and spite during a moment of blind rage. It wasn't premeditated, and looking back now, I see just how wrong I was to act on those impulses."

"Only looking back on it? Not when you were in the middle of digging through your teammate's phone or sending a personal photo to knowingly be broadcasted on the scoreboard in front of thousands of people?"

I already knew this meeting had a very high likelihood of ending poorly; no doubt with my baseball career being a thing of the past. But the bite in his tone creates a sinking feeling in my gut I can't shake.

This is so much worse than just losing baseball.

My jaw ticks, and I clear my throat. "As I said, sir. I was blinded by rage. I didn't think about the repercussions my actions would have on anyone involved."

"No, you didn't. Because if you had, I'd certainly hope some form of common sense would have led you to pause and think about what you were doing. The way it would not only reflect on you, but the damage it would cause your teammate to be outed so publicly." His eyes take on the same hardness his tone already possesses. "And then, thanks to cell phones and technology, videos were taken and the whole thing went viral on the internet within hours."

I wince, already more than aware of the fallout my actions have on my teammate, Keene. Aspen too, though I don't really give a damn about that dickhead. Keene is who I care about. Or *cared*, I guess. Even if I had a funny way of showing it by outing his and Aspen's relationship.

It's not one of my proudest moments, and God knows I'd take it back now if I had the chance. But that's the thing about hindsight, right? It's always twenty-twenty.

Not waiting for a reply or more excuses, Dean Marshall continues laying into me.

“Of course, on top of the havoc you’ve wreaked in Mr. Kohl and Mr. Waters’ personal lives, there’s also the reputation of the baseball program, and even this university, to think about.”

My heart crawls up into my throat, becoming nearly impossible to breathe around. I choke on it as I cough out the word, “Sir?”

“I’ve had parents calling and emailing since the incident. Hundreds of them, especially those with students in the LBGT community here at Foltyn. They’re all demanding action be taken.”

My brain snags on his last sentence as more fear and regret crashes over me in waves. They pull me under, lock and chain themselves around my ankles until I might as well be drowning in them. At this rate, letting them take me forever might be preferable.

Wetting my lips, I murmur, “I can’t begin to apologize for what my actions have caused, sir. It was foolish, tasteless, and uncalled for, and had I thought ahead to the way it would make others in the LBGT community feel, things never would have escalated this far. I can assure you.”

Dean Marshall studies me, surely looking for a crack in my sincerity where I know he’ll find none. Because, on top of hurting both Keene and Aspen and possibly screwing myself out of a future here at Foltyn, I’ve become the one thing I never dreamed of.

My father.

To the point where I don’t even recognize myself anymore. All I see is him and his bias. The distaste he has for anyone that isn’t straight has rubbed off onto me, turning me against them.

Turning me against...myself.

After another moment of silence, the Dean leans back in his chair, keeping his intense, penetrating stare on me. “We take this kind of thing very seriously here at Foltyn. Diversity and acceptance are two pillars this university was built on, and providing our students with a safe space where they can be themselves is of the utmost importance to me and the rest of the administration.”

“I understand, sir. And I’m more than happy to apologize or do whatever is necessary to prove I will never be the cause of something like this again. I was already planning to reach out to Keene as it is. Just tell me what you need me to do, and I’ll do it.”

His fingers tap on the wooden desk absently, every light thud ratcheting my heart rate higher and higher. “I wish it were enough, Mr. Reynolds, but intolerance isn’t something we can have here. Which is why we’re going to cut to the chase rather than drag out a done-deal even further than we already have.”

I open my mouth to ask what he means by a *done-deal*, but no words come out. They’re stuck in the back of my throat, terrified to escape and be faced with whatever comes next. All I know is it can’t be good.

And it’s not, when Dean Marshall answers my unspoken question with a cold, harsh finality.

“After much consideration, myself and the admissions office have revoked your acceptance to Foltyn College. Effective immediately.”

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EVERY

Present — Week One

The blaring sound of my alarm jars me from sleep and causes me to bolt straight up in my bed. I quickly grab for my phone, bleary-eyed and frantic, to silence it and check the time.

Seven o'clock.

Fuck my life.

There's not been one summer of my life where I've woken up this early for anything other than baseball. But as the fog of sleep slowly starts to lift from my brain, the realization of why I'm actually awake sinks in all over again.

Because instead of relaxing, hanging out with some of the guys who live in the area all year, or taking regular trips to the coast to escape the heat that tends to descend on the Portland/Vancouver area during the later parts of the summer, I'll be spending the next ten weeks of my life corralling crotch goblins at a goddamn summer camp in the Oregon wilderness.

But then again, everything about my life hasn't been going the way I thought, though I'm smart enough to realize it's of my own doing.

Groaning, I force myself from the warmth of my bed and start getting ready to meet my doom. My feet drag all the way through my morning routine, as if taking a ten-minute shower instead of five is going to delay the inevitable.

I finished packing last night, so all there's left to do is put my toiletries together, haul the two duffels downstairs, and load them into my G Class

parked in the garage, which I do a half-hour later.

Dad's Escalade is still parked beside it, letting me know he hasn't left for work yet, and when I walk back into the house, I find him standing in the kitchen with his back to me. His hair—the same medium blond color as mine—is combed and styled with gel for work, as he pops a pod into the Keurig.

“I thought you had a meeting this morning.”

He turns and leans against the counter. “Got pushed to the afternoon. But that just means I can see you off.”

Of course he'd want to. He's the one who thought up this slightly hair-brained plot about to be set into motion.

As it turns out, Alpine Ridge is the same camp Dean Marshall's brother, Colin, owns and runs. Add in that Dad is the one who does the books for the camp—has for years, since he and Colin became life-long friends during college—and it was easy enough for me to be hired on as the camp's newest summer counselor.

Yay me.

“You didn't need to stick around,” I tell him, moving through the kitchen to grab a banana from the counter for a quick road snack. “I'm about to hit the road anyway.”

His coffee finishes brewing, making me think I can quickly sneak out while he fixes it to go. But he might as well have eyes in the back of his head, because even with his attention locked on pouring it into the thermos, he stops me from escaping.

“You really need to make a good impression, Avery. Don't forget that.”

“Yeah, Dad. I got it,” I tell him, a little more snap to my tone than is probably merited. But I know what's on the line here. I know better than anyone.

Dad's theory of me working at the camp goes like this: by me getting into the Dean's brother's good graces, I will, in turn, get back into the Dean's as well. And maybe once he's seen the growth and progress I've made while working at the camp, I might be allowed to come back to Foltyn this fall.

It's a long shot, maybe even down-right insane, but it's becoming more and more apparent that this might be my only chance to complete my degree on schedule. It's too late to get into another school, even a community college. And even if I could, it would set me back almost an entire year, because not all my credits would transfer with me.

Getting back into Foltyn for my senior year is the only option.

So, while I have little to no faith it will work, I'm tossing all my eggs in this basket anyway. And praying for a goddamn miracle.

His gaze lifts, eyes narrowing on me. "Cut the attitude. You're the one who got yourself into a mess so big, no amount of money I've thrown at the school in the past makes a difference now. Offering them more only makes it look like bribery to get you back in."

I almost laugh, because it was all rubbing elbows from the beginning anyway. The entire reason I got into Foltyn in the first place is due to it being his alma mater. That, and the sizable donation he made to the college was more than enough to secure my position on the baseball team—because heaven forbid he say I'm talented enough to earn the spot on my own.

Then again, all he's ever done is throw money at his problems and expect them to go away. And this is one circumstance where it just won't happen.

"I'll put my best foot forward. I promise."

"You need to do more than that, Avery," he says sharply. "You need to do everything in your power to win over Colin."

"I know, Dad," I say, this time a little more forcefully. "You saying it over and over again isn't going to do anything but stress me out more when I feel like I'm already being thrown to the wolves."

I expect him to continue pushing the subject. That's who Dad is, after all. Driving his point home until I can hear him, word for word, while I fucking sleep. So when he actually listens to me, dropping the subject, I finally feel a moment of relief.

But only for a moment.

"Look," he says, voice finally taking a softer tone—something entirely different from him. "I hope you know I'm only hard on you because I want to see you succeed. I just hate knowing you possibly won't get the chance because of one mistake."

More like a series of mistakes.

A bit of emotion sticks in the back of my throat, so I just nod instead.

He does too before clapping me on the shoulder. "I hope you know I get it. The kind of...*lifestyle* your teammate has doesn't sit well with me either. But no matter how disgusted we might be by the things they do together, the kind of crap you pulled can't happen in the twenty-first century."

All the blood rushing through my veins quickly turns to ice as his words register.

I bet he didn't even notice the tone of his voice or the implication of what

he's said; the homophobia and bias laced in a statement that spilled from his lips without a second thought. Not when it came out as easily as it did.

Every time it happens, it makes me sick to my stomach. This time is no different.

Clearing my throat does nothing to help the way my heart is lodged in my throat, but I still manage to choke out my response past it.

"Yeah, Dad. I know."

It's something I've always known.

Just like I know the parts of myself I've refused to give voice to can never come to light. Because there's no way in hell he's ever going to accept the *real* me as his only son.

It's a quick hour-and-a-half drive from our house in Vancouver over to where Alpine Ridge Summer Camp is nestled into the forest near the base of Mount Hood. Much too quick for my liking, because I've yet to work out a clear plan on how to wriggle my way into the good graces of the camp director, should he already know about my history at Foltyn.

I'd be a fool to think he doesn't—what happened made a lot of news channels around here—but part of me remains optimistic anyway. I have to, otherwise there's no way I'll be able to stick this out.

I doubt I'll be able to as it is, because while I might be an athlete, I'm the furthest thing from an outdoorsman.

Once I'm parked in the lot, staring at the massive lodge off to the left, the feeling of dread inside me only grows. But instead of melding in it, I shove it down before grabbing my bags from the trunk and heading toward the building—I can only assume—houses the camp director's office.

And my assumption must be right when a man who looks so similar to Dean Marshall, he has to be his brother, exits the lodge and waits for me at the top of the stairs leading to an expansive deck.

"You might as well be the spitting image of your father, Avery. Glad to see you made it," he says, extending his hand to me as I reach him.

I accept it before giving it a firm shake, praying to God my hands aren't as clammy as I think they are, while taking in his warm smile.

"Director Marshall," I say, keeping my tone as even and professional as I

can manage. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

His lips quiver a moment with a hint of amusement before he releases my hand. “The pleasure’s all mine. Let’s get you in my office to go over a couple things before we get you settled in.”

Not one to argue with my new boss, I follow him through the doors to the lodge and down a hall to the immediate left, not stopping until we reach the final door labeled Director Marshall. He pushes the door open before motioning for me to enter, calling through a walkie talkie as he does to ask for a grounds escort to meet us at the lodge in ten minutes.

“Take a load off,” he says, nodding to the chair across from his desk. “We can chat for a bit while we wait for the rest of your welcoming committee.”

I do as he says, sliding into the chair as the door falls closed with a soft *snick*. When he takes a seat opposite me, I’m immediately taken back to the moment I was sitting across the desk from another Mr. Marshall. When my entire future unraveled before my eyes.

It only serves to remind me how important being here is.

“Thank you for making time for me this morning,” I start, doing my best to feel him out. See what he knows or what he’s heard—if anything. “I know things are set to kick off tomorrow, and I was hoping you could give me a better feel for things before I’m—”

“Thrown to the wolves?” he supplies with a wry grin on his face, and when I wince at the idiom I used verbatim this morning, he lets out a deep laugh. “I’ve spoken to your father at length, and believe me, you’ve got nothing to worry about when it comes to working here. The kids are great—the counselors too. I have no doubt you’ll ease into the job just fine.”

I’m left staring at him, taken aback by the ease and comfort radiating from him. Like a warm hug or something. Regardless, it’s the exact opposite impression I made of Dean Marshall, and it’s not what I expected.

“Thank you, sir,” I manage, after finding my voice again. “It certainly makes me feel a bit better about spending the summer here.”

There’s a moment of silence while he studies me before he gives a quick nod. “I have to say, I was surprised when your father contacted me about getting you the job. Especially with how last minute it was.”

“Trust me, it was last minute for me too, sir.”

He waves before leaning back in his chair. “Call me Colin. There’s no need to stand on formality here, and I certainly don’t require any kind of power trip.” Another smile forms on his lips, this one a little more knowing.

“If there’s one thing you learn in your time here at Alpine Ridge, it’s that I’m not my brother, Avery.”

Mention of Dean Marshall sets my nerves on edge all over again; constricting my lungs and causing my heart rate to ratchet up a notch. “I’d never begin to presume you and Dean Marshall are the same person. Brothers or not.”

One salt-and-pepper brow arches dubiously. “Really? So then you aren’t just here for the summer in hopes I’ll put a good word in for you with him so you’ll be reinstated at Foltyn come fall?”

Once again, I’m left speechless. Mouth hanging open, ready to defend myself, but the words just won’t come out. They can’t; whether it be from pure shock or unwillingness to lie to my boss in the first five minutes, I’m not sure. Either way, Colin doesn’t wait for me to give any sort of answer before continuing.

“I’ve known your father for a long time, Avery, and Jason Reynolds isn’t one to beat around the bush. Quite frankly, neither am I. So when I asked him why in the world you wanted to come work at a summer camp, he laid it all out for me.”

Fuck a motherfucking duck.

A wave of nausea hits me, and it’s like I can see my entire future go up in smithereens all over again. Because if *all* entails every piece of this plan Dad cooked up, then I’m screwed before we even begin.

“Colin, I—”

He holds his hand up. “I know it’s not your idea to be here. Even without your father telling me, it was obvious from the moment I saw you walk up those steps; you’ve never spent a day of your life at a summer camp. But that doesn’t matter to me.”

“It doesn’t,” I say slowly, to which he shakes his head.

“What *does* is—while you’re here—you’ll not only give these kids your all, but you’ll also make the most of it for yourself.”

The tiniest bout of relief hits me, and maybe I’m not as fucked as I thought.

“Absolutely,” I tell him, my tone earnest. “I have every intention of making the most of my summer here. You could tell me right now that you’re estranged from your brother or something, and I’d still make the decision to stay.”

A deep chuckle comes from him. “We’re far from estranged, though I

don't know how much help I'll be in your quest to be reinstated as a student at Foltyn. If I know anything about Ian, it's that he isn't one to change his mind or give second chances. And if he does, the number of times it's happened in the time I've known him can be counted on one hand."

My heart, which had just started to soar with hope, is immediately shot down, falling into the pit of my stomach as it's weighed down by the realization that this all might be in vain from the start.

Is it too late to take back what I said about staying no matter what?

He must take my silence as defeat, and he leans back in his chair. "I'm not trying to burst any bubbles for you, kid. But just like you've chosen to be up front with me, I'm choosing to be up front with you. I think there's always hope. And that's why I plan to give you the best shot I can by assigning you to Elijah's group."

"Elijah?"

His lips lift in a smirk before he spins a picture frame sitting on his desk around to face me. Inside it is a photograph which can't be more than a couple years old from Colin's features alone. In the image, he's standing beneath the Alpine Ridge sign hung over the entrance to the camp with a dark-haired kid who can't be more than eight or nine.

"My nephew. Who is also your Dean's son."

All the wheels and gears in my brain come screeching to a halt at one tiny piece of information neither my father or I were aware of.

The Dean has a son...and he attends camp here.

"I'm sorry..." I mutter, trying to wrap my brain around what is happening here. "After knowing everything—my mistakes at Foltyn, my father's not-so-subtle scheming—you're going to trust me with Dean Marshall's son?"

There's a devilish gleam to Colin's eyes when he nods. "That's exactly why I'm doing it."

Yeah, brain is still not computing.

And from the way Colin laughs, my expression must make it extremely apparent.

"The only place Eli hates more than being home with his father is here," Colin states before he gives me a *what can you do?* shrug. "He's been coming for a few years now, but he doesn't have fun. Usually spends most of the time alone or attached to my hip, rather than making friends with his peers. This is the summer I want to change that."

I wet my lips, following his train of thought. But I'm not all that fond of

the station it stops at. “So naturally, you’re blackmailing me into...what? Being his friend?”

Another deep chuckle bursts from him as he shakes his head. “Not at all. But I’d like to think of it as us doing each other a favor. A win-win, if you will. You keeping an eye on Eli for me and making sure he has a bit of fun this summer gives me one less thing to worry about while I’m running this place. In exchange, I’m more than happy to put in a good word for you with his father. And who knows,” he says, a slight twinkle in his eyes, “maybe you’ll make enough of an impact on the kid and he’ll do the same thing.”

Yeah, I highly doubt that. Kids have never been much of my thing, and I swear to God, they know it the second I walk in the room.

“I’ll do my best,” is all I manage. Because, honestly, what other option do I have at this point? I’ve been backed into a corner by my father, and now Colin is only trying to help me make the most of it.

Yet something about this whole situation...doesn’t make sense to me.

My brows clash together in the center, and no matter how I try to work it out, I’m still left with one burning question unanswered.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but why would you help me? After knowing what I did and then finding out my father plotted this whole thing to get me back into school, why aren’t you just showing me the door?”

Colin’s head cants to the side as his dark eyes travel over my face, studying and analyzing it in the same way his brother did a few weeks ago. It’s the only time since I’ve met the man where I’ve truly *felt* a similar vibe from him.

And, for whatever reason, he must see something in me his brother didn’t.

“I’m a firm believer of second chances, Avery. Doing a bad thing doesn’t automatically make you a bad person. But I do want to be sure there won’t be any issues here this summer. With campers or counselors who might...” He trails off, clearly making an effort to word his thoughts correctly. “Lead a different life than you agree with.”

“Never,” I reply, my head shaking vehemently. “That part of me is in the past, and I never intend to make the same mistake again.” After the stinging rejection I got from Keene, matters of the heart will be kept under lock and key for the foreseeable future.

His face softens, and for the first time, I feel truly at ease with the circumstances I’ve found myself in. Or as comfortable as possible, considering I still know jack shit about kids, summer camp, outdoorsing, or

the job I'm meant to do for the next ten weeks.

But hey, this is a start.

"Great, then just know I've set you up with a good group of kids," he tells me, attention shifting to the file folder on his desk he's already begun flipping through. "And you'll be paired with Kal for the duration of the program. He's one of the best counselors we have on staff and knows this place like the back of his hand. Hopefully with him by your side, you won't feel like a fish out of water."

I nod. "Thank you, si...Colin."

His lips quirk at my catch. "Very good. Now, during the month of June, we like to—"

Wherever the rest of his thought was heading is cut off by his office door opening without warning, revealing a brown-haired young man with an all-too-familiar face on the opposite side of the threshold.

Kaleb LaMothe.

My now-ex teammate from Foltyn, who also happens to be the last person I'd ever want to see here. Or ever again, if I had a say in it.

After all, he's the reason Coach—and in turn, the Dean—found out about what I did with that stupid slideshow photo. If he'd never turned me in, I'd still be on the team and in school. Which means I wouldn't have to spend most of my summer here when I'd much rather be...well, anywhere else.

And to make matters worse, he's wearing a forest green shirt with the camp's logo on the corner, making it a safe bet he works here too.

His eyes—damn near the same color as said shirt—lock with mine for a brief moment before I shift my attention back to Colin.

"Ah, perfect timing as always, Kal," he says, motioning for him to enter.

Bile works its way into my mouth, my eyes sinking closed while sending up a silent prayer to any God who might listen that all these pieces snapping together are only a nightmare. But even without opening my eyes, I know it's my reality.

Kal...as in *Kaleb*.

The same guy who I'll be spending the entire summer working with.

Fuck.

KALEB

The pulse hammering in my throat hasn't lessened since the moment I walked into Colin's office to show the new summer counselor around the grounds, only to find Avery Reynolds sitting in the chair across from him.

Not while I ask Colin what the hell is going on. Not while I listen to him explain that Avery is the new counselor on staff this season. Not when he explains how Avery is going to be assigned to the same group of kids as me for the summer, so I can show him the ropes.

Even as I slip out of Colin's office with Avery on my tail, I can still feel the thrum of blood rushing beneath my skin. It floods me with a scalding heat that rivals the sun's. Hot enough, even the cool mountain breeze can't seem to temper it.

Awkward silence creates a toxic fog between us, and even in the open air on this gorgeous June day, it's stifling. And though I wouldn't have thought it possible, it only gets worse the second Avery tries to break the ice as we head down the steps.

"So...it's a small world."

It is, and his presence here is making it smaller and smaller by the second. Which is why I have no intention of engaging in any bullshit small-talk with him. Or any kind of talking, for that matter. Around the kids and for my job's sake? Sure, I'll play nice. But I'm planning to make sure any and all encounters besides those required of us are kept to a minimum.

It's the only way this will work.

"Let's not."

He doesn't take the hint.

“Kaleb. I—”

“The grounds are set up in something of a half circle,” I start, cutting in before he has a chance to finish his thought. I don’t wanna hear anything he has to say.

We pass by the bathhouse, which is directly beside the main lodge, and I continue explaining the layout of the camp. “You’ve already seen the lodge. Offices and housing for administration, bathrooms, laundry facilities, and the cafeteria are all in or directly behind it. And then all the cabins for both campers and counselors run down six paths that radiate in an arc from the center of the complex.”

Rather than try explaining it again if he’s confused, I stop at the activities board near the bottom of the steps and rip one of the maps off. I press it into his chest—the heat in my veins shifting to straight up boiling levels when I feel the hardness of his pecs beneath my palm—before turning away.

“At least there’s indoor plumbing,” he says while folding the map and tucking it into the pocket of his jeans.

I don’t answer, instead leading Avery down the third path from the left—where all the cabins for the eleven-year-olds are located—that winds between the firs and hemlocks. Silent prayers for peace and tranquility are sent into the universe, and all I can do now is hope they’re answered. Or maybe being immersed in nature can bring those things to me. Otherwise I very well might lose my fucking shit on of this guy.

“Counselors have their own cabins. It’s set up so there’s one on either end of the path. I’ll be on the end closest to the center of the complex; you’ll be set up on the far end.”

“So I’m the one eaten by bears first,” he deadpans from behind me.

“We can only hope,” I mutter under my breath.

The cabin layouts might be the only fortunate part of this entire situation. The small amount of added distance between his sleeping location and mine should make it easy enough to avoid him during my downtime at the very least.

I chance a glance over at him to find dread and discomfort written all over his chiseled face. Anxiety etched into those piercing blue eyes, the same color of the sky on a clear day.

Even out of his element, Avery’s still able to hold onto that conventionally attractive rich-boy swagger he has. Much to my displeasure. I’m sure he smooth-talked his way right into Colin’s good graces too. He’s

just got that air about him. Always saying the right thing at the right time, oozing charm and charisma at every turn.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't fallen victim to it my first couple years at Foltyn too, back when I was still doing my best to find new friends and fit into the team. But what I failed to realize is that being teammates doesn't automatically equate to friendship, and even with countless conversations over our seasons together on the same team, I can count on one hand all the things I know about him. Because everything was surface level. No substance to it.

We're nothing more than acquaintances, and after seeing what he did to Keene and Aspen, I have no problem keeping it that way.

Silence once again lingers between us as we reach the end of the path, dead-ending right into the set of steps leading up to Avery's cabin. I take them two at a time, reaching the top in two strides, and begin unlocking the door.

"You and I will both have a master key, meaning the key I'm giving you unlocks not only your cabin, but all the other cabins on this path."

"Including your cabin?"

The question gives me enough pause to stop what I'm doing. Because I sure as hell hadn't thought about that.

Fucking wonderful.

"I said *all the cabins*, didn't I?" I manage to grind out before flicking the lock out of place and shoving the door open for him to walk in.

On the other side, a double bed, lounge chair, and nightstand between the two take up the majority of the cabin's footprint. There's a small built-in coat rack behind the door, as well as a few cubbies to store clothes, shoes, and toiletries.

As simple and understated on the inside as it is on the outside—though it's actually one of the nicer cabins on the property. It's one of the last ones added before last summer, when we got the funding to expand the program, allowing us to almost double the number of kids able to attend this season.

I drop his key on the tiny hook beside the door and lean against the threshold, watching Avery like a hawk as he quietly glances around the space.

"This is it?" he asks while setting his bags on the bed.

Something between incredulity and disgust leaks from his tone, and it instantly grates on my nerves. I shouldn't be surprised this style of living

wouldn't be up to his standards. When he heard the word *cabin*, no doubt he thought of some fancy ski chalet in Aspen or Park City, not the tiny one-room style those of us without money think of.

The fact that he has to walk a few hundred yards to the bathroom or won't be able to send all his clothes out to be laundered will be a rude awakening for him.

"Home sweet home for the next ten weeks."

A low groan comes from him as he runs his fingers through his golden locks. "If I survive that long."

More irritation courses through me, and I've just about had it with his bullshit. Which is why I'm not surprised I can't keep my thoughts to myself a moment longer.

"What the hell are you doing here, Avery?"

The frankness of my question must take him off guard, because he freezes instantly, those sky blues locking with mine. And for the briefest moment, I think I see something alluding to uncertainty in their depths.

"Look, I wasn't aware—"

"Save it," I snap, cutting him off. "I asked what the hell you're doing here. That's all I wanna know."

Biting his head off must snap him out of whatever stupor he briefly fell into, and then on a dime, the fighter in him comes out with a vengeance.

"Why're you coming at me like this?" he snarls. "If one of us should be pissed at the other, it's me. Because *you* were the one who got me kicked out of Foltyn, not the other way around."

"You got yourself kicked out."

Something between a snort and a laugh comes from him; a clear attempt to make little of my accusation. Too bad for him, all it does is light a fire under my ass.

"Try and brush it off. Blame me if you want. But what you did was wrong," I bite out, arms crossing over my chest. "It's not my fault you can't own it or take responsibility for your actions."

A sneer takes over his face; one I can only describe as vicious and feral. Anger and even a little hatred swimming in his glare as he crosses the room to me, getting up in my face like his proximity does anything to intimidate me.

"In case you didn't realize, I've done everything in my power to make it right. With Coach. With the school admin. And with Keene."

I knew he texted Keene to apologize, but I hadn't gotten many more details out of our catcher than that. Then again, he's been holed up all summer, licking the wounds the fucker in front of me inflicted on him in the first place.

"And an apology is supposed to just magically make the fact that you outed not one, but two people, better?" I scoff and shake my head, knowing full well it doesn't. "Why'd you even do it, anyway?"

The sneer on his face deepens, and if even possible, he steps in closer. Close enough for me to catch a whiff of his cologne or body spray or whatever the hell he wears. Ocean salt and some sort of citrus, and it makes my stomach flip unexpectedly before a buzzing feeling sets in. It feels eerily like...butterflies. Even in the midst of whatever kind of showdown we're having.

Then the asshole goes and opens his mouth again, effectively breaking the moment and reminding me exactly why I can't stand him.

"The time for asking questions was the second you saw me looking through Keene's phone. Not months later, after the damage is done."

"Damage *you* caused," I point out.

"And it all would have been avoided if you'd spoken up."

His statement gives me pause, because even without him saying it, I've wondered if it's true. Plenty of times over the past few weeks, I've thought about how things could have played out differently. Because, while I'm perfectly aware that Avery made his own choices, I made mine too. And I chose to not say anything to him at that moment, instead quietly observing rather than making my presence known.

Maybe I could have talked to him. Distracted him enough to stop him from finding the picture which ended up being exactly the kind of ammunition Avery was looking for. It sure as hell would've saved Keene and Aspen from all the shit they went through because of Avery's actions. Shit they're *still* going through, because last I spoke to Keene, he hasn't heard a word from Aspen since that catastrophic moment.

But the more I dwell on it, the more miserable I get.

Avery shakes his head, still spitting mad from the looks of it, but he also takes a step back, giving us both some much needed space. "This is pointless. Because you're never gonna agree with my actions, just like I sure as fuck won't agree with yours."

"Finally. Something we can agree on." I'm practically seething when I

circle back to my original thought. “So are you gonna tell me why the hell you’re here?”

“Nah, I’m gonna just let you fill in all the blanks. Feel free to go to Colin with your theories, though. You know, ‘cause you’ve already had the practice.”

My jaw ticks hard enough my molars might crack from the pressure, and I’m damn sure steam is shooting straight out of my ears.

This fucking douchewaffle.

“Forget it, Reynolds.” Shoving off the threshold, I head down the stairs and call over my shoulder. “Campers arrive tomorrow morning, seven o’clock. Do us both a favor and stay out of my way until then.”

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KALEB

Cars begin arriving at seven on the dot the next morning, and Avery is nowhere to be found. Which checks out, honestly. I knew there was no way he's taking this seriously, and that's exactly the reason I asked why he was here. Because, while this might be all fun and games to him, working here is something I take very seriously.

And while I enjoy being right as much as anyone, it also pisses me off to no end.

In fact, half of the campers in our age group have arrived by the time Avery comes skidding to a stop beside me.

"You're late." I tell him, not bothering to glance up from the clipboard in my hands.

"Only by fifteen minutes," he says in a huff.

"Fifteen minutes, one minute, or an hour. The amount of time you're late by doesn't change the fact that you're still late."

A sharp scoff comes from him. "You're really getting off on this shit, y'know that? You have some sort of superiority complex I don't know about?"

I finally lift my gaze to find his blue eyes aimed at me in a glare. "If being on time and responsible is a superiority complex, then yes."

He blinks, irritation and frustration written all over his face.

Well, he can join the club. Because I'm sure as hell annoyed to no end by his inability to be on time for the kids' arrivals.

I'm about to tell him this too, when out of nowhere, his fingers wrap around my wrist, causing a small zing of electricity to shoot straight through

my chest. And that's the best way to describe it. Electric. Not the same white-hot heat that ripples through my extremities when I get angry, nor the jolt of adrenaline when fear kicks in. It's a sensation I've never really felt before, apart from yesterday, and I don't really know what to do with it.

Avery uses his grip to haul me toward the side of the lodge, and it snaps me out of the momentary stupor I fell into at his touch.

"Reynolds, I'm a little busy—"

He stops us dead in our tracks, turning on me and cutting me off before I have the chance to finish my thought. "This isn't going to work."

I yank my arm free from his hold and snarl, "You pulling me away from what I was doing? Yeah, it sure as hell isn't."

"I meant this" —he motions between our chests— "isn't going to work. This bickering and snarkiness. If it does, one of us is bound to snap. From the way things have gone the past twenty-four hours, it might even get nuclear. And that can't happen in front of all these kids."

He happens to be right. Unfortunately.

And him being right only pisses me off more. Still, I keep my temper reined in as best I can. The last thing we need right now is me losing my fucking shit.

"For once, I'll agree with you. So let's make it easy on both of us." My eyes narrow on those sky blues. "Tell Colin you're no longer interested in working here. I'm sure there were plenty of applicants for the position who would gladly take your place, even this last minute. Then all our problems are solved."

A frown creases his forehead. "What? No. I'm not going anywhere."

I shouldn't be surprised by his unwillingness to listen. I've known him long enough to understand he's stubborn as a mule and not one to back down from any sort of confrontation.

Taking the time to look at him—I mean really fucking look at the guy—I do my best to figure out, once again, what the hell his game is here. Because none of it makes any sense to me.

This isn't a place he'd be caught dead of his own volition. He knows it, I know it, and most importantly, it's written all over him. In the way his hair and clothes are a disheveled mess, like he just threw himself together after rolling out of bed. In the whites of his eyes, bloodshot to hell; no doubt from lack of sleep.

Which brings me to ask him the same damn question as yesterday.

“Why?”

“Because I need to be here.” His tone is insistent, but not as much as the look in those bloodshot eyes. “I just do. Okay? So can we move on and try to get along?”

My mind catches on one, single word.

Need.

Jonesing it outdoors wouldn't be Avery's scene unless it was on some rooftop bar for brunch with his richie-rich friends back in Vancouver. Not roughing it in the wilderness, even if we do have running water.

He's here out of some sort of necessity, and it's backed him into a corner.

Which is why, rather than fighting with him more—possibly bringing out the raging bull living deep inside him—I let it slide. I'll just wait for him to crack instead. Because he will eventually.

“Look, I don't know how you got this job or why you think you need it in the first place. I don't really care, either. But this camp is *my* safe space. *My* haven away from real life. I *want* to be here, and I'll be damned to hell before I let you ruin it for me, or for any of these kids who feel the same way.”

“I won't.”

“Fine.” I slip a sheet of paper out from the clipboard and hand it to him while trying to keep the irritation from showing in my tone. “These are the bunking assignments for the kids. Three per cabin. They're all unlocked already, no thanks to you, so you'll just need to take the kids to get settled in as they arrive. I'll take care of checking them in and all the goodbyes.”

I don't bother waiting for a response, instead turning on my heel to head back to the safety of the parking lot.

It's five to eight by the time my father's truck rolls into the camp's parking lot.

He's barely thrown the vehicle into park when my twin brothers bolt out the back doors, making a beeline straight past me to their friend, Colton, who is waiting for Avery to come back and take him to his cabin.

Ashton practically tackles Colton, Parker not far behind, and the three of them instantly start chattering animatedly at each other; surely filling in the blanks they've missed in each other's lives since they saw each other skiing

at Mount Bachelor this past winter.

“Nice to see you too, guys!” I shout to the twins, holding my arms out to the side. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

Parker’s nose wrinkles in disgust at the same time Ashton yells back, “We saw you yesterday!”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t at least say hi,” I mutter to myself as I check the two of them off the list and head over to Dad’s truck to grab their bags.

“Your mom barely got a goodbye out of them this morning,” Dad says by way of greeting as he pulls their duffles from the bed of the truck. “They’re excited. I wouldn’t take it personally.”

I roll my eyes as he hands me Ash’s before hauling it over my shoulder. “Ten weeks without their parents. Of course they’re excited.”

“Especially when they think their big brother will let them get away with everything.”

A snort mixed with a laugh leaves me. “They won’t be getting away with a damn thing if I have anything to say about it.”

His deep, warm chuckle floats over me like warm honey, and a tiny twinge of homesickness courses through me. I don’t see my parents nearly enough now with spending most of the year in the Portland area while they’re back in Bend, but it’s not until I’m back in their presence when I realize how much I miss them.

“I’m certain they’ll be testing you on that.” His expression sobers slightly as we approach the edge of the parking lot where the twins are. “I know you don’t have a lot of time, but how’re you doing? I’m sure not a lot has changed in the past twenty-four hours, but...”

My eyes search Dad’s face momentarily, debating if I should tell him the truth or not. But needing to talk to *someone* about it wins out, and a long sigh leaves me.

“Avery’s here,” I tell him quietly.

“Avery?”

“From school. The one who was on my team that...” I give him a silent, imploring look. Begging him to understand what I’m saying without spelling it out where other parents, counselors, or kids could hear, even if they’re all too busy with their own conversations to eavesdrop.

I know of a few of the older kids who’ve been attending camp here regularly for years that are out and open about their sexual orientation. Not just to their families, but publicly as well. They don’t need to find out about

the shit one of their counselors pulled not even a month ago, outing someone in their own community.

Thankfully, my father just nods in understanding before his eyes track Parker and Ashton instead. “If you don’t feel safe, you have the right to say something.”

“It’s not my safety I’m worried about. There’s no way he’s going to find out about me while we’re here.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

I explain my line of thinking with the LGBT kids who attend here, then add, “Plus, I don’t want his bigoted, biased bullshit to rub off on any of the kids. Look at Park and Ash; they just want to fit in with their friends and be cool. They’re impressionable, and I’m concerned he might do or say something that’ll either hurt one of the kids with some off-hand comment. Or worse, guide some of them down the path he followed.”

He gives me a thoughtful look before saying, “All valid concerns, to be sure. So what are you gonna do about it?”

Another sigh leaves me as I scratch the back of my neck. “I don’t know yet. But if you’ve taught me anything, it’s that hatred and bias aren’t ingrained in us from birth. It’s a line of thinking both taught and learned. And it’s a chance the camp is taking by letting him be here.”

A grin appears on his face and he nods. “I stand by teaching you that, and again, I see your concerns. But I think you’re looking at this from the wrong perspective.”

“Meaning?”

“Maybe instead of worrying about what he might accidentally teach them, you can make this summer about what you know you can teach *him*?”

My brows raise in surprise. “You think I can reverse his bigotry?”

Dad simply shrugs. “It might be harder than getting him fired, sure. But I don’t think it would hurt to try.”

Yeah, except that would mean spending more time with the dick than I already have to. Something not very high on my to-do list.

Doubt must be written all over my face, because Dad lets out another low chuckle. “No need to look like I ruined your summer before it’s begun. I’m just offering some food for thought.”

“As if I needed more on my plate,” I mumble, my voice laced with sarcasm as I grab Parker’s bag from him too. “But thanks.”

A smile tilts the corner of his lips and he claps me on the shoulder. “I’ll

let you get back to it. But your mom and I are proud of you. And we'll keep being proud of you no matter what you decide to do."

"Thanks, Dad."

I'm pulled in for a quick hug before he releases me and heads back toward his truck.

"Wait, aren't you gonna say bye to the twins?" I call after him.

He waves me off, a grin on his face. "Not a chance, kid. They're too preoccupied and I've gotta get back home anyway. Make sure those two don't kill each other."

"I'll do my best."

Dad's truck has barely disappeared from sight when I turn around to find Avery standing with Colton, Ashton, and Parker. His eyes are locked on the bunking assignments, probably searching for all their names when Ashton all but yanks the paper from his grasp.

"Ash," I shout, immediately moving toward them, and by the time I've reached the group of them, he's already put the paper back in Avery's waiting hands.

"Sorry," Ash says, and at least he has the decency to look a bit sheepish.

"Not to me."

His nose wrinkles a little before he looks up at Avery instead. "Sorry. I was rude."

"It's all good," he tells Ashton. He pauses for a second, glancing from Ash back to me with his brows furrowed slightly. "I take it you know them?"

"Only their entire lives," I mutter, pointing at their names on the bunking assignments. "Parker and Ashton *LaMothe*. My brothers."

His brows shoot up as he, once again, looks between the twins and me. Only this time, to try and place the resemblance.

There's no mistaking the two of them; they're identical. Down to the scraggly bodies, mops of light brown hair, and hazel eyes. But I don't share many of their features. Which makes sense, seeing as their dad isn't mine. At least, not biologically, though that doesn't mean shit to me. He's still the only dad I've ever known.

"I don't see it," Avery confirms after a minute.

"Usually how it goes," Parker confirms with a lilt of laughter. "We don't like to claim him most of the time anyway."

I roll my eyes, already regretting my request to be assigned to their group this year. "Hilarious, Park."

My attention shifts to Avery again to find him already staring at me, and the instant our gazes collide, the buzzing feeling from earlier is back. Resurfaces with a roar, ripping through me and impossible to ignore.

Clearing my throat, I nod toward the twins. “All our kids are here, so I’ll take my brothers to their cabin if you’ll take Colton.”

He nods before breaking eye contact to glance at Colton. “Let’s get a move on, kid. Your friends are waiting.”

Colton’s giddy, excited energy radiates off him as he says bye to the twins before heading off with Avery for the cabins. The tingly electric feeling fades the further the two of them walk away, disappearing entirely when they also disappear from sight.

When I finally allow my gaze to shift back to the twins, they’re both already watching me with curiosity.

“Who was that guy?” Ashton asks, arms crossed over his chest like he’s some kind of badass, not my twerp of a brother I could snap like a twig with one hand.

“Yeah, he’s never been a counselor here before,” Park chimes in. “Do you know him?”

Ash’s brows furrow as he shifts his attention to Parker, cocking his head. “Didn’t you feel that tension between them? Of course they know each other.” He looks at me again. “So who is he?”

Ah, yes. How I’ve missed this; classic Park and Ash. Always bouncing off each other, reading each other’s minds, and never letting another person get a word in edgewise.

“Are we playing Twenty Questions and I didn’t realize it?”

Parker shrugs before grabbing his bag from me. “If we are, we’ve still got like seventeen to go. Technically eighteen, since Ash asked the same question twice.”

“Smartass,” I murmur before handing Ashton his bag too. “Yes, I know him. That’s Avery. I played baseball with him at Foltyn.”

Parker’s eyes widen and he smacks Ashton in the chest. “Oh, my God. *That* Avery?”

I let out a long sigh before nodding.

The nice thing about being out to my family is not only the freedom to be myself with all of them, but it also gives the chance for Mom, Dad, and I to teach the twins about the LGBT community. And it allows me to share things about my life—things like what happened this spring at Foltyn with Avery

and Keene—so the twins can learn from them.

Teaching them to be loving and accepting towards those who are different from them. Not a couple little assholes who can't handle some diversity or people being their most authentic selves.

Ashton's the first to ask the question we all want the answer to.

"Why is he here?"

I roll my lips inward before answering honestly. "I really don't know. Haven't managed to figure it out yet."

Both their noses wrinkle up, speaking more about their feelings than words ever could. And though I didn't have any worries about my brothers being influenced by Avery this summer, if I had, they'd be completely gone with that single look.

But this is supposed to be the fun time of year, and I'm not about to let it start off with heavy shit. So I change the subject.

"C'mon, let's get you to your cabin," I say before ushering them deeper into the grounds. "I'm sure you're both excited? Seemed like it when you couldn't even say hi earlier."

They both nod, the same giddy energy they had when they first got here back on a dime. But then Parker lets out a little disgruntled noise before whining, "But why'd you have to pair us with Elijah for a bunkmate?"

"Parker Matthew," I hiss in warning, glancing around to make sure no one—especially Elijah—is around to overhear my dickhead little brother.

"Kaleb Jackson," he retorts back, all attitude and sass.

Oh, the joys of fighting with a preteen. And lucky me, I get to spend the camp season doing it...with not just the twins, but eighteen others too. Then add in the one guy on the planet I'd rather never see again being my co-counselor, and this is bound to be one interesting summer.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

KALEB

I t's quarter after midnight when I step into the bath house, expecting it to be deserted for this time of night, only to find one of the three showers is already in use.

Most of the camp is usually dead asleep at this time, doing their best to recharge for a jam-packed day sure to come tomorrow. But apparently, someone had the same idea as me, and when I glance at the vanity to find a small leather toiletry bag—the letters AJR embossed on the side—my mood instantly takes a plummet off Mount Hood.

I don't need to know what the J stands for when the A and R are clearly Avery Reynolds.

“Fucking great,” I mutter under my breath before dropping my own things on the sink to unpack my shampoo and body wash.

Working at the camp for the past three summers has always been grueling. Long, sometimes very hot, days outdoors, constantly handling a bunch of kids who need this, that, or the other thing. Activities packed in our schedule from dawn to dusk to make sure they're all so exhausted when it's lights out, there's no shenanigans after—something a few returning campers are notorious for causing.

So when it comes to the end of the day, I need these thirty minutes of alone time to take the hottest shower imaginable and wash away not only the dirty and grime from the day but also all the stress and frustration I've had to keep bottled up while I'm around the kids.

Stress Avery now adds to.

He's fucking everywhere.

Spending all this time with him is starting to really wear on me, and it's only been a few days. And most of it is thanks to the fucking intense, buzzing feeling I get whenever we're within a few feet of each other.

I felt it when we were in his cabin day one, then when he grabbed me and pulled me to the side the following morning. A few more times since then too, while we've been taking the boys on the lake and I've been forced to witness Avery in nothing but a pair of swim trunks for hours at a time.

It's taken me a few days to place the feeling, and after today, I know exactly what it is...no matter how much I wish I didn't.

It's attraction. Desire.

Fucking lust.

All things I'd never want to feel for him, but it seems the head in my shorts is severely at odds with the one on my shoulders.

Which is just fucking wonderful.

I do my best to shove thoughts of him aside, even if he is within a couple feet of me at the moment, and slip into the empty stall beside him. Blowing out a long breath, I flip the nozzle on the shower to let it heat and undress, all the while perfectly aware of that damn feeling growing inside me.

Avery hasn't made a peep while I've been in here, so he's either ignoring me, or he must not have heard me over the running water in his own stall. Either way, I can only be thankful for, and then hope he's in and out before I'm done...or vice versa.

No run-ins. No interactions.

Last thing I need after my epiphany earlier is to run into him half naked in a towel. Or completely naked. Or just run into him in general.

All avoidance would be preferable, really.

I start on my hair, lathering shampoo in my palm before sticking my head beneath the spray to rinse. Ignoring the electric feeling from being this close to him is nearly impossible right now, and I even go as far as turning the dial on the shower down to cold. But the frigid water does nothing to temper the roaring desire at knowing he's only a couple feet away from me.

Naked and wet and—

A soft moan comes from the stall beside me, and I almost drop my bottle of body wash on the floor.

What the—

Another groan, this one deeper and more drawn out, echoes through the bathhouse. Loud enough that...there's no way he knows I'm in here.

He'd only be doing what I think he's doing if he assumed he was still alone.

Oh, my God.

And as a few more seconds pass, I do my best to keep perfectly silent... and listen. For any other tell-tale sounds to confirm my suspicions. Because maybe it's not what I think. Hell, part of me is fucking praying to whatever God might exist that Avery *isn't* currently jacking off in the stall beside me.

But God must hate me, because after another soft moan fades, I can hear the distinct sound of skin moving over more skin.

"Fucking hell," comes a lust-thickened voice, barely more than a rough whisper, over the water pelting down on the tile floor.

I'm hot all over, the cold water dousing my skin doing nothing to calm the fire burning inside me. And it only gets worse as more of his groans reverberate through the bathroom like it's in stereo. So it's not surprising when the erotic sounds are enough to stir my cock to life.

Fucking hell is right.

Flipping the shower cold enough to become hypothermic, I douse my entire body in the spray before gripping my cock around the base and squeezing. Hard. Because I can't...I just can't—

"Oh, shit," Avery groans, and then a loud *smack* of his hand against the tiled wall sends another bolt of lust straight to my dick.

Ah, fuck it. If I'm gonna get hard listening to the asshole getting off, I might as well use it to my benefit.

So naturally, I do the only thing the head below my waist will allow.

I flip the water over to scalding, add some soap to my palm before wrapping my fist around my cock, and start stroking at a slow, leisurely pace.

My eyes fall closed, head drops back, and I allow the pleasure starting to build within me, despite knowing this is a terrible fucking idea. But I had to spend all day helping him lift those canoes, seeing the sun shining down on his naked, tanned torso the whole time. And it was torture. I had to look away at one point, because having him catch me jaw-dropped and ogling would only add fuel to the fire between us.

Now, though? There's no reason for me to keep it from shifting back to the forefront of my brain.

Visions of wet, smooth skin and carved muscle race through my thoughts as Avery's soft, low pants continue raining down on me like the shower I'm standing beneath. The combination immediately invades my senses, making

my blood boil with the need for release.

My teeth sink into my lower lip hard enough for the familiar tang of copper to coat my tongue. But it's better than the alternative: letting moans or expletives slip free.

The steam and temperature of the shower added to the white-hot lust running through my veins like lava starts overwhelming me, and I press my forehead to the cool tile wall to keep from overheating. But I don't stop my hand from moving, nor the images from flooding my brain.

Of Avery in the exact same position as me, only this wall separating us.

His fist around what I'm sure is a thick and veiny cock. The muscles of his forearm and neck becoming corded and strained with effort as he brings himself closer and closer to ecstasy. To the infinite bliss that is—

Avery lets out a sharp hiss before a long, slow sigh of pleasure is mixed in with the, "*Oh, fuck, yes,*" he mutters.

—release.

His curse draws my own balls up, and I swear, I'm right behind him. I move my palm over my length while also thrusting into my fist, fucking it with reckless abandon; rolling the head with every upstroke. The pressure and pace I'm keeping primes me to launch sky-high into the stratosphere, and I'm craving the euphoria that comes with it.

So much so, I don't even care about the plummet back to Earth after.

A soft moan manages to slip past my lips, and I sink my teeth into the inside of my cheek to keep it from happening again.

God, I'm close. I'm so fucking close, I can feel my release barreling down my spine as my hand glides over my length faster and faster. Desperation takes over, and a low moan disguised as a sigh slips free from my mouth—

The shower curtain on my stall is yanked to the side without warning, revealing Avery on the other side. A towel sits low on his hips, and it's the only thing giving him a barrier of decency. But me, on the other hand? I'm bare-ass naked, harder than I've ever been, and seconds away from coming.

All of which is fucking mortifying when realization sets in.

"What the actual fuck?" I snap, grabbing the shower curtain and wrestling it from his grip to hide my erection from view. But it's too little, too late. From the way he blinks up at me, nearly stunned to silence, he got more than an eyeful.

Fuck me running.

And now he's just standing here...staring at me while the water pounds down over me. Which makes me uncomfortable as hell, but for all the wrong reasons. Because now that he's right in front of me—water still dripping from his hair and cascading down his chest—my cock has more concrete images to work with.

And that's *really* not what needs to happen right now.

I aim my best death glare at him, hoping it hides the straight-up lust I'm trying my best to gain ahold of. "Do you mind? A little privacy while I shower would be nice."

Avery still looks stunned as he mutters out an explanation I didn't ask for. "The place was empty when I came in here. But I heard the shower still running when I turned mine off."

"That's generally what happens when another person is in a different shower."

"I didn't realize someone else would be in here at this time." He shakes his head, still a little stunned. "I thought it just...turned on."

"So naturally, that possessed you to barge into the stall and check? Rather than, I don't know, asking if someone was in here? Or run the opposite way, in case the place was haunted?"

The barrage of questions paired with my taunting quickly lights his very short fuse, snapping him into true asshole-Avery form. And while it isn't something I enjoy, at least it tamps my libido down enough so I'm no longer saluting him at the waist.

"I don't fucking know what I was thinking, Kaleb. It's been a long-as-shit week, and it's not even over yet. I might as well be an extra on *The Walking Dead* right now, and I sure as hell didn't think someone else would've come in here at fucking midnight!"

"My stuff sitting out there on the counter wasn't a dead giveaway?"

"Oh, my God," he says, shaking his head while stepping back. "Did you not hear a word I just said? I'm minutes away from fucking hallucinations. You think I really *saw* it?"

He's got a point, even if I'll never admit it aloud. I remember my first week of camp as a counselor, and it's like he said—zombified.

"Okay, fine," I concede before noting the water slowly starting to cool as it hits my skin. "But are we done here? I kind of want to finish my shower."

I go to pull the curtain back into place without waiting for his answer, but he grabs the fabric again and holds it open. So once again, I'm forced to grab

it back and cover myself.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Oh, hell no. We’re not even close to being done. You wanna sit and question me? Well, let’s talk about what the hell *you’re* doing in here,” he growls before jutting his chin toward me. “Because it looks an awful lot like you’re perving in a boy’s camp.”

I open my mouth, ready to call him out for doing the exact same thing minutes earlier...but then I realize I can’t. Because if he knew I was getting off to the sounds he was making, it would only make worse implications.

And the last thing I want is to give him more opportunities for uncovering my sexuality.

So, on the fly, I come up with a cover plausible enough to deny perving of *any* kind.

“Oh, fuck off, Reynolds. Don’t act like you’ve never gotten a little hard from cleaning your dick.”

“Really? Cleaning it? That’s what we’re calling it these days?”

A dubious look appears on his face, brows arched in challenge when he crosses his arms over his broad chest. One I’ve only now realized has a fine dusting of blond hair across it.

Abort, abort, abort.

“Fine, you got me, okay? I was jerking it. You really gonna tell me you’re prepared to go ten whole weeks without getting off?” I pause and shake my head. “But it’s not like I was...*perving* on them. They were nowhere in my thoughts.”

Just the idea makes me wanna gag.

Perving on *him*, on the other hand...that just makes me fucking horny. Unfortunately.

There’s still a slight amount of judgment in his tone when he asks, “And you knowingly did that with someone else in the stall next to you?”

Now he’s got me. Even if the roles were reversed, and I was the one who opened his stall when I first walked in—only to catch him dick-in-hand—he still didn’t know someone was in here. Or that anyone would be coming at all.

I can’t say the same, though. At least, not truthfully.

So I do the only thing I can in this situation—I lie.

“You’re not the only one exhausted enough to think you were the only one in here.”

A slight blush tints his cheeks, and I'm not sure if it's from the steam in the bathhouse or the insinuation I made. Either way, it's enough to throw him a little off balance, and he clears his throat before he plays it off as best he can.

"Yeah, well...make sure you're actually alone next time." He coughs before clearing his throat again, "But I, uh, I guess you can...get back to it."

The buzzing feeling hasn't gone away while we've been in this little show down so much as faded into the background with the conversation. But now that it's over, and he's still standing here in only a damn towel...well, shit. Let's just say I'm happy my dick is currently hidden from view.

"Thanks," I murmur sarcastically, painfully aware of the thickness suddenly present in my voice. I try to keep my eyes locked on his face instead of his insane body while he steps back toward the counter, but nope. The second he turns his back toward me to comb through his hair, I'm ensnared by those muscles instead of his abs and pecs.

"You can shut the curtain now, LaMothe," he says while meeting my gaze through the mirror above the sink. "Unless you're planning to give me a show."

My stomach rolls, a mix of fear and anticipation rushing through me as I yank the fabric shut, effectively closing me off from him. And it's only when he's out of sight that I feel as if I can finally breathe again.

Fuck, I need to get this baseless attraction under control.

I guess it's not entirely baseless; Avery's an obviously good-looking guy from an objective standpoint. It's something I noticed early on when I met him. It was just super easy to lock down back then because, one, he's fucking straight. And two, after seeing him become a grade-A asshole, the attraction began fading on its own.

Apparently not as much as I thought, if the state of my cock has anything to say about the matter.

I squeeze around the base again, trying to ease some of the pressure building, but it's no use. Release is the only thing that'll bring me relief at this point.

And God, I hate myself for how much I wanna be listening to his voice while it happens.

"I shower every night at this time, just so you know," I call out from behind the curtain, slowly stroking my length some more as I wait for him to respond. When he remains silent, I add, "Wouldn't want to have this kind of

run in again.”

Still nothing.

From the lack of response, I don't even know if he's still in here at all, or if he's just fucking with me all over again. I'm not sure why it matters to me, either. I can get off just fine with or without him here.

And I certainly have no fucking clue if giving him that tidbit of information was meant to be a warning...or a hopeful invitation.

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EVERY

Week Two

I fucking hate this place.

Hate it with the passion of a thousand burning suns, and I have no idea how I'm supposed to survive the next two plus months out here in the middle of nowhere. We're only a week in, and I've already regretted every second I've been living in a tiny log cabin tucked deep within the bug-infested wilderness.

Even with every activity for the past few days being on the lake just outside of camp—all thanks to the unseasonably hot temperature for June—I'm still miserable. Don't get me wrong, I love being out on the water, but I'd much rather it be on a sailboat. Or anything that's a lot harder to tip over than a canoe, kayak, or paddleboard.

And believe me, I did tip over. On multiple occasions.

Needless to say, I'm entirely out of my element here. To the point where I might as well be Matt Damon in *The Martian*, stuck on a foreign planet and having to find a way to survive.

But today, we're finally doing something that should be easy, even for me.

Hiking.

After all, hiking is just walking in the woods, right? Maybe add in some hills, rocks, and tree roots as obstacles, but it's still walking. And it's not like we'll be going all that fast when there's twenty kids with way shorter legs who need to keep the pace too.

At least, that's the small amount of hope I'm holding onto as I check all the boys' packs for the things they might need on today's excursion. Compasses, water bottles, sunscreen, first-aid kits. EpiPens for any of the boys who have allergies to things found in the woods.

The crunching of footsteps comes up behind me as I'm about to zip up the final pack, and when I rise, I find none other than Kaleb standing there just...staring at me. And it gives me the transparent feeling in those awful dreams where you show up at school in only your underwear.

And that thought instantly brings me back to the other night in the showers where the situation was in the exact reverse. Which makes me feel hot in ways I really would rather not.

"Can I help you?" I ask after his staring reaches the point of painfully uncomfortable.

Kaleb's brow arches, a dubious look etched into his features as his eyes scrape their way up and down my body. "What the hell are you wearing?"

What?

I glance down, taking in my forest green camp tee and khaki shorts before looking back up at him with a frown. "The exact same thing as you."

He taps the toe of his dust-covered hiking boots to the toe of my boat shoes. The same ones I'd wear when Dad and I'd go out sailing on the Columbia River or any typical day visiting the coast.

My frown turns into something of a scowl. "You have a problem with my shoes now?"

"For hiking? Yeah. Going up and down five miles of trails wearing those is a sure way to end up with feet covered in cuts. Or worse, blisters."

"Because you're the expert, right?"

He blinks those stupidly green eyes at me. "Yeah. I kinda am."

This fucking guy. So sure of himself and what he's saying.

Granted, he was right earlier this week when we took the kids out in the kayaks, telling me I'd end up as red as a lobster because I didn't put enough sunscreen on for this high of altitude. Something the petty, stubborn side of me refused to listen to. And wouldn't you know, he was right, and I had a sunburn from hell that took three days to tan over.

Him calling that outcome has only made him more smug. I can read it all over his face right now as we have this little staredown.

"I'll take my chances."

Kaleb's perfectly white teeth sink into his bottom lip before he lets out a

wry laugh. “Suit yourself, Reynolds. Not my feet that’ll be two slabs of raw meat afterward.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, going to brush past him. “You coming with me to get the kids or what?”

“Oh, they’re on their way,” he tells me while grabbing his pack. “I just came from telling them all to hit the bathrooms before meeting us here.”

He’s right; not more than five minutes later, we’re handing out their packs and doing our headcount. And in true Kaleb fashion, he’s taking every opportunity he can to roast me in front of the kids as they count off, all the while flashing me little looks to gauge my reaction.

Playing annoyed isn’t hard, but ignoring the weird swirling flutter in my gut definitely is. Because while we still clearly bicker like children, there’s now this strange undertone to it. Has been ever since the other night in the shower.

Maybe even since the day I got here.

I could be imagining it now, especially since I caught him jerking it. Or maybe it’s because I was doing the same thing with no idea he was in the stall right beside me.

Or because it was his sharp jaw, chiseled body, and forest green eyes running through my errant thoughts the entire time.

Do not go there. Not right now.

Kaleb calls for the kids to fall in line, and without any more preamble or digs, he sets off with a single-file line of eleven-year-olds behind him. I wait and fall into step at the back of the group as we head up the trail; one, to make sure there aren’t any stragglers getting lost in the wilderness—hello, lawsuit waiting to happen—and two, because it’s as far away from Kaleb as humanly possible.

The more distance between us at this point, the better.

“You two don’t get along, do you?”

I glance up from where I’ve been carefully staring down at the trail to prevent myself from tripping or stubbing my toes on a root, only to find Elijah Marshall has fallen back in step beside me.

“That obvious, huh?”

The dark-haired pipsqueak looks up at me, his brown eyes peering through a set of dark-framed glasses. He’s a tiny guy, easily half a head shorter than the rest of the boys in his age group, and is reserved and soft-spoken to match.

“Just a bit. You both are good at pretending for the most part, though.”

I smirk, already really liking this kid, along with his lack of filter.

We’ve spoken a couple times over the past week, but nothing more than him asking for help getting his canoe to push off from the dock or grabbing the hammock carabiners from the top shelf since he couldn’t reach.

All in all, not a whole lot to go off. And definitely not enough to be fulfilling this so-called favor with his uncle.

“How do you spend all this time with someone you don’t like?” he asks suddenly, cutting through my thoughts.

“Now, hang on. Who ever said I don’t like him?”

Elijah gives me one of those *give me a break* looks, eyebrows basically pulled up into his hairline. Which is hilarious with those glasses on. “You asked if it was obvious. And it is.”

I let out a sharp laugh as I glance ahead up the trail. Kaleb’s still at the front, leading the pack toward our destination. He’s easily a head taller than everyone else, so it’s not hard to spot the National Park snapback sitting backward on his head.

“I don’t not like him. We just...” My sentence falls off at the end, not entirely sure how I feel about him. All this mountain air is fucking with my sanity, making me see him in a completely different light than I was even a week ago.

“You just don’t get along all the time,” he supplies.

His way of circling back makes me crack a grin. “Exactly. We have to work together, so we need to be civil despite our history.”

“History?”

My teeth scrape over my bottom lip and I debate how much of this story to divulge. But if I’m really going to take Colin’s advice to heart and build some sort of relationship with the kid, I’ve gotta start somewhere. Might as well be with what landed me in his life to begin with.

“We played baseball together in college. Until he got me kicked out about a month ago.”

I glance over at him just in time to catch his eyes widen into saucers. “He got you kicked out, and you can still stand to look at him every day?”

“Well...it’s more like I did something to get myself kicked out, but I wouldn’t have unless he told someone about what I’d done.”

“So he’s a snitch.”

That gets a chuckle out of me. “At first, that’s kinda how I felt. But what I

did was wrong, so I can't blame him for snitching."

His nose scrunches up as looks at me. "If you know it was wrong, then why'd you do it?"

The question is one I've been asked plenty of times before now, seeing as it's so obvious, but this is the first time I find myself actually willing to answer it. "Because I was hurt and angry, so I wanted to hurt that person back. But it turns out hurting them back didn't even make me feel better. Instead, it made everything worse."

He nods, his brows still knit together as he processes. But one of the gears in his brain must hit a snag, and his head snaps up again.

"You didn't like...commit murder or anything, did you?"

I burst out laughing before deciding I really like this kid. I don't think getting to know him over the next couple months will be much of a hardship at all. "Nothing illegal, I promise."

A sharp, dramatic breath leaves him. "That's good."

The subject changes after that, and I'm quick to realize he's a quirky, curious and extremely observant kid. With a major emphasis on observant, because right around mile two, he notices the gap between us and the next kid has more than tripled in size.

"What's wrong?" Elijah asks before looking down at my feet. Then he stops mid-step and starts giggling uncontrollably. "Kal was right. You really do look more ready to go on a yacht than you do to go hiking."

The jab only sends a slight twinge of annoyance through me, but I'm willing to chalk it up to the searing pain shooting through my heels and pinky toes with every step.

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone's a critic today," I mutter, still giving him a faint smile through the burn. "C'mon, kid. Pick up the pace. The last thing we want is to be left behind."

AVERY

I t's just before dinner time and I haven't even had a chance to put on a shirt after changing from our hike—let alone take stock of the injuries on my feet—when the door to my cabin bursts open and Kaleb comes barrelling in.

My brows furrow as I snap the button of my shorts closed. “Ever heard of knocking? I could've been indecent.”

“Yeah, well, then we'd be even,” he says absently while glancing around the cabin in an almost frantic sort of search. In fact, his eyes haven't so much as landed on me once.

“You lose something?”

The question causes his gaze to collide with mine, worry and fear running rampant in those forest depths as he says a single word.

“Elijah.”

My brows shoot up. “You lost a kid?”

A grimace appears on his face. “Can we go with misplaced?”

“How do you misplace an entire human being? A shoe or a key or something, sure. But a person would—”

“Yeah, I got it,” he snaps, still panicked and on edge. Probably more so thanks to my jeering.

“And you've checked the cafeteria? They were supposed to go there right from the hike for dinner.”

Kaleb shakes his head. “He's not there.”

Shit.

“What about the bathhouse? Colin's office? His cabin? You checked there too?”

“Yes, obviously.” He starts raking his fingers through the thicker brown hair on the top, creating a haphazard mess. “No one’s seen him since the hike, so I have no idea where he is. I figured with how you two were talking earlier, he might be here or have said something to you.”

“Not at all.” A tiny amount of worry hits my gut as I grab a clean camp tee and slide it over my head. “But we can go look for him.”

“And what about the other kids?”

“They’re eleven, Kaleb. We can leave them to eat dinner unsupervised while we look for him.”

“Goddamnit,” he mutters, glancing at me again. “Fine, but we should split up and cover more ground.”

“Fine by me.” I toe into my sneakers and follow him down the steps, falling into step with him as we rush down the path toward the lodge. “How do you wanna do this?”

“I’ll keep looking around the center of the complex. Maybe he’s just moving while I am, so I’m always missing him. You check the paths to the other cabins. And maybe some other areas of the grounds. The lake, the field. I doubt he’d wander off that far, but at least we’re covering all our bases.”

He stops once we reach the outside of the lodge and hands me one of the walkie-talkies we’ve been using on hikes and other excursions. “Radio in if you find him. If you don’t, meet me back here in an hour and we can...”

The way he trails off tells me he’s clearly thinking the worst. Hell, I wouldn’t be lying if I wasn’t too. This is probably every camp counselor’s nightmare, especially deep into the wilderness like this, the nearest town twenty-something miles away. The only way to make it worse would be if it was dark.

Without thinking, I place my hand on his arm and give a comforting squeeze, not taking into account the way it would amplify the electricity crackling in the air between us. It’s something that’s almost constant now when we’re around each other.

“We’ll find him. Don’t worry.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows harshly, and he nods. “We’ll find him.”

After a couple seconds, the burn of his skin beneath my palm becomes impossible to ignore—as does the swirling feeling in my stomach—and I pull my hand away. Yet our gazes stay locked together, harnessed by gravity or whatever else is responsible for the way we keep being pulled together like

this.

“Please try not to alert anyone that we’ve lost a kid,” he says softly, and I see the same bit of fear from when he burst into my cabin swimming in his eyes again. “Especially Colin. You know, until we’re certain.”

A smirk I don’t entirely feel lifts the corner of my mouth. “We? Last I checked, he was lost on your watch and not mine.”

The jab earns me an eye roll. “See you in a bit.”

We part ways at the lodge, and I head up through all the rows of cabins—thinking maybe he went off and found another one of the groups—only to come up empty.

I don’t have any luck up near the hiking path, and he’s not in the field off the far end of the lake either. But just as I’m about to leave the field and head back in, I finally spot him.

Across the lake.

Sitting at the edge of the dock, legs dangling in the water.

Alone.

It’s not until I see him that I realize how truly anxious I’ve been about him being missing. Relief floods through me, washing through every cell of my body. It’s probably also why I take off in a dead sprint until I reach the trail leading to the dock. Swear to God, I’ve never run faster in my life, even with the plethora of blisters sure to be covering my feet by now.

And the second he comes into view again at the end of the path, I can finally breathe.

From this distance, he appears unharmed. And even though he’s a hundred yards away, the slump of his back and downward droop of his head make it obvious he’s upset about something.

Or like he’s a child version of Atlas; the weight of the world resting on his shoulders.

Slowly, I close the distance to Elijah, and when I reach his side, I choose not to speak. Instead, I slide out of my shoes before taking a seat beside him, ready to submerge my feet in the cool lake water.

“You probably shouldn’t do that,” Elijah mutters, breaking the silence without so much as looking at me. “Your blisters could get infected.”

He makes a valid point, but...

“I’ll take my chances,” I reply, plunging my feet through the surface.

Silence lingers between us, allowing the sounds of nature to fill the void. Birds chirp off in the distance, and the wind creates small waves in the lake

that lap against the edge of the dock.

It's peaceful. Calming.

Elijah might as well be any ice sculpture, giving off every *I don't want to fucking talk* vibe possible. But as more time and silence stretches, I can almost feel him melting beside me.

And then, without any prompting, he speaks.

"I hate coming here."

I shift my attention to him, treading carefully with my response. "To the lake?"

"Alpine Ridge," he corrects, kicking his feet in the water. "It sucks here."

I've got to give Colin credit; he's spot on about Elijah not enjoying his time here. But that didn't seem to be the case earlier today on the hike.

I wonder what's changed since then.

"You're telling me you didn't have fun today on the hike?"

His brow raises, but he still doesn't look at me. "You think climbing mountains is fun? It's literally walking uphill to nowhere before turning around and going back down."

My lips quirk, because, yeah. Hiking is kind of insane when you put it in that perspective.

"And you didn't have a good time out here earlier this week? Kayaking and canoeing?"

This time, all I get is a headshake.

"Then why do you keep coming? I mean, I know your uncle runs the place, but..." I trail off, purposely leaving the sentence open-ended so he can fill it as he pleases. Hopefully he does, giving me more than a couple short words as an answer.

When those two saucers for eyes finally move away from the water and look up at me, I can see the breakthrough we're about to make.

"I don't really have a choice. Dad wants me to go. Make friends, be outside, *experience the world*," he says, a bit of mocking sarcasm laced in his tone on the last one. There's a shrug of indifference before he adds, "So I just go, even if none of those things happen."

"You have friends, though," I point out. Because I've seen him laugh and joke around with some of the other boys at lunch or during the activities. In fact, never once during this past week would I have thought he was the same kid Colin described to me on the first day.

A soft snort comes from him. "Maybe we get along, but those guys aren't

my friends.”

I bite my lip before hedging, “Parker and Ashton seem nice. They’re your bunkmates, right? And from what I understand, they’ve been coming here just as long as you have.”

This time I get another shrug. “I always feel like a third wheel because of their whole...twin bond thing.”

“What about Colton or Jordan or Bradley?” I ask, listing off a bunch of kids in our group. “I’ve seen you laughing and joking with them a few times.”

“They’re too sporty and outdoorsy.”

I know I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help the slight chuckle falling from my lips. “You’re at a wilderness summer camp, Eli. Isn’t that the entire point?”

“That is the point,” he says. “But I’m not. I’d rather spend my summer in my room—”

“If you say playing video games, I’m going to scream,” I cut in. To drive the point home, I open my mouth and suck in a deep breath, ready to let it rip.

He clamps his hand over my mouth, and for the first time since I’ve sat down beside him, a smile creeps into his expression. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those adults who hates video games.”

I laugh beneath his palm before pushing it from my face. “First of all, I’m *not* an adult. I might be old enough to be considered one, but I promise, I’m just as much of a kid as you are. And second, I love videogames. But those are for the rainy winter days, not the insanely nice weather we get during the summer.”

“Unless you’re someone who hates going outside. Then video games are great *everyday*.”

“Fair enough. But have you tried finding something out here that you do enjoy? Archery or the ropes course or scavenger hunts? Anything at all?”

“They’re okay, but I don’t really like any of it.” His shoulders lift in another damn shrug before his voice comes out more lost and alone than I’ve ever heard it. “It makes me feel like I don’t belong here.”

I didn’t think it was possible for my heart to break for someone else, but here I am, feeling it all the same. And I hate it for him.

“You’re not alone in that feeling,” I muse more to myself than to him. “But you know what we gotta do in the moments where we don’t think we fit in?”

“I have a feeling *go home* isn’t the right answer,” he asks, a brow arched.

“Nice try.” I grin before bumping my shoulder against his. “Nah, kid. We just fake it ‘til we make it.”

He takes a second to mull it over before he taps his foot against mine.

“And how’s that working for you? Wearing boating shoes for hiking?” he says, his tone teasing. “I mean, c’mon. Who does that?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I never said I was good at faking it, okay? It’s a work in progress. But it’s getting easier every day, just like it will for you.”

Even with his nod of agreement, I can tell he’s not completely sold on the idea. We’ve got to start somewhere, though.

“Maybe you’re right.”

Our conversation fades, the sounds of nature taking the place of words instead. I’m not sure how long we stay wrapped in this tranquil bubble while looking out over the alpine lake. But I do know it’s the most at peace I’ve felt since arriving here.

The feeling doesn’t last much longer, though, because when I absently glance behind us, I spot Kaleb.

He’s walking down the path toward us, a mixture of relief and irritation written in his expression that’s visible even from this distance. The crease in his brow and slight frown etched at the corner of his lips makes it all too apparent he’s not happy to find Elijah and I here together.

Probably because I didn’t do the one thing I was supposed to: call back on the walkie-talkie if I found him.

“Elijah, you’re supposed to be up at the lodge for dinner right now,” he says as he reaches us, eyes locked on the kid beside me.

“I don’t want to eat up there,” Eli mutters beside me, kicking at the water absently. “I don’t want to be here at all.”

Intuition hits me, and I think I understand what problem he might be having.

“Let’s go up and I’ll sit with you,” I find myself saying before I can think better of it.

Elijah’s head snaps over to me, giving me doe eyes like I just hung the moon or some shit. “Really?”

Bingo.

I shrug. “I mean, why not? There’s no rules against it.” *At least, I don’t think there is.* But just to be sure, I glance over at Kaleb, who nods.

“There’s no problem with it, but you do need to eat. We’ve had a long day, and tomorrow will be too. You need the energy.”

He lets out a long, dramatic sigh. “Great. Another long, draining day in the wilderness planned for tomorrow. Just what I wanted.”

The mouth on this kid. I have to roll my lips inward to keep from laughing.

“C’mon. Let’s get back to the rest of the guys before we get in even more trouble.”

Between hiking earlier today and running around looking for Elijah afterward, my feet are indeed two slabs of raw meat by the time dinner is over. A fact which becomes even more apparent when I take a seat back on the dock and remove my shoes to find patches of inflamed skin that sting when the cool air hits them.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter under my breath, taking in the carnage.

I flick open the first-aid kit I grabbed from the lodge and start out on cleaning the blisters when I hear the crunching of twigs and footsteps, alerting me I’m no longer alone on the dock. And though the voice is obvious once he speaks, I could’ve guessed it was Kaleb without turning around.

“Thought I might find you here,” he says as he drops to the wood beside me.

Lifting my gaze to collide with his reveals those green irises dancing with delight. A true *I told you so* expression sits on his smug face, and as much as I hate admitting it, I deserve it.

He was right by telling me hiking in damn boat shoes was a bad idea.

“I take it you’ve come to gloat?”

The corner of his mouth lifts a bit more. “Nah, I think the state of your feet does the rather disgusting job for me.”

My attention shifts back to my feet, and I realize, yeah, they sure do. But at least none of them are on the bottom of my foot.

“Here, let me,” he says, grabbing the roll of gauze before starting to wrap my left heel. He glances up at me for a moment when I don’t fight him on it. “Unless you’d rather me not. But I’ve had enough first-aid training to do this in my sleep.”

All I can do is nod for him to continue, because I'm left fucking speechless; truly unable to say a single word. Though maybe it's because my subconscious knows it's better for him to take care of it correctly rather than, once again, making a fool of myself.

Or it's due to the zaps of energy coursing through me where his skin lingers on mine that I'm desperately trying to ignore.

He keeps tending to my wounds in silence for a while, simultaneously taking in the carnage as he goes. But when he moves to my other foot, he lets out a low whistle.

"Damn, you did a number on yourself," he muses before wrapping the heel. "I have an extra pair of hiking boots, you know. So do plenty of the other counselors. All you had to do was ask around to borrow a pair in your size."

"And here I thought you said there wouldn't be any gloating," I say dryly.

"I wouldn't call it gloating so much as informing you so this doesn't happen again." He moves, wrapping a rather tender spot, and we both wince when the gauze makes contact with my skin.

"Motherfuck," I mutter. "Might be better to chop 'em off at this rate."

His mouth twitches into something of a smile. "Still might have to after you decided to stick them into the lake water earlier. You did wash them out after, right?"

I roll my eyes. "I might be inept when it comes to packing for a couple months in the wilderness, but I know basic first-aid protocol."

There's another quiver of his lips, and I can tell he's fighting back another comment. Or more laughter. Hell, probably both, if I had to bet on it.

Thankfully, he manages to keep silent. Which might be the only good thing to happen today, apart from my conversations with Elijah.

His willingness to talk with me about what was bothering him is the first time since I've been here where I've actually felt useful. Honestly, it was probably the first time in a while I've felt understood by someone else.

And it was talking to a freaking pre-teen.

But that's because I get it; I've been on the side of not fitting in. Of not feeling comfortable being myself or showing who I really am to the people around me. Of trying to be the person my father wants me to be. And look what it's done. I've become jaded and guarded, cutting off any and every type of relationship at the knees. It's isolating, living like this, and it's something I can see in Eli too.

The last thing I want is to see the kid go down the same road I did. So even if it might not be my place, here I am, inserting myself anyway.

“I need to ask you for a favor,” I hedge, my hand swishing in the water while Kaleb continues to work.

He glances up from his task, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Asking for boots now isn’t gonna help the situation. But yeah, you can use mine next time.”

“Very funny,” I mutter, laying the sarcasm on thick. Because that’s not where I was going with this—though I will definitely put a pin in his offer for later. No way in hell I want to deal with the pain and embarrassment of this all over again.

Kaleb is sure getting a good laugh out of it, though. Which grates on my damn nerves as always, but I’m still thankful for him helping me right now. He doesn’t owe me anything, especially when we’ve been butting heads since the moment I arrived.

“What is it you really wanted to ask?”

I tap my fingers against the worn wood of the dock and wet my lips. “Do you think your brothers would bring Elijah into their circle a bit? Is that something you can make happen?”

A weird expression crosses his face at my request; lips slightly parted, and those forest-green eyes widen a bit. It’s some mixture of bewilderment and...maybe awe? All I know is he’s looking at me like he doesn’t even recognize me. Or like I’ve been body snatched by someone who actually gives a shit about anything other than myself.

Then again, this very well might be the first time it’s ever happened, so I can’t really blame him.

His attention flicks away from me to the water as his mouth snaps closed. Even when he clears his throat, his voice still comes out a little graveled. “I’ll see what I can do. Or Colin can.”

The last thing that kid wants is his uncle coming to his rescue, trying to make friends for him. It sure as hell wouldn’t do a whole lot to help him feel included or less alone.

And the entire point of me being placed with Eli’s group was so Colin *didn’t* have to worry about him this summer.

“Don’t involve Colin,” I tell him with a shake of my head. “It’ll only make the situation worse.”

“And what is the situation, exactly?”

Divulging something Elijah has told me in confidence doesn't feel right, but neither does sitting on this information if there's any ideas Kaleb might have to help him. After all, he's known the kid far longer than I have.

I blow out a long breath and shake my head. "He hates it here. Thinks of himself as an outsider. Feels like he doesn't belong."

Understanding crosses Kaleb's face, but he doesn't look all that surprised as he nods.

"I wish I could say I wasn't expecting that answer, but he's been that way since his first year here. Very closed off and fearful of rejection," he says as he finishes dressing my wounds. "But not with you. You've gotten through to him more in the past week than I've managed to in three years, though. Something I'd be annoyed by if I wasn't grateful he's at least opening up to someone."

I sigh and roll my shoulders, like it would be enough to get rid of the anxiety, stress, and worry knotted in them.

"It doesn't feel like enough."

When I lift my gaze to meet his again, he's wearing that same expression from earlier. The one reading like he's never seen me until right now, and it brings back the awful feeling of being paper thin. Transparent as glass.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that?" I snap, my discomfort coming out as irritation.

He looks away quickly and shakes his head, but a smile hints at the corner of his lips. "I don't know. You're just really good with him. It's different than I expected."

Yeah, well, I can't say I expected it either. But being fucked up by the expectations of a parent has a way of bonding people, no matter how different they might seem at the surface. Doesn't mean I want Kaleb to see that part of me, though. If he does, it's terrifying to think he might see even more things he's not supposed to.

"Gotta mix it up sometimes," I deadpan, attention fixated on checking my palms for invisible slivers to keep from looking at him. "Being an asshole all the time would just make me predictable. Better to keep everyone on their toes."

"Yeah, that's gotta be it," he murmurs, and when I hear the amusement in his voice, I'm forced to look up after all.

A full-on grin sits on his lips now, and I think it's the first time I've ever seen him smile at me. A real smile, not one of those patronizing or smug ones

I've been getting since I arrived here. This is just pure...I don't know.

Happiness seems like the wrong word. It's almost like he's seeing something I'm not, and it makes me more unsettled; the same swirling feeling in my gut returning to accompany the electric buzz between us.

"It is."

He lets out something between a laugh and a scoff. "Couldn't possibly be that you actually give a shit about the kid, right?"

My lips form into a thin line and I shake my head. "Nope. Just doing my job."

And when Elijah goes home to tell his dad about his awesome counselor who helped him get through the summer at a camp he hates going to, there's no way in hell I won't get back into Foltyn.

He's a means to an end. The win-win Colin offered me. That's it.

At least, that's what I'm trying to tell myself.

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KALEB

Tonight's activity for all the various age groups—ours included—is campfires and s'mores, and even at almost twenty-one years old, it's gotta be my favorite pastime of summer camp. Even if it's something that isn't a guarantee here, thanks to fire bans usually coming into effect by the beginning of July. But we had a wet spring in Oregon this year, and we're all planning to take advantage of the opportunity to roast marshmallows on the fire before the forest dries up and we can't.

Of course, wrangling a group of eleven-year-olds to sit still—even for snacks and treats—is a lot harder than it seems. I don't know if it's because I'm young enough for them to see me as cool, but not old enough for them to truly respect me when I tell them to do something. I just know it's frustrating as hell sometimes, especially when they want to try testing my patience.

Colton and Jordan in particular have been doing it constantly this year. Of course, knowing I'm Park and Ash's older brother is the most likely reason they think pushing the limits won't get them in trouble in the first place.

“Do you think your parents are gonna let you come back here if one of you loses an eye from running around play-fighting with sticks?” I ask the two of them when they're busy swinging their marshmallow-tipped sticks at each other like they're swords. But my point does little to sway them into behaving, because they straight up ignore me.

“If you two don't sit down and listen, I'll walk you back to your cabin right now,” Avery says, not even looking up from where he's shoving marshmallows on Elijah and Max's sticks. And while I expect them to ignore him just like they did me, I'm shocked to find they actually do as he says

without any complaint.

I'll be damned.

After everyone has their s'more and no one is asking for seconds, I lean over toward Avery and murmur, "How'd you do that?"

Avery's eyes flick up to meet my gaze. "What do you mean?"

Doing my best to keep my voice low and not disturb the moment of peace and quiet, I elaborate. "Get them to calm down so fast."

A frown furrows his brow together and he shrugs. "I don't know. I just told them what I wouldn't want to hear at their age."

"I do the same thing and it only works half the time."

A grin lifts his lips. "Maybe it's because they know you're a pushover."

My jaw drops open, and before I think better of it, I give him a playful shove on the shoulder. "The hell I am."

"Keep telling yourself that, LaMothe," he taunts before moving toward the empty spot on the opposite side of the fire.

I watch after him, wondering how the hell the person I'm seeing in front of me is the same guy who used that photo to out one of our teammates. It doesn't compute properly in my brain as I take the final vacant seat between two of the kids.

All of us settle in, and the crackling from the fire, the soft whistle of the wind floating through the trees creates a calming effect over the group. It's one of my favorite things about being out here every summer. Being one with nature. Feeling so small and insignificant inside a much larger whole.

It puts my soul at ease.

But not as much as it normally would, and I know the reason is sitting directly across from me.

The light from the flames illuminates his entire face, casting a warm glow over the sharp lines and planes of his nose and cheekbones. A bit of stubble has grown in on his jaw and cheeks, adding a more rugged look to him than I'm used to seeing. Aging him a bit too, so he looks more mid-to-late twenties rather than a year older than me.

And I hate how much more attractive it makes him.

Stop. Stop looking at him that way. All it's going to do is cause more issues, which is the last thing you need—

"We should play a game," Jordan says, breaking through my thoughts.

I'm all for a game, especially if it means escaping being put on the spot to tell them another ghost story like last year on fire nights. I'm not much of a

story-teller in general, and games are the perfect way to save me from a repeat embarrassment.

I lean forward, elbows resting on my knees. “What kind of game were you thinking?”

Jordan glances at Ashton, then to Colton. “That TikTok game might work, right?”

“TikTok game?” I ask.

“The *put a finger down* one,” my brother supplies as he looks at me. “You know the one.”

I can’t help the laugh that comes bursting out. “You’re talking about Never Have I Ever.”

“No, it’s called Put a Finger Down,” Colton insists.

“Yeah, but it’s based on Never Have I Ever.” I look between all the boys, each of whom are staring at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. “You just say ‘never have I ever’ and then finish the sentence with something you’ve never done. And anyone who has done it has to put a finger down. Last person with at least one finger up is the winner.”

“Why would you say a bunch of things you’ve never done?” Jordan asks, face all scrunched up in confusion.

“Sounds kinda lame,” Colton surmises, looking around the fire for confirmation from his friends and peers. Which he gets from a good majority of them.

Fucking kids these days.

And yes, I understand how much even thinking that sentence makes me sound like my grandparents.

“It’s more fun this way, I promise.” My gaze instantly shifts to Avery across the fire, and I give him a pleading look for some kind of back up here. Lord knows he’s played this at least once in his life.

Of course, in a shocking turn of events, there’s no back up to be found.

“Don’t look at me.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m not involved in this.”

That’s what he might think. “Oh, yes you are. You’ll be playing too.”

A deep frown draws down the corners of his lips. “For real?”

“Absolutely. Participation in camp activities is mandatory.” I arch a brow at him. “I take it you’ve got more skeletons in the closet you’re reluctant to share?”

Avery’s scowl deepens, and with the fire casting an eerie glow across his

face, he looks more like a murderous psychopath ready to run rampant through the camp with a chainsaw than a twenty-two-year-old college student.

But he doesn't complain or make another peep as the boys take their turns going around the campfire. They're listing off things so ridiculous—never have I ever been to the moon or seen an alien being two of them—and no one has put a single finger down by the time it gets over to Avery on the opposite side of the fire.

"I don't think you're understanding how the game works," he mutters, looking at one of my brothers who is seated beside him. Not that I can blame him, because Parker just said *never have I ever died*.

Like, seriously, Park?

"Never have I ever attended summer camp," Avery says, and I watch as every single boy puts a finger down. Myself included.

"You need to put a finger down too," Parker grouses when he notices Avery still has all five fingers up.

"I work here. I've never attended one. There's a difference."

A lot of eyes roll at his technicality, and they keep going right around the circle.

Now that the boys understand the goal better, they get a little more competitive and ruthless. Some of them purposely start going for each other, trying to get their friends out. Some of them try coming for Avery and I too, saying they've never graduated high school or played college baseball before.

Elijah, who has been very quiet and keeping to himself since his little runaway incident, even gets in on the fun. He stares Avery dead in the eye as he says, "Never have I ever worn boat shoes to go hiking."

"You're dead to me," Avery says as he puts down his third finger, and I can't help but chuckle at the entire exchange.

Meanwhile, I'm still sitting here with only one more finger to go, and at this rate, I'll be the first one out. And while it's just all fun and games with a bunch of kids, my competitive side just can't help it.

So when I see both of my brothers sitting there with two fingers left, I go in to even the score a bit.

"Never have I ever had a twin."

The death glare Parker and Ashton give me as they each go down to a single finger could melt ice. But the kids, my brothers included, seem to be having a good time with it, and that's what matters most. Of course, there are

still a few off-the-wall statements just to be funny as we circle around again for the second time, but I'll chalk it up to kids being kids.

It moves to Colton next, who honestly looks ready to jump out of his seat with excitement for his turn; he's practically overflowing with anticipation. And I'll take that any day over the lot of them being bored.

"Never have I ever..." Colton says, eyes flicking around the campfire deviously. "Kissed another boy."

The instant his words register, a cold sweat breaks out over my skin.

I'm comfortable in my sexuality, having learned a long time ago that being gay is nothing to be ashamed of. It's one of many reasons I'm out to my entire family; brothers, aunts, grandparents and all. Even some of my friends back at Foltyn, like Keene and my roommate Eric, are aware of it. It's nothing I'm trying to hide from the world, even if I'm not out screaming it from the rooftops.

It's simply part of who I am.

But broadcasting it in front of Avery is something entirely different. There's no telling how he'll react. If past circumstances are anything to go on, I know it won't be good.

Which is why I have every intention of lying in front of all these kids, if only to save my own ass.

Except, I catch the way Ashton and Parker glance over at me, waiting expectantly for me to put a finger down. Because they're smart enough to know I should be.

Fucking shit.

Slowly, I lower my last remaining finger to my palm, effectively knocking me out of the game. But doing it as discreetly as possible does nothing to stop the few gasps echoing around the campfire.

"Wait, you've kissed a *boy*?" Colton says, his nose a little scrunched up. "You're not supposed to."

I quickly gather myself, answering to get ahead of any negative connotations that the boys might associate with the LGBT community. "Who says you're not supposed to?"

"Like, everyone."

I shake my head. "See, that's where you're wrong. You can kiss whoever you want, as long as you have their permission."

"But doesn't kissing another boy...make you gay?" asks Max.

My lips roll inward on instinct, and *fuck*, I don't really want to go here

right now. Especially when I can feel the heat from Avery's attention locked on me. But to hell if I'm going to let any of these kids think there's something wrong with having a sexuality other than straight.

"Why do you say it like it's a bad thing?" When Max or none of the other boys answer, I continue. "But no. There is such a thing as an innocent kiss between two people who happen to be the same gender. It doesn't automatically make you gay. Plus, there's bisexual, for one, which is when you like boys and girls." I pause, debating about diving deeper into things like pan or ace, but then decide better of it. It's a topic for another time, probably when they're a bit older.

"So which one are you?" This comes from Jordan.

My teeth sink into the fleshy part of my cheek before I say the words I told myself I'd never be ashamed of.

"I do happen to be gay."

From the silence that descends over the fire and furrowed brows all around, it's clear they're processing. Hell, I'm doing my best too, but it's almost impossible when I feel Avery staring at me.

I don't have to look at him to confirm it; the heat from the roaring fire has nothing on the scorching blaze his eyes locked on my face are creating. It burns holes right through me until I'm seared to a crisp.

And when I do finally garner the balls to meet his gaze from across the fire, I swear I might burst into fucking flames.

I'm a goddamn glass house, and my brothers just threw rocks at all the windows and walls, breaking and shattering them pane by pane. It was an accident, nothing malicious behind their expectations to out myself. Because, to them, it wouldn't be *outing* myself; they were simply waiting for me to tell the truth.

Too bad the truth is going to have massive repercussions.

EVERY

Kaleb and I get all the kids into their cabins without argument, despite us making the poor decision to hop them up on sugar an hour before we're expecting them to climb into bed. Even Bradley—who has been notorious the past week for bouncing around between bunks in his, Colton, and Max's cabin—doesn't fight us on it.

Guess that's what happens after a long day in the sun followed by staying up late around the campfire. No sugar rush can fight that level of exhaustion.

After I'm done checking the cabins to the left of the trail, I turn to find Kaleb. I can make out his silhouette heading toward me as he finishes checking on the cabins to the right.

"All good?" he asks, shoving his hands into the pockets of his bomber.

He's looked good all night—plaid flannel and camp tee beneath the caramel colored leather. A pair of dark washed jeans hug his legs in a way that makes it seem like they were made for him, and after ten days out here, his stubble has grown out into something of a short beard.

All things still noticeable in the moonlight cutting through the trees.

All these things I hate myself for noticing.

"Yeah," I say a little too stiffly, trying to ignore my rolling stomach. "We're all good."

"Great." He pauses, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm gonna go double check the fire, but you can head off to bed."

My brows crash together in confusion. "We flooded the pit with enough water to drown a fish before taking the kids to their cabins," I remind him.

He blinks a couple times and shakes his head. "Well, I still gotta clean up

around the pit. Get the food back in the lodge.”

Not bothering to wait for a response, he starts back toward the pit. And that’s when I realize he’s looking for any excuse to get away from me. For whatever reason, I can’t let it happen, though. Can’t stand the thought of him walking away and...fuck, I don’t know.

After the shit just aired at the fire, I don’t know fucking anything.

Which is why I close the distance between us before falling in step beside him. “I can help you. I don’t mind.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “But isn’t it kind of my job?”

He doesn’t answer, just keeps walking. If possible, at an even quicker pace. But he can’t outrun me, similar to how I can’t outrun all the thoughts and questions racing through my brain, thanks to his candor with the kids.

And it’s those thoughts which cause me to break through the stagnant silence floating between us.

“You did good with them tonight.” When he glances up at me, I add, “With the kids, I mean.”

“I certainly hope so. It’s kind of my job.”

The clear echoing of my statement from a moment ago isn’t lost on me, and while his poking fun like that would normally set my blood to boil, instead it forces an awkward laugh out of me.

“No, I just mean...like how you handled everything.”

There’s no hint of understanding on his face before he turns away again, and it frustrates me to hell. I don’t know if he’s pretending to be dense or if I’m really not being clear about what I’m trying to say.

Hell, I’m not even sure I know what I’m trying to get at. Or where I’m hoping this conversation will go. I just know there are so many things I want to ask and know, and I have no idea how to verbalize them without sounding like a complete idiot.

“You know, with the whole...being gay thing.”

God, could I be any more of a fucking imbecile?

The look on his face tells me he’s thinking the exact same thing. It also tells me this is not a conversation he wants to be having right now, especially if the way his lips curve down are anything to go off.

“Yeah,” is all he says, a rough gravel to his tone now before he looks over at me. “Is it going to be a problem?”

I wish I fucking knew.

“I just...I thought you were straight.”

A sharp scoff comes from him and he shakes his head before glaring at me. “Why? Because straight is automatically the default?”

The question takes me aback, mostly because I’ve never thought about it in that way. But now since he’s said it, I realize I really have seen it as the standard for everyone I meet. I assume they’re straight.

Same way everyone assumes I am.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

He tosses a hand out, waving me off. “Save it. You wouldn’t be the first.”

We reach the fire pit then, and we both start gathering the remaining boxes of graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows before heading into the lodge’s kitchen to put them away. And since I’m not sure what to say after his dismissal, awkward silence stifles us the entire time.

But the silence gives me time to think, and right now, thinking is the last thing I should be doing. Because all my mind can seem to focus on is the fact that Kaleb is gay, and I’m—

Don’t go there, something deep in the recesses of my brain warns as I watch him lock the back door again.

Which is exactly what I should do with these feelings that’ve been rapidly increasing since he walked into Colin’s office last week. Lock them up. Immediately. Shove them in a box at the back of my mind and throw away the fucking key.

There’s no other option.

Still, I’m itching to say something—to break this overwhelming silence—as we make our way back towards the cabins. But I can’t think of anything at this point.

Hell, what do you say to someone who was all but outed by his brothers in front of twenty-plus people, and one of them was the guy who did the exact same thing to one of your friends, but on a much larger scale?

Realization smacks me square in the face at the thought, and it’s enough to stop me dead in my tracks. Halting suddenly must take Kaleb off guard, because he stops too, annoyance and a tiny amount of concern mixed together in his expression as I blink at him.

“Wait, is this why you’re pissed at me? Why you went to Coach about the photo?” I ask. “Because you’re gay too?”

His brows clash together even more, and if that weren’t enough to alert me of my mistake, then the sharp tone of his voice sure as hell does the job.

“Not that it matters to you, but Keene is *bi*, not gay. And though you don’t actually give two shits, no, they aren’t the same thing either. Like I pointed out to the kids.”

I open my mouth, but he cuts me off before I get a word in edgewise.

“And for the record,” he snarls, closing the space between us and pressing a finger into my chest. “I turned you in because what you did was a piece of shit thing to do. My sexuality has nothing to do with it.”

I’d almost be convinced if it weren’t for the small amount of apprehension lingering in those eyes. It’d be damn near impossible to hide when we’re this close. Even earlier tonight at the fire, as his secret was shared, I caught a glimpse of something similar.

And the alarm, no matter how slight, tells me one thing.

He’s lying.

“Your mouth is saying one thing, but your eyes are saying another, LaMothe.”

The tension between us is laced with something a little more potent than it normally is. It’s become this overwhelming urge to just throw him against the nearest hard surface and kiss him until neither of us can breathe, crashing into me with lust-filled waves.

And it only gets worse when he steps in closer to me, nostrils flared with anger.

“Fuck off, Reynolds. You don’t know shit about me.”

The desire coursing through me spikes with a mixture of anger, bringing my blood to a boiling point. He must realize it too, because the finger against my chest flattens into a palm before he pushes me away; not enough to cause a stumble, just to garner a bit of space.

But it sets me right the fuck off.

Just not in the way I’d ever expect.

Because, instead of throwing a fist in his face or spewing some hateful words, I wrap my hand around the back of his neck and slam my mouth to his.

A soft yelp comes from him, probably out of shock, and it gives me the opportunity to slip my tongue past his lips. The first brush it makes against his sends a bolt of lust all the way to my cock, and as they tangle together, a deep groan rumbles from within his chest. One I swallow down with hunger, greedy for more.

Because this is it. What I’ve been searching for. What I’ve been craving.

What's been missing all these years, because I've been too much of a coward to allow myself to have it.

But at this moment, none of that matters.

Nothing does except the sweeping press of my lips on his.

My hand at the back of his neck snakes up, curling into the hair at the back of his head to anchor him in place. The other grabs his hip as I back him toward the closest tree, and the second his back collides with it, I press my entire body weight against him. I continue devouring him like my life depends on it in what is sure to be the greatest kiss of my life.

Which is...fucking insane. But it's the truth.

Even while this—touching another man—is something I've been taught is unnatural and disgusting my whole life, something that feels this good can't be wrong. No matter how many times I've been told differently or how foreign the concept might be.

And I'm so lost in the moment, in the feel and taste of him, it's preventing me from overthinking.

Or thinking at all, because instincts have taken over as I roll my hips into his. It elicits another groan, this time from both of us, and God, if it isn't fucking amazing. Everything about this is.

The scratch and scrape of his facial hair against my skin.

The firmness of his body, even through his clothes.

The thick ridge of his cock rubbing mine through our jeans.

The way his fingers dig into my hips beneath my hoodie as he finally gives in, kissing me back with the same passionate fury.

His teeth sink into my bottom lip—the bite of pain causing my dick to throb painfully behind my zipper—and when he releases it, the faint taste of blood hits my tongue. It spurs me on and makes me kiss him harder.

We grapple for control over one another, dueling with our tongues and hands while our hips keep bumping and rocking together. I think he's about to wrap his fists in my hoodie and pull me closer when his palms move up to my pecs. Or maybe spin me around and pin me against the tree instead, pressing against me to the point where there's not a single air molecule between our bodies.

But he does none of those things, and instead, he flattens them against my chest to push me away for the second time tonight. Enough to not only break our connection, but send me stumbling backward blindly.

His chest is heaving like he's just run a marathon as he glares at me with

a mixture of rage and lust. “What the fucking hell, Reynolds?” he seethes.

Fuck.

I’m sure he wants an answer, but I’m too busy staring at him in the dim moonlight while I wait for the world to shift back onto its axis. Only it doesn’t. It stays tilted, and the whole thing has me off balance.

I must be out of my goddamn mind. The fresh mountain air, the sun beating down on us from dawn to dusk, spending every waking moment in the forest must be fucking with my sanity. It can be the only explanation for what is happening to me. Why I can’t seem to fight the lust running rampant through my system.

“Reynolds?” he says again, and it’s clear from his tone, he wants an answer.

Too bad for both of us, I don’t have one.

I lick my lips, and I swear I can still taste his on them. Feel where they just were, their sudden disappearance creating a cooling effect on mine. And there’s a burning rawness to them from where his week-old stubble was scraping against my skin too.

Something I didn’t know I’d enjoy.

Replaying every second of that kiss like it’s my life force isn’t what needs to happen right now, but it’s all my brain seems capable of. But then I feel the shame spiral already starting to creep in, and soon enough, I’ll be buried in it. Lost beneath piles of self-loathing and regret.

I need to be far, *far* away from Kaleb when it happens.

So I do the only logical thing.

I turn and flee, disappearing down the path to my cabin at a speed Usain Bolt would be jealous of. I don’t stop until I’m locked safely inside, my back slamming against the wooden door before sliding down it.

What the fuck did I just do?

KALEB

I'm left standing in front of my cabin, completely alone and painfully hard, fixated on the moonlit path Avery just disappeared down.

The immediate urge to run after him and demand answers hits me, but I fight it tooth and nail. Knowing I'd probably come up empty handed anyway helps me garner enough self control not to, and God only knows the state I'd find him in if I listened to my instincts. So instead, I rush inside my cabin, grab a change of clothes and my toiletries, and head off to the shower.

The hope is that some time alone to process this, rather than rashly following him, might give me some insight into why in the ever-loving fuck Avery—one of the biggest homophobes I've ever met—would pin me to a tree and kiss me like I was the air he breathes.

No matter how many times I work through it, any attempt to understand is in vain.

The only logical explanation within all the theories I've thought up can't possibly be true.

Because that would mean...

I shove my thoughts to the side, and do my best to focus on the task at hand. But every move I make as I shower is on autopilot, and my mind is pulled back to one, single idea. The only one that makes sense.

He's got the same secret I do.

Did.

The semantics of it all doesn't change the mere idea from being enough to drive me to the brink of insanity.

Not more than twenty minutes later, I'm dressed in a pair of plaid cotton

pants and a Foltyn baseball hoodie, and heading back to my cabin for the night.

My time in the shower didn't do much to wash away the taste and feel of him. They're both permanently embedded in the forefront of my brain now, and there's no sign of forgetting anytime soon.

My thoughts still race, and no amount of tossing and turning on my mattress has any effect on calming them down. The quiet only makes it worse, the insanity from earlier creeping back in with a vengeance.

And I realize if I've got any hope of sleeping tonight, I need answers.

But unfortunately, there's only one way I'm gonna be getting them.

Not bothering to talk myself out of it, I rip the covers off and slip into a pair of shoes before I barrel back down the steps and set out deeper down the wooded path. It's shrouded in quiet darkness, nothing more than the moonlight slicing through the thick conifers to light the way. When I reach Avery's cabin, I find it in a similar state.

Dark.

There's no soft glow of a lamp coming through the window. No sound coming from inside either. Neither fact is enough to stop me from storming up the steps and slamming my fist on the door.

"Avery. We need to talk," I say through the door, still pounding on the wood.

There's no answer for a minute, but then the door is ripped open hard enough to come right off the hinges.

I can't see much more than Avery's silhouette through the blackness, but it's enough to know he's there. No doubt glaring at me for waking him in the midst of his beauty sleep.

"What are you doing?" he hisses, though his voice is still riddled with gravel and shards of glass. "You're gonna wake the kids beating your damn fist on the door like you're a deranged maniac."

"Oh, now I'm the insane one?" I snap, stepping through the threshold and letting the door fall closed behind me. Because I don't give a shit about anything other than answers right now. If any of the kids wake up—and I doubt they will—we'll deal with it later.

The second I'm closed in the darkness with him, confined in such close proximity, I realize my mistake.

Because even after the short amount of time we've been here, this cabin smells like him. Overwhelmingly so. Ocean salt and citrus invade my

nostrils, and when I attempt to focus on something else, I realize I can hear every little breath each of us takes.

The darkness has heightened all my senses, and I don't know how I can feel him without his touch, but I can. His presence in the room is layered over me like a second skin. Enough to set my every nerve on edge, but the lack of physical connection keeps what remains of my sanity intact.

Yeah, I really didn't think this through.

Silence lingers between us as I drown in wonder and in him. Then I'm breaking through the quiet like I'm bursting through the sea in search of oxygen.

"What are you doing here?" I murmur into the void.

No sound comes from wherever he is, then I hear the faint click of the lamp, and I'm temporarily blinded as light floods the room. After blinking a few times, I find him leaning against the opposite wall.

Shirtless, and a pair of black sweats hang low on his hips that showcase a spectacular V tapering into the waistband.

Fuck, this really wasn't a good idea.

Avery crosses his arms over his chest, his muscles moving and flexing beneath his tanned skin. "You're asking me? You're the one who just barged in here after midnight like you own the damn place."

"I meant *here*. At Alpine Ridge."

Because the real reason can't be to kiss me and drive me fucking mad with lust that makes absolutely no sense for me to have.

"You're back on this shit? Seriously?" His fingers sift through his golden hair, frustration evident in his voice. "Couldn't it have just waited 'til morning?"

My teeth scrape over my bottom lip and I shake my head.

"I need answers."

To more than one thing.

The look on his face is one of exhaustion. Physical, but also mental. Like he too has reached his breaking point.

Maybe that's why, for the first time in over a week, I get a real answer from him.

"I'm trying to get back into Foltyn."

I blink, registering an answer I wasn't expecting. "And somehow you think spending a few weeks with a bunch of kids in the woods is going to make the Dean and the entire admissions office rethink their decision to kick

you out?”

He opens his mouth, clearly about to pop off at me, but I'm taken off guard when he closes it again without saying a single word. Then his lips form into a tight line, two tiny dimples popping at the corners of his mouth when he does it, like he's trying to keep from saying something he might regret. Which is...very unlike the Avery I've seen in the entire time I've known him.

Those blue eyes flick around the cabin, clearly in search of a way out of this conversation. But he must not find a single escape route, because he sighs and mutters, “It was my Dad's idea.”

“Your dad's idea,” I repeat dryly.

“It sounds insane even to my own ears, but yeah.” The exhaustion on his face gives way to a hint of misery when his gaze collides with mine. “He thinks if I can get Colin to like me, he might talk to Dean Marshall on my behalf.”

For what might be the twentieth time today, he surprises me. Not only by the honesty in his answer, but how easily he offered it up.

My immediate reaction to this information is to go into protective mode. Specifically for Elijah, who is sure to be nothing more than another pawn in this whole scheme. God only knows the impact this knowledge would have on the kid if he learned the counselor who's taken him under his wing is only doing so because of some messed up, self-serving ulterior motive.

He'd be crushed.

“That's...”

“Ridiculous?” Avery supplies.

“Disgusting,” I say instead, my nose wrinkled up to echo my statement. “It's disgusting that you'd stoop to this level. And I'm sure now, you're using a kid to get to his father?”

A sharp scoff comes from him. “Like I said, it wasn't my idea to start with, but I'm not really left with much of a choice. If I want a degree by the end of next school year, Foltyn is the place I need to get it.”

“And Elijah's just collateral.”

“That's not true, and you know it.”

“Do I?” I counter, taking a single step toward him. “Because you sure as hell were quick to deny it the other day. And that boy, for whatever fucking reason, looks up to you. Thinks you care about him. All you're going to do is break his damn heart when he finds out it was all a lie.”

“Think what you want, Kaleb. Because I know you just want to keep on living with this image you have of me in your head, not willing to alter it even when I’ve proven to be more than you see me as.”

Wetting my lips, I shake my head. “I guess we’re at an impasse, then, because I don’t think you’ve proven a thing. A few soft moments in the forest while you’re away from the real world doesn’t erase all the bullshit from earlier this year.”

The line of his jaw ticks, pulsing as he clenches his teeth. “Fine. If that’s the case, we’re done here.” When I make no move to leave, he continues. “You can go now. I’d like to go back to sleep.”

But I still don’t go. Don’t fucking move from the spot my feet are anchored to like a lifeline. I can’t leave until the question—the entire reason I came here in the first place—is answered. Until the burning in my mind is finally put to rest.

“Why did you kiss me?”

And how the fuck are you so good at pretending it didn’t happen at all?

Just like that, I watch as he shuts off. Instantly shifting back into the guarded, hostile asshole I’ve known him to be.

“It was a momentary lapse in judgment.”

Liar.

My arms cross over my chest, and I shake my head. He’s not getting out of this that easily. Not if I have anything to say about it.

“Try again. With the real answer this time.”

Those sky blues turn to pure ice as his face takes on the appearance of chiseled stone. It’s nothing more than a mask. Hard and unyielding; perfectly smooth and showing no way to slip beneath it.

He closes the space between us until he’s directly in front of me, once again trying to use the inch of height he has on me to his advantage. Daggers form in his eyes as they glare into my soul.

“What do you want me to say, Kaleb? Tell me what you want to hear, and I’ll fucking say it.”

My jaw ticks, frustration setting in as I realize the only thing this conversation is gonna get me is a trip to the nuthouse. And maybe Avery a trip to the fucking morgue. I’m about ready to send him six feet under if these games he’s playing don’t end soon.

“I really don’t like you,” I tell him. As if that weren’t completely obvious. “You’re a preppy, rich asshole who thinks only of yourself because you’re

under this delusion that you're better than everyone else around you. And I can't stand it."

I'd be doing myself a favor by remembering that.

He doesn't miss a beat, snarling out his own comeback. "And you're a smug, overly-confident dickhead that loves nothing more than saying *I told you so*. And as if that weren't bad enough, you're a fucking narc to boot. So needless to say, I don't like you either."

I can feel the anger radiating off him, hitting me in wave after wave. But the tension lining his voice is off. After all, I've seen him pissed at plenty of people over the past couple years, and I'm observant enough to realize this is different.

Like it's not really *me* he's pissed at.

I feel something else besides anger too.

A current of energy snapping back and forth, cycling in the negative space between us as it creates an electric charge powerful enough to blow the entire grounds to smithereens. It's the same feeling I got as he pinned me against the tree earlier and kissed the daylight outta me.

"Then why did you kiss me, Avery?" I ask again, but the edge my tone possessed is nowhere to be found this time.

And as I watch him—studying every line and feature of his face—a crack forms in that stone mask of his. Torment seeps from the fracture. More and more of it oozes to the surface until he finally lets it fall to the floor.

"I...don't know." He pauses, clears his throat. "I don't know why I want to do it again, either. Because I'm not..."

He doesn't continue the sentence, and honestly, I don't have it in me to force the conversation anymore either. I'm too busy fighting off the electric buzzing I felt earlier as it crashes over us like a tidal wave. But try as I might, it's no use. I'm still drowning in it, sinking under wave after intoxicating wave.

What the hell is happening right now?

My voice comes out raw, like it was shredded with a thousand razor blades. "Well, there's not going to be a repeat."

The certainty and finality in my statement has an effect on him. More than he'd like, I'm sure. But he can't hide it now; no mask can repair itself that quickly. It takes time to piece it back together after being broken and dismantled to this degree.

He sure as hell tries, though.

“Remember that when you come back begging for more.”

I shake my head, knowing here and now is the time to lock up this unfounded attraction for good so it doesn't see the light of day again.

It's the only way I'll survive the rest of the summer here with him.

“Never will I ever.”

To be continued...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CE Ricci is an international best-selling author who enjoys plenty of things in her free time, but writing about herself in the third person isn't one of them. She believes home isn't a place, but a feeling, and it's one she gets when she's chilling lakeside or on hiking trails with her dogs, camera in hand. She's addicted to all things photography, plants, peaks, puppies, and paperbacks, though not necessarily in that order. Music is her love language, and traveling the country (and world) is the way she chooses to find most of her inspiration for whatever epic love story she will tell next!

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NOT YOUR SWEETHEART

HAYDEN HALL

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CADEN

“I ’m going to fucking kill you,” Beckett’s voice boomed from the other side of the locker room. He dropped his helmet on the floor carelessly, drawing attention from several other players. “Do you fucking know what you did out there?”

I winced. *Yeah, I fucking know what I did out there.* But I wasn’t going to give him an argument when he wanted one. Rising to the bait was not something I enjoyed.

I ripped apart the Velcro straps holding my shoulder pads in place and shrugged them off. The side of my torso was bruised from the maneuver I’d attempted and tragically failed to execute. And that was why Beckett Fucking Partridge was grilling my ass.

Beckett still wore his jersey with a capital C printed on it, like I needed more reminders that he was the captain. And if this was his way of lifting the locker room mood, kill me fucking now. But I was used to Beckett’s outbursts after two years of watching his grubby hands reach for all the influence around here.

“Ha-fucking-ha,” Beckett exclaimed. “You think you can ignore me? After you screwed over the entire team?”

I clenched my jaws, teeth grinding audibly as I tore off my elbow pads.

The other teammates cleared the way for Beckett to pass through the locker room. Nobody would cross paths with the fucker unless their life depended on it. He was loud and rash and obsessed with his position in the hierarchy of our team.

He marched across the room and brought his face inches away from mine,

while I stood like a goddamn monolith. The Becketts of this world hardly intimidated me.

“Listen here, you fucking asshole,” Beckett hissed. “I think you owe this team an apology.”

I stared at him for a long while, as if to ask if that was it. Our eyes were level now that Beckett was leaning in, though he was normally a couple inches taller. His square face radiated heat after a hard game, flushed and with a few beads of sweat on his brow. He only lacked his helmet, all the pads still in place as I scanned him.

Then, I looked beyond Beckett, and found a locker room full of people who minded their fucking business. Sneaky glances our way came only out of curiosity if there would be an actual fight; nobody waited for my grand apology.

My gaze returned to Beckett’s cold blue eyes. “Huh?” he demanded.

I could feel the heat of his face on mine when he jerked forward. One careless move and our noses would touch.

“I don’t think so,” I said coolly. I needed to stay strong and steady.

“What did you say?” Beckett asked in a low growl.

Really, it was no surprise he took it this hard. He’d hated me since the day he laid his eyes on me and the feeling had been mutual. Beckett Partridge was everything I was not; rich, well connected, spoiled rotten, and the biggest fuckboy on campus. And probably beyond.

He bared his teeth at me like he could intimidate me, but he was running out of tricks.

“You heard me,” I said. “I tried something. It didn’t work.” Guilt stabbed my stomach; I’d cost us a victory. Had I done my part exactly as I had been told...well, it was impossible to say. At the very least, I wouldn’t be the sole target of Beckett’s frustration. We might have lost anyhow, but the responsibility wouldn’t have been mine alone.

The next thing happened so abruptly that it took me another couple of seconds to realize it had been real. Beckett bent his arm and pressed it across my chest; his elbow pads dug into my exposed flesh; the locker behind me jumped forward and slammed against my back — or Beckett pinned me against it; it was hard to say in the moment — and cold metal bit my bare skin.

Beckett was pressing so tightly against me that I sucked a shallow breath of air in fear. Fear...of what? Beckett’s physical strength didn’t intimidate

me, but his proximity did something that made my stomach lurch. The heat of his body on mine and the piercing glare directed only at me made my skin prickle.

He held me like that for another beat. Two.

Perhaps he wouldn't have let go of me had Coach Murry not entered the locker room. "What the hell is going on?" Coach yelled. "Partridge!"

Beckett pulled back, but he spared me another murderous glare before the contact broke. "This amateur cost us the game, Coach."

"And you never cost your team a game?" Coach Murry asked, narrowing his eyes at Beckett.

Our captain snarled.

Dammit, Coach, you're making it worse, I thought to myself.

"He never listens," Beckett growled.

Coach waved his hand dismissively. "Michaels, be alert," he snapped over his shoulder at the co-captain. "You'll be captaining next week's game." He turned back to Beckett and me, his glare steely. "You two, hash it out or you'll sit out the rest of the season. This isn't the sort of behavior I want in my locker room. I don't give a rat's ass how you do it, but I'll take no less than best friends for fucking life next time you intend to play. I'd hate to lose two of my best players, but I'd hate it even more to let you two hotheads demoralize the entire team."

"That's not fair!" Beckett flared.

"No," I huffed out in disbelief.

"Tell it to your mama and let her bake you your favorite cookies, Partridge," Coach snapped, his raspy voice metallic with anger. "Discussion over."

"Coach, you can't..." Beckett stepped forward, but halted as soon as Coach directed his full attention to him.

I scooted to the side to avoid being the collateral should this turn into a battlefield of strong wills and stubbornness.

"Finish that sentence, Partridge, I dare you," Coach said, his voice like a shovel dragged over gravel.

Beckett pulled back an inch, but that was as good as waving a white flag.

I knew better than to protest. But I also knew I was double-fucked. There was no way in the universe I would play friends with Beckett Fucking Partridge today or any other time. He'd given me enough hell these last two years as it was.

Coach Murry stormed out of the locker room. His word had been final and his decision would be enforced. Low chatter filled the space as Beckett and I stood frozen and the reality sank in.

Coach couldn't have meant it, could he? But I dismissed that thought immediately. Of course he'd meant it. Two excellent players versus the entire above average team? I wouldn't have a hard time making my choice. Sure, Beckett and I mostly pulled the above average end of the entire team, but we weren't alone. And, as today showed, I wasn't without fault. But Beckett seemed to think that he could do no wrong, which pushed my buttons hard. That, sharing the spot with pickled cauliflower, was the thing I hated the most in this world. A guy so spoiled he thought he could be no less than perfect.

Beckett turned around, eyes devoid of emotion, and seemed to notice me for the first time ever. He frowned like I'd grown a tail and his gaze dropped from my eyes to my torso.

I remembered then, that I was still half-undressed, torso bare and chest heaving as I tried to breathe without shuddering at the prospect of spending time with Beckett.

"This is bullshit," Beckett muttered.

And for once, even if it tasted like eating mud, I had to agree with Beckett Partridge.

BECKETT

Mr. Prim-and-Proper stood in the rec room doorway.

“Move,” I growled.

His arms, crossed at his chest until now, dropped after an infuriating beat of indecision that reflected on his face. He moved the great length of three inches to the right and I stepped through, brushing my shoulder against his.

Caden huffed.

“What is it, sweetheart?” I mock-worried. “Did I bruise you? You’re ever so tender.”

“Fuck off, Partridge,” he said through clenched jaws and inhaled. “And maybe take a shower while you’re at it.”

Anger flared through me like a malfunctioning rocket. A disaster course was inevitable. “Are you serious?” I spun to face him fully, my hands balling into fists so I wouldn’t grab him by his worn-out T-shirt and rip it to shreds. “You smell funny? Is that where we’re at?”

Nah. His words weren’t the source of my annoyance with him. Words couldn’t hurt me at this point. It was the cool, calculated tone he always used. It was the way he held all his cards so close to his chest. It was the stubbornness of a boulder that Caden Jones was.

His expressionless face didn’t twitch because this guy was made of marble and some magical fucking fairy had brought him to life without bothering to make him convincing. “I said what I said.”

I scoffed. The fucker was right. I’d gone on a long run in the cold and muggy weather to clear my head of Coach Murry and Caden Jones, but it had all been futile. Caden was standing right in front of me and no amount of

head clearing could change that. Also, I smelled like sweat. *Asshole*, I thought. “Fine,” I said and raised my hands in surrender. “A guy can’t have a can of beer with his friends after a run around here, I guess.” I made a step out of the rec room, brushing against his shoulder again on my way out. “Wanna watch me shower, sweetheart?”

His nostrils flared for a split heartbeat. “No,” he said flatly.

Ugh. He was *no fun* at all. Of all the people I had to have infinite mutual hatred with, I got stuck with one who was as creative as an overturned oak. He couldn’t even come up with something like, “I’d rather claw my eyes out, put them on a stick, and make marshmallows out of them.”

Okay, that was maybe a bit of a stretch. It was also beside the point; Caden Jones thought he was too good for the rest of us.

I shrugged. “Your loss.”

“I’ve seen you shower already,” Caden said in that steady voice of his. “It takes more to impress me.”

The jab caught me off guard and laughter ripped through my constricted throat. It almost came out as barking. I shook my head at him, oddly proud that I’d gotten him to lower himself to my level. Because that was the way he saw things, right? I was down there in the mud with the common students, while he was up in the heights of self-made glory.

I showered begrudgingly. It hadn’t even been that bad; active guys like us got sweaty, nobody batted an eye. I should have just kicked the fucker in the balls and slammed the door in his face, but I’d felt merciful, I guess. Or, just maybe, provoking his annoyance was the only fun I’d had all day.

When I returned to the rec room, wearing gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt that made my dark eyelashes pop and emphasize my blue eyes, Caden was leaning against the wall, watching table soccer play out a few paces in front of him.

He didn’t notice me until my arm was above my head and my armpit an inch away from his face. “Is my rite of passage good enough?”

Whatever I’d done, it caught Caden just enough off guard that he let the solid mask of tranquil hatred slip for an instant. He stiffened, shocked by my presence, and pressed both hands on my broad, hard chest, pushing me back until I bumped into the large table soccer setup. Protests of the two guys playing went over my head and I leaped for Caden, grabbing that worn-out T-shirt with both my fists and nearly lifting him off his feet.

Before I could utter a word, my co-captain Jarred, or captain now,

stepped in. Known for his strength, Jarred shoved his arms between us and separated me from Caden within a heartbeat. “Will you two just stop it already?”

“He pushed me,” I said.

Jarred turned on me. “You asked for it.”

“Seriously, dude? You too?” I groaned in disbelief. “This is bullshit.”

The facade rebuilt itself on Caden’s robotic face. He looked like he wanted to say something, but I couldn’t even begin to imagine what it was.

“Guys,” Jarred said sternly. This whole captain thing had really gone to his head, it seemed. “I think I speak for everyone here,” he said and looked around the rec room. Ten other guys directed their attention to the three of us. “Everyone’s sick of your petty bickering. If you have to kill each other, could you do it outside? If not, then hash it out already.”

“Yeah, fuck already,” added Trent from the background to an uproar of laughter. “Wait, that’s what we’re talking about, right?” He gave a guileless grin and sank into his armchair.

Jarred cleared his throat and rolled his eyes a little. “I mean it, Beckett. You too, Caden. Sort this shit out.”

Carefully, Caden opened his mouth. “I think I’ll draw the line on pushing an armpit into my face.”

Jarred shot me a look that was supposed to make me feel guilty. It failed. “Whatever,” I muttered.

Caden stepped back, let his gaze linger on me a while longer, then turned away and left the rec room. And even though he was out of my sight, he wasn’t leaving my mind. For two years, the guy had just decided to hate me. Why? Because of my trust fund? Because of my excellent sense of fashion? Because of my superior skill on ice?

“Dude,” I growled at Jarred.

“Don’t ‘dude’ me,” Jarred said. “I wasn’t kidding. We’re sick of you two impersonating February tomcats. You have a responsibility to your team, Beck. And Caden’s on that team.”

For one, I found myself without a witty retort. “It’s your responsibility, now,” I said matter-of-factly.

“You think I want it?” Jarred asked, laughing sarcastically, almost desperately. “Because I don’t. I don’t want to captain a losing team next Friday when two of our best players are watching us from the bench.”

“Uh, yeah, I’d like to second that,” Trent said.

“Here, here,” a few more voices rose.

I pouted. I was on the verge of saying Caden was the one who needed to hear this, but everyone here seemed delusional, so there was no point in going against the crowd.

Okay, that wasn't true. But I would rather be damned than admit any responsibility. My feud with Caden was two years old and he was the one who had started it. Whatever missteps and justices I might have done in the meantime were solely *on him*.

“Fine,” I said, a fake smile stretching my lips. “I can do that.”

Jarred narrowed his eyes distrustfully. “Really?”

“Yep,” I said. “I'll be my sweetest self to him. And when this whole plan blows up in your face and he loses us another match, you'll see it's not my fault at all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have friendship bracelets to weave.”

I turned on my heels to a ripple of groans and sighs, and marched out of the room.

I could be friends with the guy, especially if only for a little while. Nobody had ever resisted my charm when I bothered to direct it at them. Caden would be no different.

After all, I was *almost* the model captain everyone liked. Sure, the guys were annoyed right now — even though I'd done nothing to deserve it — but I was friends with all of them. The only one who disliked me was Caden Jones. And while the feeling was mutual, all I had to do was make *him* like *me*.

CADEN

My eyes kept going over the same line of text again and again, but the words weren't sinking in. I would probably need to delicately glance at the cover to even remember the title of this book.

It was a regular Caden Saturday. I had no time for friends and hanging out; I needed to keep my hockey scholarship and stay on the team, which meant a lot of studying and a whole lot more exercise and practice.

My room was a boiling pot, stuck in the middle of heated rooms from all sides. I lay on my bed, topless, one hand under my head, the other holding the book inches away from my face.

The knock on my door was followed by the gross intrusion of my privacy by the person I least wanted intruding.

"Oh good, you're decent enough," Beckett said, facial muscles flexing into a forced smile. "Shirt fell apart? Don't answer that. Sorry. Force of habit."

I dropped the book I'd been trying and failing to read by the pillow and sat up in my bed. All the rooms in our old, colonial boarding house were single-bed rooms with enough space to make yourself comfortable. I had a wooden desk and a spinning chair, a wardrobe, shelves with my trophies from back when I had captained our high school team, and a beanbag on the far side of the room.

Beckett scanned the inventory, then let himself drop into the beanbag.

"Yeah, no, make yourself at home," I muttered, scanning the room for a T-shirt, then once more for embarrassing stuff. I found neither.

Beckett's eyebrows wiggled playfully. I couldn't guess what the hell had

gotten into him. Instead, I thanked my lucky stars that I hadn't actually been doing anything embarrassing. *Always lock the door*, I noted to myself, then quickly pushed the thought of the toy in my nightstand's drawer out of my head. Not that he could read my mind.

Still, if he'd barged in forty minutes earlier, I would have been packing my shit and running away in embarrassment.

"What do you want?" I asked, every shred of me tense as I sat at the very edge of the bed, shoulders set, pecs and abs constricted. If he was still holding a grudge from last night's shoving, I was wise to be prepared.

But Beckett seemed relaxed in my beanbag. His golden boy face had big dimples when he cracked that practiced smile of his and his absurdly blue eyes shone with amusement and something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on. A stray lock of blond hair rested on one of his eyebrows.

The whole image was repulsive, really. It just went to show how cocky the bastard was to stroll in and claim my space with that stupid, innocent smile that sometimes made my heart clench.

No, I snapped at myself internally. *The only clenching this asshole is responsible for, is that of your fist.*

"You and I, we're best friends from now on," Beckett announced.

I snorted. "I don't think I got the memo."

"It's being hand delivered," he said. "We're going to be the sort of teammates that Coach Murry dreams of. And we're gonna take the team to victory on Friday."

"Nice of you to have it all planned out," I said, standing up. It wasn't enough to look down on him from where I sat. "But I think I'll politely ask you to leave now."

"Why? Busy?" There was a ghost of a grin crossing his face.

I narrowed my eyes, not exactly sure what he was suggesting. "I'm just more comfortable when you're not in my room."

Beckett sucked his teeth. "You wound me."

"You annoy me," I replied, losing my composure with every passing second.

"Knock it off, Jones," he said, more snappy now. He lifted his muscled arms and folded his hands behind his head. The short-sleeved T-shirt pulled over his swollen biceps and I stared, giving myself a moment to collect my thoughts. "I was kindly reminded that I have a duty to the team."

"Sounds a lot like a *you* problem," I said, but the spite was leaving my

voice faster than I could speak.

“And a *you* problem,” Beckett said. “You’re here on scholarship.”

Air left my lungs and no amount of effort could get me to inhale again. “They can’t just take it away,” I whispered.

“True,” Beckett said. “You can sit out the rest of the year. But what then? Drop out after three years? Go home with your tail between the cheeks? Why should they renew it?”

My face flushed with a sudden wave of heat. Everything that was at stake had already crossed my mind. “I won’t sit out the year,” I said.

Beckett was swift for a solid, bulky guy. His arms flew through the air and he pushed himself up on his feet before I could process it. “Glad to hear it,” he said with the same fake politeness he used on everyone he’d ever met. Well, except me, most of the time. It was the simple case of Beckett never needing anything from me, thus never bothering to fake it. “Good luck pulling that off while this is going on.” He wagged his index finger between us. “Coach Murry will surely change his mind when he hears your compelling arguments.”

That smile was vicious. He wore it to annoy me; and in that, he was absolutely successful. He was also, technically right. There was no way I could persuade Coach Murry to let me play without some proof that Beckett and I won’t distract the rest of the team. I couldn’t state how much I hated this. But when Beckett spun away from me, something inexplicable burst through me. “Wait,” I rasped, grabbing his shoulder before he could leave.

As he turned to me again, millions of emotions flickered over his face, as if he was looking for one to settle on. Fright of what I was doing, anger that I dared touch him, smugness that I asked him to stay. But he settled on bored curiosity, eyes lazily scanning my face.

“How would we do it?” I asked, cursing myself internally that my future depended on being close to this prick. “It’s not that easy to fake a friendship.”

Beckett ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth, then sucked in a breath of air. “We make rules we can follow.” His voice dropped lower as he said those words. “It’s just for appearances.”

“For a week, sure,” I said carefully. “But what’s stopping Coach Murry from getting rid of us the week after? Or next year? We can’t just...*like* each other.” The word was hard to force over my teeth. It carried too much naked truth.

Beckett’s eyes glistened for a moment like he caught onto my insecurity

around it. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but I'm a very likable person."

I rolled my eyes as I stepped back. "This isn't gonna work."

"Don't be such a spoilsport," Beckett said, taking a step toward me and closing the distance between us. He stood incredibly close; so close that I couldn't move without revealing that the proximity was driving me nuts. "I'm not proposing you fall head over heels for me, though stranger things have happened."

I hoped to God I wasn't blushing, but the heat in my face made my brain spin.

"Just...keep your mouth shut around the other guys. You can do that, can't you?" His voice dropped lower as he spoke. The commanding note grew stronger and my will was caving in. Beckett shifted his weight from one leg to the other, shoulders swinging a fraction. His head was tilting, as he was just tall enough that he looked down on me. "Tell me," he continued, biting his lip as he thought for a beat. "What about me triggers you the most?"

I scoffed, but it carried no edge. Life had been easier half an hour ago when the only thing I wanted to do was shove the fucker out of my way and stick to what I knew; hating him with a passion. "What good would that do to know?"

Beckett gave a casual shrug. "If it's reasonable, I might be able to dial it down around you."

"You're cocky," I said, voice weaker than I'd wanted it to be. "You're full of yourself. You expect everyone to like you just because you're you. Like your trust fund gives you the right to boss everyone around. You're loud. You're obnoxious. You think everyone's waiting for you to wink at them and they'd drop their pants for you. You treat me as less cos I'm here on a scholarship. You..." My voice cut off when I realized everything I said made Beckett's wicked grin broaden. He stared into my eyes with a deadly curiosity, raising one, black eyebrow and creasing his other brow under the stray lock of blond hair. "What?"

He shook his head and pursed his lips, letting the silence hang between us for a heartbeat or two. "You're being unreasonable then."

If there was a surefire way to set me off, this was it. "I'm fucking not. You asked and I answered. I don't care if you're incapable of toning any of this down." But I had a reason to care because the plan depended on it. After all, I stood to lose the most. Beckett was well connected. He could transfer elsewhere in a blink. Perhaps he wouldn't get to captain a team, but he would

definitely get himself to co-captain one. And when he did that, it would be a matter of time before he pushed the captain out.

And me? This was my only shot at professional hockey.

Was I really going to risk it because I disliked his dimples and his self-satisfied smirks?

“You’re so full of shit, Jones,” Beckett said. He didn’t move, but it felt like he was a couple inches closer. It was like he grew bigger and occupied more space. “Just because you got that measly scholarship, it doesn’t make you better. Just because you get high grades, you’re not smarter.”

“There’s nothing fucking measly about it,” I squeezed through clenching jaws. “And I never claimed I was better. The truth is simple. Odds were stacked against me from the start. And if you can’t admit that much, you might as well fuck off to whoever you’re planning on fucking tonight.”

Fuck.

Beckett sucked his teeth, amusement spreading over his face. “Ooh, look at that. Caden Jones is jealous.”

“I’m not,” I barked. Where the hell had all my composure gone? I sorta needed it right about now. I was blurting things out before thinking and every word that came out of my mouth was another weapon in Beckett Partridge’s arsenal.

He bared his teeth in a wicked grin that punched dimples into his cheeks, blue eyes sparkling as he stared at me. He looked like he couldn’t decide what to do with me. Kiss or kill.

The feeling was mutual, but I would rather die than reveal such a weakness.

“It looks like we’re at a dead end,” Beckett said, more amused than disappointed. He moved a little to the right and I turned on my heels after him. Like two cats looking for a fight, we circled around. “The way I see it, we can bring each other down. And believe me, nothing would give me more pleasure than to wipe away the smug smile off your face.”

“If anyone’s smug smile is up for wiping,” I said and gave him a pointed look.

His eyes narrowed, but the smile I mentioned only broadened. “My point exactly,” he said, eyebrows wiggling for a brief moment. “Or, we can set our differences aside and work together. We have the same goal, after all.”

“What if I want to see you fail so badly that I’ll sacrifice myself for it?” I asked hypothetically.

Beckett snorted. “You’re not that self-destructive, sweetheart.”

The last word set the fuse on fire. Oh, but it was a short fuse, too. My hand found his chest before I knew what I was doing and I tried pushing him back. But Beckett wrapped his fingers around my wrist and yanked my arm, my open palm pressing hard against his chest, feeling his heart beat quickly.

“I’ll make you my final offer,” he said, eyes sparking with something darker. I hadn’t seen this look before. His voice dropped lower and his breathing seemed more shallow. “Since you’re a stubborn ass, Caden, I’ll ask you nicely to pretend all’s well around the coach and the rest of the team.” His grip on my wrist tightened. “I get to be the captain. I get the first shot at the NHL when the time is right. And you...you get to keep your scholarship.”

I opened my mouth to protest. It didn’t seem fair.

But Beckett flashed a grin and pulled my hand a little to the side until I was touching the side of his ribcage, my heart pounding in my throat, echoing in my head. “And whatever else your heart desires.”

Heat rose along my neck and made my head swim. I opened my mouth to tell him it was out of the question. I meant to say I would rather drop out this instant. But I couldn’t.

His lips were on mine before I could blink. It was a hungry, greedy kiss; its intensity was almost painful. Beckett held the back of my head as he parted his teeth enough to suck my lower lip between his. He bit, but only a little.

My heart tripped once. Twice. My fingers curled and dug into his ribcage. I tasted the sweetness on his lips and nearly whimpered when the tip of his tongue entered my mouth. Fuck, it felt good. How long had it been since someone kissed me? Especially someone with so much cocky dominance that I felt like I could give in, be taken for a ride, and forget about everything else for one blissful instant.

Beckett kissed me deeply and thoroughly for what felt like an eternity. And though mere seconds had passed, I found myself in need of making an urgent decision. Should I kiss him back? What path would that take us on? If I encouraged him now, or even allowed a little more ground...ah, but it felt so good.

His head bobbed from one side to the other as he explored my mouth with his tongue. He was so fucking good at this that my admiration bordered on hatred. Or the other way around. I wasn’t so sure.

The only thing I could be sure of was that if I let him go where he

wanted, I would be in for a treat. Beckett was the campus playboy without a rival. I didn't need to wonder what it would be like because it would be fucking perfect.

Except he couldn't fucking trust me to pull off a maneuver on ice without his blessing, which fucking got us here in the first place.

I inhaled sharply and moved my hand off his ribcage and to his solar plexus, pushing him roughly away. "No," I said.

He raised both hands to the level of his shoulders, palms facing me, and took two solid steps back. "Your loss," he said, moving his left hand to fix his ruffled locks.

"You should go." I turned away, my face heated and my cock throbbing hard. The last thing I needed was for Beckett to see how easily he could devastate me.

"Uh-huh." His footsteps were slow, his breaths steady and deep.

I stared at my bed, Beckett behind me, and waited for the door to open. When it did, I spoke up again. "And Beckett," I said, turning my head just enough so he would see my cool, composed profile. "The only way I'll play friends with you, is if you learn how to trust me out there where it matters."

He snorted. Because of course he did. It hardly surprised me. "Trust you to do what?"

"If you're still insisting I cost us that match yesterday, think again before you ask me to be part of your schemes." It took all my strength to stay composed through the words I squeezed over my lips. "And maybe question your own skill on the ice."

Not one of my muscles twitched; not for a moment did my voice crack. I played every secret ace I had and got through this without showing him any weakness. But it had been a close call.

When Beckett murmured another 'uh-huh,' and shut the door, I reached for the back of my desk chair and grabbed it for balance. "Fuck," I whispered, struggling for air. That had been the hottest thing I'd ever felt; that had somehow sparked the lustiest thoughts and fanned the embers of my deepest desires. Holy fuck, he could be hot when he wanted to be; and when I made myself forget who he was.

I shut my eyes and tried to clear my head of Beckett Partridge.

Somehow, I would need to find enough composure to be around him in this house for another year and a half. This house and on the ice. And in the locker room after practice. And in the showers. Fuck.

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BECKETT

I didn't see the elusive fucker for another three days. However the hell he had managed it, Caden steered clear of me even around the house we shared.

Perhaps he was punishing me for my lack of judgment. Oh, and it had truly been an epic lack of it. I'd given in to the dumbest temptation of mine. And it wasn't just because Caden was all stern handsomeness and sculpted muscles; sure, that was my type, but my type cost a penny for a dozen. I could find guys like him in every nook and cranny, on and off campus.

But there was something impossible about Caden Jones. He was impossible to win over and he was the wrongest thing I could want. Which made me want him all the more.

And in his absence, my desire for Caden Jones only increased. Because I'd really thought...ah, it didn't matter what I thought. I'd been mistaken.

So, when Caden strolled into the locker room on Tuesday with a stony face and as cold as his brown eyes could be, I forced myself to stay cool. I acknowledged him with a curt nod, still unsure where we stood. He'd made a request I hadn't fully understood; mainly because I had been dealing with rejection at the time. Also, what the fuck was it supposed to mean? That I should trust him more? I fucking hated riddles.

Whatever it was that Caden had meant, it made no impact on anything now. He marched toward his locker without another glance, undressed casually, and put the gear on. Practice went by well with no highs or lows. We had exactly zero interactions and Coach Murry was standing on the side, arms crossed at his chest, watching very intently.

When it was over, Coach stopped me on my way to the locker room. “Is that the best you two dummies can do for the team?”

“I’m trying, Coach,” I said, my voice more tired than I’d anticipated. “Will you let us play on Friday?”

“Hmm.” Coach said nothing else. He narrowed his eyes in thought, then spun away from me.

When I finally reached the locker room, several guys glanced at me like they expected some sort of a speech. I ignored them, locking my gaze onto Caden’s broad, bare back. He was ripping off the Velcro and shedding off the pieces of his gear until he was down to his jockstrap. I had never allowed myself to look at another teammate with my lusty eyes, but I couldn’t resist it now.

Caden grabbed a towel and marched into the shower, stepping out of his jockstrap along the way, just like all the other guys. Except, I had no interest in seeing the other guys. And I had no right to stare at Caden, who I wanted to see.

I swallowed the growing knot in my throat as panic slowly prickled up my spine, and simply grabbed my stuff from the locker and rushed back to the boarding house.

By Thursday’s practice, I was no wiser. Caden and I were in the same limbo we’d been in two days earlier and the match was coming up soon. Coach Murry had his sulky face on; Caden had his military expressionless face going hard; and I...I was fucking lost. Between nursing my wounded pride, puzzling Caden’s meaning, and reading Coach’s thoughts off his hardened face, I managed just enough strength to get the team spirits up.

And yet, when it was over, Coach had no answer for me. “I’ll tell you tomorrow,” he said.

“But we’re playing tomorrow,” I pointed out.

“Michaels is ready to take over at a moment's notice, son.” Coach pursed his lips.

Except, Michaels didn’t want it and the team would definitely lose. Not that I had a way to *promise* a victory. I’d been distracted both times this week and Caden seemed to have lost his edge, too. He was distracted out there and more than cold off the ice. I couldn’t read him. I couldn’t read anyone.

So when I returned to the boarding house, the only thing I knew for sure was that I had a desperate need to burn more energy. And since kissing Caden, only to get pushed away, guys who would welcome me without

exchanging names seemed just a little unappealing. So, instead, I burned my energy by running. I ran and ran as rain drizzled and sweat broke over my body. I ran more, until my calves were burning and my lungs felt twice their size.

Whether it was a stroke of luck or just another kick in the balls, when I returned to the boarding house, it was fairly quiet. Even the lights seemed subdued from the outside. Some, doubtlessly, weren't in there; others were slacking down in the rec room; and some, like Caden Jones, were probably holed up in their rooms. And this was where my balls got the kicking. I barged into the house, dripping wet from rain and glowing with the heat I'd worked myself up to, and there, in the huge, open kitchen, stood Caden, snacking on cookies.

"Oh. It's you," he said after he looked up.

"Sorry," I murmured, my command of the English language dramatically dropping off. "I was clearing my head."

"I didn't ask." Caden lifted a glass of milk and washed the cookies down. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, muscles tensing in his right arm.

"Yeah. Right." I scratched the back of my head, water dripping from my tousled locks of hair. "Sorry to bore you, then."

Caden didn't reply and I decided my best course of action was to walk away. The smartest thing I could do was not touch the hornet's nest by walking out of the room instead, take a hot shower, and pretend everything was fine.

So, with that in mind, I proceeded to do the exact opposite. I leaned against the massive kitchen island, looking straight into Caden's brown eyes on the other side. "I'm sorry I repulsed you with that kiss."

Caden, for once in his life, actually smiled. Oh, it wasn't even close to a genuine display of joy. Far from it. It was a sinister, sarcastic smile followed by words designed to hurt. Luckily for everyone, I was a heartless bastard who couldn't be hurt that easily. "Get your head out of your ass, Partridge."

Alright. I know how to work with this, I thought. "I'm trying to apologize, asshole. You'd be wise to accept my apology while it's on the table."

"Do you think I'm so weak that a little kiss scares me?" he asked, as stony as ever. "You think you need to apologize for that? Believe me, Beckett, there are countless other things you've done wrong, but that wasn't one of them." He pursed his lips abruptly, like he hadn't meant to say quite as much.

Too late. I cocked my head in thought, observing the faintest shade of red touching his cheeks. He *did* like me, too. Well, 'like' was a strong word. "If anyone needs to get their head out of their ass, though, it's you," I said. "I'm so sick of listening to your riddles, Jones. Can't you fucking say what you mean? And I say 'mean' instead of 'feel' because I'm still not sure you're capable of feeling, you robot."

His eyes flashed with anger. At least he could feel that much. "Just because you're not at the receiving end of my feelings, it doesn't mean I don't have any. That's exactly why you're not in my equation, Partridge. You're so self-absorbed that nothing exists unless it's directed at you."

I snorted with contempt. "That's so not true. Just because it's your attention I'm trying to grab, it must mean I'm going around begging everyone to like me, huh?"

Caden locked his gaze on mine. "Are you begging me to like you, Beckett?"

I shifted uncomfortably. He'd parsed straight through my words and found my meaning. "What if I were?" Perhaps that wasn't the smartest path to take. Then again, when had I ever chosen being smart?

"Maybe it's a little late for that, don't you think?" Caden lifted an eyebrow.

I gripped the edge of the polished marble top of the kitchen island and stared deep into those big, brown eyes. "Bullshit," I said. "You felt the same thing I did. Don't pretend."

"What does it matter?" Caden asked.

"It matters," I said, my voice dropping lower and quieter. "It matters if you like me the same way I like you. And it matters even more because you're the most infuriating dick I've ever met and I just so happen to kinda be into you."

"But it doesn't matter," Caden said. "Like, hate, it's all pointless, Beckett. Nothing's gonna happen here. Not with the two years of baggage we've been carrying."

I pouted as I pushed myself away from the island. "What baggage? We never saw eye to eye, true. But we never had problems. I figured, if we give each other a chance..." I shrugged.

"And does it matter that I was trying to impress you for the first six months? Does it matter that your approval meant everything to me when I couldn't have it? No, it doesn't fucking matter. Because I learned one thing in

these two years, Beckett. I learned that you'll never have faith in me and that I am better off fending for myself." He breathed deeply, posture as steely as ever. "So why would I start giving you chances now? Now, when you need to captain our team and it depends on whether I dance to your fiddle."

"It's not like that," I said carefully, but the truth was I had no proof to offer. "Besides, it's not that I don't have faith in you...you're the second best," I offered. We both knew I was the best by far, but being second to me was no small thing.

"Words," Caden said. "Why wouldn't you be saying this just to get me to play along? Hell, why should I trust that you kissed me for any other reason than to bribe me into compliance?" He threw his hands up and shrugged.

Frustration was eating me raw and I wanted to jump over the island and kiss him until he was silent, but that was pretty much the worst thing I could do right about now. "That's cruel," I said sourly. "Even for you, Jones."

His eyes flashed for an instant. "But don't worry," he said. "I'll play along. We'll go out there, do our very mediocre, like we'd done this whole week, and probably get our asses kicked. But Coach will be happy we're no longer at each other's throats. Morale will be high. Everyone will break into song and an angel will get its wings."

"You can do better than that," I said.

"Don't be stupid," he spat. "Of course I can be better than I'd been this week. But someone had reminded me a week ago that taking initiative isn't meant for me. I should follow my captain's orders." He gave a sarcastic salute. "Why should I be any better than our average teammates?"

I stared at him in disbelief as it slowly clicked in my head. "You're considering other career options."

He shrugged. "I might be thinking about some."

"Nah. You're committing. I can see you."

He narrowed his eyes at me and shook his head. "I'm not committing. I'm just wondering."

I exhaled a long breath of air. "It wasn't about you taking the initiative in the rink, Caden," I said. "It was that you left me in the dark when you did your own thing."

"No," he said, shaking his head quickly. "It was about you not looking. You assumed the worst and decided I fucked up." He pushed himself away from the island and walked to the other end of it. "I thought you'd look. I thought you'd get it. But you didn't. And it's my fault, I admit it. It's my

fault I expected you to trust me for once in two years of playing together.”

“I have faith in you,” I said, clawing for some thread that would get me out of this horrible situation where I was only realizing how much I wanted him while losing him on all fronts.

“Prove it,” he said simply.

“And us? The kiss? What are we gonna do about that?” I asked. There I was, pretty much as naked as I could be without it being literal.

Caden paused and thought about it for the briefest of moments, then shot me a bewildered frown. “They’re not separate issues, Beckett.”

With that, he spun away and headed up the stairs. I heard his door slam. For better or worse, this conversation was done. And he was off limits once again.

Our match was in less than twenty-four hours and I had a lot to figure out. If only I knew where to begin. And if only I could stop, for one goddamn moment, imagining pressing my lips against Caden’s.

What the hell had he done to me?

CADEN

I led the way, like I always did. Swiftly baiting and switching between our opponents, I dominated to the cheers of the crowd and my teammates. But they were all just blurry faces and indistinct voices to me. My focus was razor sharp and the only objective was to not lose the puck.

Luckily, I was very good at that. And even more luckily, our opponents weren't.

The battle raged with neither side taking the lead for long. Though the players couldn't match me — or, where credit was due, Beckett Partridge — they still often managed to get through our defenses and trick our goalie.

My heart drummed hard; my face was burning. Time was running out and the opposition was becoming fierce. Our opponents were growing desperate to defend their line and all eyes were on me.

I tried focusing on the puck. And, for a little while, that was what I did. I narrowed my attention to the immediate threats and evaded their defenses. But as soon as the threats were a little further away, my mind returned to the one thing I really wasn't supposed to be thinking about. Not now. Not ever. That way lay in ruin and little else.

Beckett Partridge.

Since last night, we hadn't spoken more than the bare necessities related to the match, as well as those aimed at the coach to show how well we were getting along. But the moment nobody observed us, we chose silence, awkward as it was.

Last night, I'd gotten the most honesty out of Beckett since I'd known him. Or, at least I hoped it had all been honest. Because he'd admitted to

some feelings that I might have been harboring myself.

My attention slipped away from the puck and I only noticed when an uproar of disappointment alerted me that another player had attempted, but failed, to take it from me.

I bared my teeth, racing toward the goal, and realizing that the opponents were amassing on the other side. No matter how good at deception I was — and I was good enough to deceive my own team on occasion — I wasn't going to pull this off by myself. I needed an assist.

I'd told Beckett the truth of it. In the two years I'd been on this team, I'd never had anyone truly believe in me. I'd been the second best all these years. And I would have been the co-captain had I been any more sociable; but I'd never gotten the acknowledgment for my contributions. When I cost us a victory, I got the brunt of the backlash. When I won us a match, I got a slight nod as though Beckett approved of me doing precisely what I was supposed to do. As if I'd done the minimum and won.

I glanced ahead, left and right. Michaels was on the far left side on the lookout, evading an enemy defender. Partridge was parallel with me, on the right side of the rink.

There it was; the victory. It was within my reach, if only I played it smart.

The last time I'd found myself in this spot, Beckett hadn't seen me. He hadn't trusted me. He had decided that I'd done the wrong thing and he'd given up on me.

Time seemed to slow down as if we were caught in the gravitational pull of a black hole. Everything stopped. My senses sharpened until I could see the future as clearly as I could see the present. Except, two futures lay ahead. One was the same as our past; I would do the same maneuver and lose us the game. The other, though, relied on Beckett's faith in me. And that had a massive question mark hovering above it.

We could win this if you trusted me, I thought, glancing from Michaels to Partridge. Our gazes met. Though it lasted for less than a heartbeat, it felt longer. His blue gaze wasn't as icy as I'd known it. Something had changed. Either now or last night or over the course of this entire week. Perhaps it was the electricity of that one kiss I wouldn't let myself think about. Perhaps.

Whatever it was, I blinked, and Beckett blinked back. The temptation was maddeningly strong to just believe we could read one another's minds.

This was it.

The moment of truth.

Have faith in me. Just once. It was a silent prayer as two defensemen rounded on me. I waited for as long as I could until our opponents believed I was out of time to bait and switch; I swung my stick from right to left, as though I was sending the puck to Michaels. The blade of the stick missed the puck by a fraction of an inch just as the two defenders took a sharp turn toward Michaels.

My stick swung back, sending the puck to Beckett so suddenly that everyone gasped. Everyone but Beckett.

I didn't dare look. For one brief moment, I was too scared to look.

My torso twisted as I avoided opposing players. Two came to a halt and tried spinning around, skating after me, but they were just a moment too late.

When I passed them, there was only Beckett and the goalie near me. And I looked. Finally, I forced myself to check whether Beckett understood me.

His eyes were ablaze as he baited the goalie, navigating the puck seemingly to a victory.

I held my breath and directed all my thoughts at Beckett. *Do it. Now.*

And he did.

Instead of attempting to score the final point, Beckett pulled my exact trick, deceiving the goaltender at the last minute, and sending the puck my way.

Time sped up, making up for all the slowing down it had done. The puck touched the blade of my stick; my arms tensed; I held my breath.

In an instant, it was over.

The crowd erupted into a cheering frenzy. Half the rink moaned and cursed and the other half laughed and celebrated. Beckett caught my gaze again, a grin spreading under the helmet. He skated across the rink toward me, nearly tackling me to the ground.

His stick disappeared and mine dropped from my hands when Beckett crashed into me. His arms quickly wrapped around me and the fucker literally lifted me off the ice, spinning us around. "Holy shit, you did it!" he yelled. "Fuck, I knew you would. I knew it. I looked at you and I just knew."

I wiggled myself free from his tight grip and found that his arms around my torso weren't the reason I was short of breath. Hell no. It was the brilliant smile on his face that made my breaths shallow.

From the moment Beckett pulled back a few inches, still grinning at me with the same joyful intensity, until the moment we were all showered and dressed in the locker room, listening to Coach Murry's praise, there was a

gap in my memory. Everything had been happening in tiny flashes. Suddenly, everyone had an urge to tap my shoulder, all the while Beckett gazed at me. He didn't even bother hiding it.

Beckett walked up to me, surrounded by a cloud of amber and sandalwood, and lifted his arm up, leaning against my locker just as I locked it up. "We should celebrate."

My heart fluttered. "Um...I guess."

"Guys are going down to *Publin*. Are you in?" The corners of his lips seemed permanently stuck in that half-smile of his.

I scratched the back of my head. He was too close and I was betrayed by my own flushed face. "Uh, not really my thing, to be honest. I think I'll take a rain check."

Beckett's expression didn't change. "Suit yourself." He still gazed at me, not giving a damn about other guys talking at him from across the locker room. He ignored everyone and I finally found out what it was like to be at the receiving end of Beckett Partridge's admiration.

No wonder this guy had an easy time with guys. Were I any weaker, I would probably be sliding down to my knees right here.

"Yeah," I said, short of breath once again. "See you around." I slunk my duffel over my shoulder, turned from Beckett, and walked out.

It was some thirty minutes later that the knock on my door startled me out of my desk chair. For once, it was welcome, though I wasn't all too eager to show it.

Beckett strolled into my room before I had a chance to open the door. "Do you always claim other people's rooms?" I asked for the lack of a better greeting.

"I figured it would be locked if you didn't want people barging in," he said with a cocky smirk.

"That level of sarcasm is so high I can't tell if you're for real," I pointed out, crossing my arms at my chest and leaning against the edge of the desk. Beckett shut the door and glanced around the room, then lowered himself into my beanbag. "I see you have your own spot."

"Do you mind?" he asked, obviously not interested in my answer. He probably knew what my answer would be. "You were great today, Caden."

"People are always surprised," I said, half jokingly.

"That's just it," Beckett said. "I wasn't surprised. Not when I gave you a chance. When you scored that goal, it made perfect sense."

My heart tripped. Was I hearing this correctly?

“You were right all along,” Beckett said and my jaw nearly dropped. “I was too full of myself to see it, but I should have trusted you sooner.”

I frowned, my vocabulary rapidly diminishing in size.

Beckett blew out a long breath of air and ran a hand through his soft, blond curls. “That’s what I came to say. I’m sorry it took me two years to get there.”

“I...thank you, Beckett,” I said, rather anticlimactically.

We eyed one another for a while longer, waiting for *something* that never came. Beckett, finally, touched his knees and got up, facing me.

“Guys are probably waiting for you at the pub,” I whispered, struggling to inhale. Beckett wasn’t moving back. Instead, he seemed to be getting closer.

“They won’t miss me,” he said confidently. He took another step toward me, then halted, waiting. His pupils dilated, his pulse visible on his neck. “Unless you’d rather I wasn’t here.”

We stood in silence for just long enough that Beckett took half a step back, pulling away from me. The action was small enough to mean nothing, except it meant everything to me at that moment.

I grabbed his wrist and yanked him back. “I’d rather you stayed.”

Beckett’s face flashed with surprise, quickly transforming into that signature cocky smile of his. “Oh?”

“Oh,” I breathed.

The corners of his lips ticked higher up. “Then, I guess, I’ll stay.” He pulled his hand back, but not all the way. It slipped out of my grip, but his fingers threaded with mine as he stepped forward and closed the distance between us. “You know,” he said, his chest an inch away from mine, eyes scanning my face and neck. “You’re much nicer when you’re not plotting my murder.”

“You’re nicer when you don’t give me a reason for it,” I said, not even trying to free my fingers from his hold. His hand was warmer than I’d expected. “And, I guess, you’ve given me the chance I asked for...” I sucked in a shallow breath and licked my lips. “It’s only fair to...you know...”

Beckett’s eyes were ablaze, a cool flame burning in them. “Return a favor?” He laughed softly. “Nah. I’d rather if you wanted me.”

I swallowed and blinked. He was as forward as he’d ever been and I let myself find it irresistible. “I do want you.” I murmured.

Beckett’s ears perked and he cocked his head as if to ask me if I were

sure. He pulled himself together fairly quickly and licked his lips. I had a hunch as to why he was licking them and my heart gave a flutter. “Can I kiss you already?”

“Hell yeah,” I whispered, riding the relief of not having to talk anymore. The tricky diplomacy between us and the mountain of misunderstandings dissolved and disappeared as Beckett reached for the back of my head with his other hand. He leaned in and tilted his head down as I lifted my chin up.

Finally, words were redundant. Finally, fighting was over.

Finally...

...his lips grazed mine.

And every lusty thought I’d had of Beckett Partridge resurfaced from the depths of my subconsciousness, converged around him, and took over the control of my limbs.

That was a good thing because I was slowly melting away, losing myself in the tingling sensation that Beckett’s lips impressed onto mine. The tip of his tongue slipped into my mouth, playing with mine, probing, exploring.

Fuck. I whimpered over his lips when Beckett tore his hand free of mine and pressed the small of my back. My abs pressed hard against his; my crotch pressed harder. The unbearable urge to rub myself against him traveled from my brain to my hips before I could process it. I felt his smile pressed against my lips and I felt his cock harden and throb as my hips swayed.

“Holy shit, you’re horny,” Beckett said, returning his lips to mine as soon as the words were out. “So horny,” he murmured.

Very decidedly, my brain was shutting off all the unnecessary functions, like speech. I moaned and murmured something, my head falling back; Beckett bit my lower lip hard, then sucked it into his mouth. He played with it for a few moments before letting it out and pressing kisses on my chin and down my neck.

“Christ,” he muttered, his voice vibrating against my tender skin. “Why haven’t we been doing this all along?”

I would have answered him if I could string any words together. But all I managed was a choked laugh, followed by my fingers digging into his muscled back, arms tightening around his body.

Beckett took the bottom edge of my T-shirt and lifted it a few inches until I released him for just long enough to be undressed. My T-shirt flew over my head and landed on the floor, followed quickly by Beckett’s.

Though I had looked at Beckett’s body three times a week for the past

two and a half years, I had never *seen* it. Not really. I had always looked at it with my spiteful goggles, blocking him out of my vision.

Now, though, we paused. By the look on his face, I was guessing he'd never *seen* me either, though we'd showered side by side countless times. Finally, we let our curiosities off their leashes.

Beckett examined me from a short distance as thoroughly as I did him. His shoulders were rounded with defined muscles, his chest broad and waist narrow. He was bulkier where I was more cut. And his sweatpants...well, they were revealing a lot that was happening below Beckett's waist.

His cock was stretching the fabric all the way to his left hip and I choked. "Shit," I whispered. "You're, uh..." I vaguely remembered Beckett asking me to watch him while he showered a week ago. And I remembered, just as vaguely, saying something about not being impressed. He was proving me wrong.

Beckett laughed out loud. "A grower? Yeah." He shook his head. "And I'm guessing you're a size queen."

Heat washed over my face and I opened my mouth to apologize or deny or say anything at all, but Beckett laughed louder and stepped forward.

"I'm just fucking with you, Caden," he said, resting his hands on my bare hips. The heat of his body reached me. "But hey, if you are, then we're both in luck."

His hands moved over my hips slowly, trailed my waist, and rested on my ass. And when he squeezed my cheeks and pulled me closer to him, my crotch pressed against his. He throbbed just like me.

I moaned shortly, silenced by Beckett's lips on mine. Feeling those hard muscles pressing against my bare torso was something I'd never let myself imagine. Almost never. There had been times, admittedly, when Beckett conveniently entered my thoughts, though not all too often.

Beckett's kisses became hungry and greedy quickly. He pushed forward, sliding his hands from my ass, up my back, and forcing me against the edge of the desk.

He was so fucking right. We should have been doing this for the past two and a half years. It felt so much better than watching him fume; though being the cause of his fuming had its certain charms, as well.

Beckett reached down and grabbed me under my ass, pressed me against his body, and lifted me. I was a good thirty pounds lighter than him, so I wasn't surprised. My legs spread abruptly and wrapped around his waist. One

of his hands held onto me as the other hand swept the surface of my desk, sliding books, notebooks, and a mug full of pens onto my bed before he lowered me onto it.

“Fuck,” I gasped, my attraction to Beckett shooting so high in that one moment that I could hardly follow. My legs tightened around his waist and I wanted to cry out when he grinned. He was so fucking handsome that it left me panting.

Beckett leaned in, kissing me so intensely that my torso lowered under the pressure and I lay flat on the desk. He swung his hips back and forth, teasing me gently at first, then harder. His kisses were in the rhythm of the dry humping that intensified and continuously pushed air out of my lungs.

His lips trailed off mine, ghosting kisses down my neck and over my chest. Beckett followed the middle of my torso, hands sliding down the sides of my ribcage, as I closed my eyes and surrendered myself to Beckett’s worship of my body.

My eyes didn’t stay shut for long. When I began imagining Beckett’s golden hair and deep blue eyes, I knew it was better to just gaze at him. I’d been avoiding it for way too long and, now, I was finally allowed to feast my eyes.

Beckett was kissing my belly button, but his gaze was on me, scanning me from under his black eyebrows.

“Are you gonna fuck me?” I panted.

Beckett’s hand brushed quickly over my hard cock. “I better,” he said, giving me a sinister smile. “If I don’t, you’ll never forgive me.”

I would have laughed, but that wicked smile lifted my soul to another plane of existence, from where I couldn’t control my muscles. I was limp and fully at Beckett’s mercy. And, oddly enough, I was fully on board with that arrangement.

“Have me,” I whispered as Beckett hooked his fingers inside the waistband of my sweatpants and underwear and yanked them both down my legs. My cock stiffened and halted upright, its tip slick with precum and swollen to bursting.

Beckett lifted one corner of his lips lazily, looking up and down my entire, naked body. “I’m starting to think you might be into me,” he said.

“Shut up,” I huffed, my face heated and my breaths shallow. I managed a meek smile as Beckett laughed at that, then lost my mind when he bent down and closed his lips around me. “Fuck,” I rumbled deeply and slowly as

Beckett swallowed me.

He sucked me hard and fast, feeling each throb of my dick and slowing down to prevent any happy accidents that would cut our time together short. And, in those moments, I could feel the fucker smile around my cock.

I moaned loudly and for a long while when Beckett loosened his throat with the sheer force of his stubborn will and swallowed me whole, lips touching the neatly trimmed hair around the base of my cock. Whether he wanted to shut me up or slick his fingers, it wasn't immediately clear, but Beckett used the moment of my ecstatic moaning to shove three fingers into my mouth.

His thumb and pinkie held my head in place as he probed my mouth with the remaining three fingers. He pushed and pulled like my head was just another toy at his disposal and like my mouth was just another hole to fill. Then again, he didn't treat his own mouth any differently, so I didn't protest.

Seconds felt like minutes; minutes like hours. Beckett used his free hand to lift my leg over his shoulder and I lifted the other on my own as soon as he pulled his fingers out of my mouth. Hell, I knew exactly where he was heading, and it made me dangerously close to the edge of my impending orgasm.

Beckett's slick fingers touched my hole and I whimpered with pleasure, warmth spreading through my chest, excitement tingling all the way from my toes to the tip of my nose. He massaged my rim slowly and gently, sucking me at the same, an infuriating pace that kept me at the edge, but never let me cross the line.

When his index finger slipped inside my body, my toes curled and the back of my head hit the desk. He probed me slowly, getting me used to the sensation, until he felt like I was ready for another.

And when he was fucking me with three fingers, my eyes rolled back in my skull and I panted short breaths just to stay alive. Light-headed and horny beyond anything I knew, I thrust my hips off the desk, hitting the back of Beckett's throat and making him produce a choking sound.

I couldn't take his edging any longer, but he still wasn't letting me finish. The sweetest, sexiest frustration uncoiled in my chest and it spread throughout every last shred of my body. My ankles crossed on Beckett's back as he lowered his head down my cock. He fingered me ruthlessly without slowing down and I locked his head between my thighs, forcing him to hold my cock pressed against the back of his throat for so long that another

choking sound erupted from his stuffed mouth. His fist worked me harder as panic flashed in his eyes for an instant before I released him.

Beckett pulled his head back, letting my cock drop out of his mouth, and gave me the sexiest smile. His free hand pressed the middle of my chest, pinning me against the desk. "You're so screwed, Jones," he said.

"Was that too much?" I asked airily.

Beckett chuckled. "Not even close. It just made me want to torture you harder." The pressure on my chest increased as his fingers stretched me harder and faster. My whimpers turned into moans that reached new heights, until my voice cracked and I hyperventilated, sweat breaking out over my body and my hole embracing Beckett's fingers so smoothly that there was no more stretching to be done. He massaged my prostate with his fingers, overwhelming me with pleasure and a desperate, devastating need for just a little more of him.

He pulled his hand away abruptly and straightened. "Got condoms?" he asked.

"Drawer," I blurted somehow. It was a wonder I could pull off one entire syllable at this point.

Beckett moved quickly to the nightstand and opened the drawer, then whistled. "Can you take this thing?" he pulled out my black toy and dangled it in front of me.

I laughed. "Seven inches? Breezy."

"We'll see," he said in a huskier voice, then spotted the things he was looking for. He dropped his sweatpants and underwear, stepped out of them, and positioned himself in front of me. Now, he looked even bigger, and my heart palpitated with nervousness and excitement in equal measures.

Beckett was so stiff that he wasn't swinging. Not even a little. He stroked himself, a pained expression distorting his face, eyebrows rising and lips parting. He slipped the condom on, stretching it with his plus sized cock, and lubed it before massaging my rim with his slick fingers.

My mouth opened a little as he pressed the tip of his cock against my slick and loosened hole. And, as he pushed in, his gaze locked onto mine, my mouth opened wider and wider. A strangled moan left my constricted throat.

"Fuck, Caden," Beckett whispered in haste. "You're so beautiful when you're taking a cock." He settled himself inside of me after swinging his hips back and forth a few times. Each time he reached deeper and my ass welcomed him. His muscled arms tensed and his hands let go of my hips,

then slid up my torso until he wrapped his fingers around my neck.

He wasn't even squeezing. He simply held his hands there as if to keep me in place. Like I would want to move from this heavenly position. My feet were placed firmly on his flexing pecs and his big cock was all the way in me, his balls gently pressing against my ass.

I broke eye contact to look down where precum dripped from my painfully swollen cock.

Beckett purred and pulled back, relieving the pressure off my prostate for a moment before he charged. In the span of minutes, Beckett Partridge redefined every idea of fucking I'd ever had. He tightened his hands around my neck just enough to keep me from sliding away on the desk as he thrust his hips forward, filling me and squeezing precum out of me with each precise push against my prostate.

"You're fucking glowing, Caden," he said, huffing for air as he fucked me mercilessly. "So beautiful...Caden..." His thumbs traced the middle of my neck and reached my chin, then my lips. I kissed them. "So beautiful when getting fucked..."

His words alone pulled a yelp out of me. I grabbed his hips and yanked him closer, making him bury his cock inside of me and stop. His mouth opened, mimicking mine, and we stared into one another's blazing eyes. "Fuck me harder," I husked, watching the fire in his eyes burn hotter.

A stray lock of golden hair fell over one black eyebrow as Beckett bared his clenching teeth and wrecked me senseless, not even bothering to manipulate my body as he had a few minutes earlier. He impaled me rapidly and forcefully, pressing against my prostate so frustratingly and deliciously hard that I wanted to cry and laugh and sing at the same time.

I slapped his broad chest as my ankles rested on his shoulders. He bent my legs further, leaning in, pressing his open mouth over mine. His minty breath filled my mouth, my lungs. My moans entered his body.

I kept my hands on his pecs, digging fingernails into his pure, manly muscles and making him growl over my lips. As he increased the pace, my orgasm flared through my body without a warning.

"Fuck," I murmured, right into his open mouth, and whimpered. My body pulsed; my stretched hole tightened around the base of Beckett's cock, sending him into a throbbing frenzy. Hot cum sprayed my stomach and chest, scalding me where it went.

Beckett pulled his head back just enough so he could cry out, cock still

pulsing and filling the condom with cum. That gave me just enough space to wrap my hand around my dick and stroke it gently as I came off my high.

Beckett stabbed me once more, holding his cock deep inside of me, panting for air as a smile broke out over his handsome face. “Fuck, Caden,” he whispered, breathless. “You can take a fucking.”

I heaved a breath of air. “Just like you can give it,” I said as clearly as I could after having my world shattered and put back together.

I watched Beckett Partridge pull his cock out of me and felt his absence immediately. *Fuck*, I thought as he pulled the condom off and dangled it, showing off the contents with a mischievous smile. *You just positively ruined all the other guys for me.*

I pushed that thought aside and sat up. “Shower?”

He smiled, reaching for the toilet paper roll on the nightstand and tucking the condom away safely. “Shower and?”

“Again?” I asked, incredulous. “I mean, sure, but give it a minute.”

Beckett laughed out loud. “I was thinking more like going out after the shower.”

“With me?” I frowned, figuring that out only from the wide-eyed look he was sending me.

“Duh.”

It made me smile. “A bit unusual, don’t you think? Fucking first, inviting on a date after.”

“You’re not a usual guy,” Beckett said, resting his hands against the edge of the desk, one on each side of me. He brought his face to mine, cocked his head, and pecked kisses on my lips, chin, nose, and cheeks. “And I wanna know you better.”

I let out a soft, airy chuckle. “What if you don’t like what you find?”

Beckett pulled back, his entire, undivided attention on me. “Oh, sweetheart, you really haven’t been paying attention the last half hour, have you?”

I opened my mouth to say something, but laughed from the top of my lungs instead. I liked this Beckett much more than I’d liked the cocky, smug asshole I’d thought he had been all these years. “Fine,” I said. “Let’s have a date.” But the reluctance in my voice was falling away before I got the words out. I’d tried and failed, within the same breath, to play hard to get, when it was obvious I was already his.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gay. Sweet. Steamy.

Hayden Hall writes MM romance novels. He is a boyfriend, a globetrotter, and an avid romance reader. Hayden's mission is to author a catalog of captivating and steamy MM romance novels which gather a devoted community around the Happily Ever Afters.

His stories are sweet with just the right amount of naughty.

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TWISTED VALENTINE

A DYSFUNCTIONAL STORY

ISABEL LUCERO

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TRIGGER WARNING

This story contains graphic violence, murder, and sex. There's knife and blood play, including carving words into skin.

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KASPIAN

Valentine's Day is almost here, and I know Quin isn't big on holidays. To be honest, I'm not either. Most of them are rooted in religion and neither one of us believes in a higher power. Valentine's Day, while it originated as a Christian feast to celebrate Saint Valentine, has now turned into a commercial celebration of love and romance.

Quin isn't romantic, and we don't profess our feelings like most couples, but there's something special between us that others won't understand, and I feel like we should celebrate it. We didn't do anything the last two years. The first year, we were new to Alaska and trying to settle in, and last year, Quin didn't even realize what day it was. It's not like I need much, just his undivided attention. He ended up making it up to me with sex that had me sore for a week, so I forgave him.

Now, over two years later, we've both settled into our new identities—Jamison and Grayson Blackwood. It took some convincing to get Quin to allow us to have a last name that kept his original surname in it. I may have told him it was just a good name, but I really wanted to have part of his name attached to mine, even if it's not the one I was born with.

It's unfortunate I'll never truly be Mr. Black, but we can play the part of a married couple with a similar name to his. I'm still fully obsessed with Quin, and while I can pretend to love and adore Jamison Blackwood when we're around other people here, and as much as I wanted Ezra Hamilton back in Vermont, I crave the darkness Quintin Black gives me, so keeping a part of him and his origins was important.

It didn't take as long as we thought to find someone who could give us

new identification under the table. Apparently Alaska is a common place for people to run off and start over.

Both of us found work at a local sea life center. Quin got a job there first as a security officer, which is a little ironic, considering we steer clear from anybody that wears any type of uniform and has the ability to detain people. However, it's a small place where he mostly patrols the area, and usually people don't approach him. He's not the charming one between the two of us, which is why I took a job in the gift shop. I can sell the shit out of those damn expensive souvenirs. Old ladies love me for some reason. You'd think I'd scare them with my tattoos and piercings, but I have a kind smile and infectious personality. Get them to laugh and they're putty in your hands.

I look at the clock on the wall of our cabin, expecting Quin to be home soon. We live just ten minutes away from Seward, in a black, fairly modernized and secluded cabin. The nearest neighbor might be two miles away, but our views consist of nothing but trees and land.

I get off earlier than he does, but Quin said he'd be working even later than usual today. He seems to be doing that a lot lately. I try not to listen to the voice that tells me something's wrong, but I can't help but wonder if maybe he's tiring of this life we have. It's been two years out here, and as different as we are from normal people, we have settled into somewhat traditional roles.

It's not like we don't still have excitement. We had sex last night, and I have a cut across my stomach I'm still sore from; I allowed him to use his blade on me last week. He has no reason to be unhappy, but Quin's always been a hard read. He doesn't show his emotions, nor does he talk about them, but I always have ways to bring them out. Perhaps it's time to provoke him. It's always so much fun.

After putting on my boots and jacket, I jog down the three steps of our cabin and walk through the foot of snow until I get to my truck. It doesn't warm up until I'm nearing the sea life center, but I make sure to park a good distance away, blocked by trees, and then I get out and walk ahead.

I spot his gray truck parked behind the building. There's one other vehicle next to his, but the store's closed. It's been closed for an hour, and the lights are off.

I came to make sure he was still working so I could prepare my surprise, but now my heart beats rapidly in my chest as my anger boils beneath my skin, making me forget I'm standing in the thirty degree chill.

What is he doing and with who?

With my hood over my head, I make my way to the building, creeping along the side until I get to the first glass window. Peeking inside, I don't see anybody, but there's a faint glow toward the back.

I have a key, I could unlock the door and walk in and see exactly what's happening. I also have a knife. I could get rid of the problem immediately. Quin tells me I'm too impulsive, but with him, I have learned to think a little more rationally. I can't put us at risk and force us to move again. Alaska is supposed to be the end game. We fled our small town in Vermont, leaving behind several bodies, and came here because of what it had to offer. Out here, we've been able to do what we want. We have limited neighbors, lots of land, and nearby water sources to dispose of bodies. I can't ruin this for us, but he can't either.

The light goes out, and voices trickle through the air as they emerge through the back door. I stay where I am, knowing I'm undetectable right now, but needing to hear the conversation.

Quin laughs. Who's making him have a deep, full laugh like that?

"Oh man, I can't believe that," another man says.

"I'm serious," Quin replies, and I can tell he's smiling just by the sound of his voice. I step closer to the back of the building.

"Nah, you're full of shit," the other guy says with a chuckle. They seem to be friends.

"Believe what you want," Quin states, and because I know him so well, I know he shrugged when he said it. "You should come over some time. I'll prove it to you."

The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh, white vapor billowing from my lips when they part in shock. He invited this man to our house? I've never even heard him talk about anybody from work, and Quin doesn't make friends. He does a good job playing the part, but he doesn't go out of his way to invite people in.

Pure, red hot anger bubbles inside me. I can't focus on anything as I envision what I want to do to this faceless man right now. I could follow him home and slit his throat. I'd like to see him try to laugh as the blood spurts from his wound.

The closing of a car door is what snaps me from my daydream.

"So, tomorrow?" my next victim asks.

"Not tomorrow. Let me figure a few things out, but maybe Wednesday."

“Okay, well, you have my number.”

“I do,” Quin says. “See ya later.”

Another door shuts and I make my way to the front of the building, hiding out of sight until they drive off. I know Quin won't leave the way I came in. He takes another route, so he won't see my car.

I won't beat him home, but I don't want to. I need time to calm down and think. Quin's always been so methodical. He's not reactionary like me. I need to get my anger out before I see him so he doesn't suspect I know anything. Fuck the surprise I was going to give him. I have my own plans to work out.

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QUINTIN

Kaspian isn't home when I pull up, so as soon as I get inside, I head for the bathroom to shower and get into a pair of sweats and a T-shirt before I begin dinner.

After throwing some rice in the cooker, I slice up the salmon and start cooking it in the skillet. I'm probably the better cook between the two of us, so most of the dinners are my responsibility. Though Kas always makes breakfast for me. On weekends, he'll try to serve it to me in bed, where I promptly give him a look before sitting up and taking it to the living room where we can both eat.

He likes to do more of the traditionally romantic things, but they make me uncomfortable. I don't want to be catered to in bed. In bed, I want to ravage him. I want to fuck him hard, cut him deep, and see the blood soak the sheets while his cum shoots from his cock. I need the violence, not romance.

We constantly have reminders that while we're both very similar, we have stark contrasts. He sometimes wants more from me than I give. Kaspian is a stalker at heart. A *hunter*, as he likes to call it. He enjoys the energy you have to put forth to follow someone and find out everything there is to know about them. He enjoys violence too, but on a different level. I'm not sure he needs it as much as I do.

Where I used to believe there was a monster inside me, I now realize there's the facade of a decent person inside me instead. I am a monster, and I let out the normal person when I need to. The real me needs to kill.

I tried being good. I had a good run of it back in Vermont, but then I met Kaspian. He allowed me to be myself, but I haven't been able to lately. He

likes the roles we have, but there's something missing. You can't say that to someone like Kas though. He's too volatile. He wouldn't understand what I was trying to say.

The door slams closed.

"Hey," I say, watching him from the kitchen.

The cabin is small. The front door opens between the living room and kitchen which aren't separated by anything but a couch. Our bedroom is right behind a single armchair and end table, hidden behind sliding barn doors.

"Hey. Salmon again?" he asks, a bite in his tone.

"We have plenty of it."

His lips go into a straight line as he nods. "I'm gonna take a shower."

He tries to walk past me, making a beeline for the black spiral staircase that leads to the upper level of the cabin. Up there is a loft bedroom and the only bathroom.

"Hey!" I say, pushing the skillet to another burner as I approach him.

He stops and looks at me like a petulant child with an attitude. I take a few seconds to study him and notice the set of his freshly shaved jaw, so the tension is obvious. His arms are to his sides, but his thumbs are anxiously rubbing against his forefingers.

Blood. I spot it in his nail beds. He tried washing it off, but it's hard to get rid of, especially if there's a lot. My gaze drops to his boots where I recognize the crimson splatter.

"What were you up to, Kaspian?" I ask, sliding my hands in my pockets.

"Nothing."

"You come in here wearing the blood of some stranger and expect me not to notice? Or care?"

"Why would you care?" he asks. "Is blood only *your* thing? I can't have a little fun with it?"

I bite down, keeping my anger in check. "Were you careful?"

He scoffs. "Yes, Dad. I was careful."

"Not if you came in here with blood visible on your shoes and fingers."

"You think I don't know what I'm doing? I was always a step ahead of you, Quintin. Don't forget that."

My nostrils flare as we stay locked in a staring contest. He finally breaks away and stomps upstairs. I can only keep my fury tamped down long enough to plate and cover the food before I'm following him to the bathroom.

How dare he kill someone without even telling me, especially considering

he knows how long it's been. Does he not see the effect it's having on me? On us? To do something that we've been doing together for the past two years to feed both of our dark and dysfunctional tastes and not include me? Infuriating.

It's been months. He usually finds someone, stalks them, makes sure there will be nobody looking for them once they're gone, then we come together for the bloody finale of their lives.

I find him in the shower. We have a wet room, so just past the sinks to the left and the toilet on the right, I walk through the doorway and watch as the water from the wide, raindrop shower head pours over him. Nearly ten feet away on the other side is our wide, white porcelain tub, so we have plenty of room in here.

With my clothes still on, I approach him from behind and place my hands on his waist. He jumps at my touch.

"What the fuck?"

The warm water begins to soak me. "What's your problem, Kaspian?" I ask. "Do you have an issue you'd like to discuss?"

He spins around, the water hitting only his back now. "I don't have an issue, Quin. Do you?"

"Yes," I answer honestly. "Why would you kill someone without me? Have you been stalking this person?"

His lips quirk up on one side. "Oh. Jealous?"

"You know me," I say in a low tone.

"I thought I did."

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

He shakes his head before turning his back to me. "Never mind. I'm sorry, okay? I had a bad day."

"You had a bad day," I repeat.

"Yep."

I step away from him and lean against the white subway tiles, watching as he scrubs himself clean. His eyes flicker to mine a few times, but he doesn't say anything.

He shuts off the water and steps out, reaching for the towel he placed on the counter. I remove my wet clothes and toss them in the sink.

Kas eyes me through the mirror, his gaze lingering on my naked body before he turns away and rubs the towel through his hair.

I grab him by the arms and force him into the loft bedroom.

“What the hell?” he asks, trying to shake me off.

“You tell me,” I growl, forcing him to the bed.

“What?” he questions, turning over on his back.

I reach for the lube in the nightstand next to us. Considering we’ve fucked in every nook and cranny in this place, we know to keep lube nearby for when the moment strikes.

With a generous squeeze, I pour the liquid into my palm before stroking my cock.

“Tell me about tonight,” I tell him.

With another squeeze, I cover my fingers before sliding them between his cheeks, finding his hole.

“Tell you what about tonight?” he asks, a sense of fear in his eyes.

Kas rarely gets scared, but I’ve seen the alarm in those dark eyes of his a few times, and it’s only when I’m on the other side. There’s still a lack of trust between us. We’re killers. I knew going in we wouldn’t be able to trust each other, it’s why our relationship is so dysfunctional. One of the most important components in a relationship is trust, but somehow we’ve still made it work.

He worries I may lose control over my bloodlust—that I may go too far when cutting him, because I’ll want to see more blood. He worries I won’t be satisfied with just that. He’s right to be concerned. Just as it’s obvious I should’ve been worried he would soon crave the desire for stalking on his own. We came up with a plan that seemed to work out for both of us, but maybe it’s been months since I’ve killed someone because he’s been preoccupied with his own pursuits.

“Tell me what you did tonight,” I say, stretching him with my fingers.

He closes his eyes, moaning. “I...I didn’t...oh yeah.”

I lean forward and squeeze his jaw with my other hand while continuing to prep him for my assault. “No, this isn’t for your enjoyment. This is for mine. I want every detail, Kas. I want to know everything. If you’re gonna keep the experience from me, you’re gonna at least let me live vicariously.”

“Oh god,” he moans again.

I remove my fingers and coat my cock once more, settling between his spread thighs. I put my cock at his entrance and push in.

“Fuck,” he groans in pleasure.

“Explain,” I say, moving in fully before hovering over his body.

“I was driving,” he says, starting at the beginning. I’m too worked up for

the long version. I need the gritty details.

I thrust hard. "How did you take him down?"

"We were behind a bar."

"Why the fuck were you at a bar?" I ask, getting distracted.

"To have a drink." He grunts. "I had a bad day."

"Mm."

"This guy kept looking at me."

"And you were looking at him, weren't you?" I ask, sliding out until just my tip is in his ass.

"No."

I thrust in again. "Then how did you know he was watching you?"

"Fuck!" he cries out. "Because I stand out here, you know that," he quips.

"Did you want him?"

"Fuck no."

"Why not?"

"I have you."

A satisfied growl rumbles in my throat. "So you went outside?"

"I knew he'd follow me. I may have antagonized him a little. Oh god, please," he moans, reaching for his dick.

I push his hand away. "No. Keep going."

His story comes out in fragments, distracted by my thrusts. "I walked behind the bar. Ahh. There was nothing but trees. No traffic. Few customers. Oh god. I went farther, like I was just taking a piss. I heard the crunch of his boots on the snow, smelled the cigarette smoke that clung to his clothes. Oh fuck, Quin," he moans.

"I don't care about this, Kas. Tell me what I want to hear," I say, moving faster.

"He went to touch me, but I side-stepped him and shoved. He fell face first into the ground, so I stood at his head and pulled him by the hair."

"Mmhmm," I moan, closing my eyes to envision the scene.

"I pulled the knife from my pocket. The one you bought me," he says, getting into it now. "The blade is serrated."

"Yeah," I groan.

"With his hair in my fist, I leaned down and slid the blade across his throat." He pauses to moan and dig his nails into my back. "When his body started moving, I swung around and sat on his back, still holding onto his hair. I watched as the blood pooled below his neck, spreading through the

snow, creating crimson rivers.”

“Oh yeah,” I moan, fucking him harder and deeper.

“The blood was on my hand, painting my skin red.”

“Mm.”

“I had to pull him deeper into the trees. When I flipped him over, his shirt was soaked in blood. His neck was a dark ruby color.”

“Fuck,” I groan.

“I know why you love blood so much, Quin. It’s so warm. Thick. And that color...you can’t beat the color.”

“Oh god,” I cry, shooting my release deep inside him as I come with a roar.

He drags his nails across my shoulders, arching his back off the bed. After I take a minute to recover, I slide out of him and step onto the floor.

“Where you going?”

I look down at him. “Out. Dinner’s in the kitchen. I’ll be back.”

“What about...?” He gestures to his hard cock.

“You’re good at doing things on your own. Take care of it.”

He twists his mouth at me, and it’s the last thing I see before I turn and walk downstairs. I throw on a pair of thermals and layer my clothes, finishing with a heavy jacket and boots. With my keys in hand, I head to the truck and start it up.

Kaspian should know by now, I always find a way to win these games we play.

KASPIAN

Quin doesn't come home until fifteen past midnight. I made it back an hour before he did, stewed in my anger until I heard his truck, then I climbed into bed and pretended to be asleep.

It took me a little while to find him after he took off. He had a head start, after all, but I eventually caught up. The bar I went to is south of us. It's basically a small cabin with liquor, and the only patrons are the people that live nearby. Which is saying something, because the nearest town is about six miles away, and there's nothing in between.

Seward's a port town with a few places to sit and have a drink, but Quin bypassed the spots people usually go and instead went to a lodge. I found his truck parked in the lot and made sure to pull into a space that wasn't visible from the building.

I know the lodge has a bar, and it makes sense for someone like Quin to go there than to any other drinking spot. There's less people and less noise, and he's told me about coming here before. That's the thing about couples, you eventually learn their likes and dislikes, their routines and favorite places to eat and drink, and it makes it easier to find them when they try to run away from you.

As I was in the lot, all I needed to know was if he was meeting someone. Maybe the guy from our work.

How ballsy of him to try to fuck around with someone we both work with.

Okay, I don't know if he's fucking around. It doesn't seem like his nature, but what's the nature of a psychopathic serial killer? It's not like he

has a moral compass pointing him to all good decisions.

I was able to cross the quiet parking lot and get to the front of the building. There was a tiny window in the thick wooden door where I peeked inside. I couldn't see anything but a wall, so I went back to the truck and waited.

He came out alone, and I breathed a sigh of relief. And then he pulled his phone from his pocket and started talking to someone who was not me as he walked to his truck. The entire time, he had a smile on his face—like he didn't just leave me in bed with a hard cock and full balls.

I had to wait there, watching the back of his truck as he had a conversation for ten minutes at eleven-thirty at night.

Once he drove off, I waited a couple minutes and did the same. I wasn't sure if he was going straight home or if he had other plans, but I couldn't take the chance of not being there when he arrived, so I sped down the highway, turning off on a side road that most people don't take because it's riddled with potholes, and made it home.

Based on when he finally came in, he didn't come straight back, but I'll do better next time. Next time I'll know everything.

I kept the door to our bedroom open, so I hear him as he warms up his plate of food and as he sits on the couch and turns on the TV. I hear him when he gets up and washes the dishes by hand before putting them away. His steps make light padding noises as he ascends the stairs and uses the bathroom. The click of the remote lets me know he's back and turning the TV off. And finally, the dip of the mattress gives me the pleasure of knowing that even after everything, he still wants to sleep next to me.

I wait, staring at the wall, my back to him.

His arm snakes around my waist, and I nearly wiggle into him with a moan. Instead, I smile and continue pretending I'm asleep.

"I know you're awake, Kaspian," he whispers against my neck.

I bite down on my lip but don't respond.

"You think I don't know you?" he questions, his hand splayed across my lower stomach, moving up my chest. "I know your breathing patterns. I know when you're asleep. I know when you're faking it." His hand reaches my throat. "I know when you're angry. I know when you're horny. And it's all based on the breaths you take." He squeezes my throat and turns me to my back, staring into my eyes.

"I was just waiting to see if you'd come to bed with me."

“Mm.” He sounds like an animal huffing. “When have I not shared a bed with you? We’ve had our fair share of disagreements.”

“I know.”

“And I’m always here. With you. Tell me why.”

I stare into his dark, soulless eyes and try to find words. This isn’t the first time we’ve been here. He’s aware of how I get. I need his attention and assurance, and he’s not good at giving it to me, so when he doesn’t, I act out. He always knows how to rein me back in, though.

“Because you can’t exist without me,” I say.

His lips pull up on one end. “Then what are you worried about?”

I don’t tell him the truth. I bite back the words that threaten to crawl up my throat and spew from my lips, because admitting that I heard him with that guy after work means I’m throwing my plan away.

The night I heard him with another man, I was going to find someone to bring home for him, but then my thoughts got muddled. My anger took over. My attention is now on finding out who this man is, getting to know him, and making Quin find us together as he’s overcome with jealousy.

“You know how I get,” I say instead.

He brushes his thumb over my lips. “I know.” He relaxes onto his side, so I turn and face him. “I found that guy,” he says. “The one you killed.”

“How did you know where to go?”

“I know of that little shack of a bar. It’s the only one that has nothing around it within a decent distance from us.”

“What did you do?”

“I hid him better. I have the four wheeler in my truck. The bar was closed by the time I got there, so I took it out and went and found him. It wasn’t the best hiding job, Kas,” he says with a look of disappointment. “I know it wasn’t planned, but we have to be careful. That’s why we usually do this together.”

“I know,” I say with a huff. “Nobody goes out that way. The snow would’ve covered him till April.”

“Well, nobody’s gonna find him now.”

I mumble my thanks as I drape my arm over my forehead.

“Did you get yourself off after I left?” he asks.

“I prefer when you do it,” I answer, tilting my head to look at him.

His lips stretch into a smile before he gets up and settles between my legs. “Good. Let me show you how much I enjoy doing it.”

And just like that, with a few words and some physical attention, I'm wrapped around his finger again. This is all I need. Constantly. Maybe the guy from work is just a friend. We can have friends.

"Fuck yeah, Quin. Your mouth feels so good."

He moans as he takes me deep, my cock sliding over his tongue as he cups my balls, massaging them in his hand.

Quin strokes and sucks in tandem, slurping around me as his saliva coats my shaft allowing his fist to move up and down with ease.

"You taste so fucking good," he murmurs around the head of my dick.

"Oh yeah? What do I taste like?" I ask, holding his gaze as he slowly backs up.

He pulls me out of his mouth, his tongue swirling around my shaft before his lips close around my tip and suck.

"My favorite things," he says after easing away, watching me as he strokes. "Deviance, malevolence, and depravity."

"Am I one of your favorite things?" I ask through heavy breaths.

"You are the sum of all my favorite things. You're everything I desire rolled into one. Now come in my mouth and let me taste just how fucking twisted you are."

I moan at his words, writhe under his touch, and come down his throat as he brings me to ecstasy in the way only he can.

Quin crawls up my body, straddling my hips as he bends forward, bringing his mouth near mine. His finger slips between my lips, opening my mouth wider as I suck in deep breaths. His lips part, and I watch as some of my cum slides from his tongue, and then feel the thick liquid hit my own.

"Don't you agree?" he asks. "How could you not be my favorite with a taste like that?"

I swallow, and his mouth captures mine in a vicious kiss, sending me into orbit.

It isn't until later, once my endorphins have died down and Quin is fast asleep that I begin overthinking.

He didn't say I was his only. He said I was his favorite.

So no, we cannot have friends, but he won't know that until I teach him a lesson. I always have to teach him lessons. I can find people to call too. Let's see how much Quin enjoys watching me with friends. Maybe then he'll understand.

He won't just think of me as his favorite. I'll be the blood in his veins, the

air in his lungs, and the only thing keeping him alive.

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QUINTIN

When I wake up in the morning, Kas is gone. His side of the bed is cold and empty, letting me know he's been gone for a while. Sundays are usually the days he's in here with breakfast, forcing me into an uncomfortableness I can't quite explain.

Sometimes people can't take compliments well. They feel awkward if someone has something nice to say about them. That's how I feel about nice gestures, and not just nice, but amorous and intimate actions. Bringing me breakfast makes my skin prickle.

But now that he's not here with breakfast, it makes me wonder what's going on, because while it may make me feel a certain way, I'm aware he needs to do certain things, so I allow them because he lets me use his body in the way he knows I need. No matter how uncomfortable he may feel when my knife slides across his skin.

I get up and get dressed, using the bathroom and checking the loft bedroom, but there's no sign of him anywhere. Once I'm in the kitchen, I find a note on the counter.

Grabbing breakfast with a friend. I'll be back later. We might go for a hike after, so don't worry if I'm not home right away.

I place the note back on the counter and start making food for myself. Kas hasn't mentioned friends before. Neither one of us has been big on creating relationships with people since leaving Vermont. Willow was a friend of

mine there, and as soon as I accepted an invitation to go out, I ended up joining her friend group in order to appear normal. There were some bar nights, a Halloween pub crawl, and even a few lunches. To say that things ended badly is to put it mildly. The less people you surround yourself with, the less people you have to explain yourself to when things start to go wrong. You can get up and go if need be, but if you have close friends, you have to come up with an excuse as to why you're fleeing town.

We figured it would be best to keep things minimal here. We're friendly with people at work because it's a necessity. You can't be the creepy, quiet loner. You're going to be the first suspect if something happens. So we do what's necessary to keep up with appearances, but nothing more.

Kas is smart, so I question what he's doing and why. Especially after what happened yesterday.

I think about it as I devour my meal, not even bothering to turn on the TV.

It's hours later when Kaspian walks in, finding me on the loveseat with a book in hand. His face is red from the cold, his hair disheveled from the wind, and a wide smile on his face from whatever he just got done doing.

"Hey," he greets, removing his jacket and boots near the door.

"Hey."

"I expected you to text me," he says, running a hand through his brown hair.

"You know I don't do that much."

He gives me a grin, walking toward me. "Yeah, I know. Technology's not really your thing. Is it because you're old?"

"Is thirty-two old now?" I ask, arching a brow.

"It is when you're twenty-five."

He bends down and kisses my lips.

"Mm. Well, we both know you have Daddy issues. It's probably why you're with me."

He gives me a look, standing up straight. "Funny. I think we both know why we're together, and it's all thanks to me."

"Well, if you really think about it," I say, standing up. "It's because of me and what I did."

He smiles. "Who knew murder could bring two people together?"

"Did you have fun today?" I ask, following him to the kitchen.

"Yeah, I did. We hiked to Exit Glacier. There were quite a few people out

there today.”

He wants me to ask who he went with, and that’s why I won’t. It’ll drive him crazy, and I’m not so sure he was actually with anybody.

“That’s good,” I say.

Kas pulls a Gatorade from the fridge before spinning around to face me. “We also went to that new place in Seward for breakfast. The one that just opened up last week.”

I nod my head. “Was it any good?”

It takes him a few seconds to answer, his gaze studying mine. “Yeah, it was.”

“I’ll have to try it out sometime.”

His eyes narrow minutely. “You should.”

He turns around, digging through the fridge for some food.

“So, do you have your eye on anybody?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It’s been months, Kaspian.”

“Oh.” He says it like he forgot something simple like taking out the trash and not like he’s been keeping me waiting, forcing me to keep my monster at bay. “I can.”

His nonchalance pisses me off. “Well, *I’d* appreciate it,” I say with sarcasm. “Unless we’re doing things on our own now, because if that’s the case, you know I’m capable of finding my own victims.”

He turns, tossing food on the counter next to me. “I’m sorry. I guess I got caught up in our normal day-to-day stuff.”

I stare at him for a few seconds. “You know we’re not normal, Kas. I told you we’d—”

“You said we’d never have forever either,” he cuts in. “But then you said you couldn’t exist without me, so things can change.”

I open my mouth to say something, but he continues.

“You said the dream I had of me being able to stalk someone and you kill someone and have us both come back for dinner afterward would never happen, because it wasn’t normal, but what have we been doing these past two years? Exactly that. It’s *our* normal.”

“It was,” I state. “And then you stopped stalking, choosing instead to bring me breakfast in bed and then trying to make me feel bad that I don’t do the same for you.”

His nostrils flare, and I can see him fighting back the words he wants to

say. “You knew what I needed from you when we started. I told you what I expect when I’m in relationships with men.”

“And I distinctly remember saying you’d never be satisfied.”

“I’d be satisfied just fine if you could give—”

“I can’t give you what you want!” I yell, something I almost never do. “I’m a fucking psychopath, Kas. I’m not lying when I say I don’t have the capability of giving you what you need, but you know that. Don’t let our living arrangement fill your head with fantastical ideas. I want you in my life. I crave your darkness. With you, I’m the most comfortable I’ve ever been. But I will not shower you with poetic declarations of love and profess how you make me feel.” I round the table, coming to a stop next to him. “I will, however, worship your body, because the sight of it turns me on like nothing else,” I say, pulling the hem of his shirt up until it’s over his head. “I will always protect you because the loss of you would send me reeling. The anger I’d feel would turn me into an even darker person, and nobody would be safe.” I undo his pants as he continues watching my face, his eyes laser focused on the words leaving my lips.

He captures my face in his hands as his mouth attacks mine. His tongue twirls with my own, not in a sensual dance, but in a violent fight. We both seek dominance, and where I usually win, I think I’ll allow him to take this one.

Kaspian pulls at my clothes, tearing them off me in a frenzy. When we’re both completely naked, he drops to his knees on the hardwood floor in the kitchen and takes me in his mouth, his round, dark eyes looking up at me.

I run my hand through his hair, fingers tangling in the strands, gripping tightly as I thrust into his mouth. He gags a few times, pulling back to catch his breath while his saliva drips to the floor.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” I groan.

He stands up quickly, his face going to my neck as his hands peruse my body. “I want to fuck you,” he says. “Please, Quin. Please. I need it. I need to know you’re mine in every way.”

We don’t switch roles often, both of us content with the way we usually do it, however there’s been times when Kaspian needs this. It’s when he’s feeling especially needy and high-strung.

“Okay,” I reply.

Kas is reaching into the drawer in no time, finding the bottle of lube we keep there. I turn around and once again he’s on his knees, spreading my legs

and licking me from my balls to the top of my ass. He moans and grunts as his tongue prods at my entrance.

He stands, pouring the liquid into his hand before gently pushing two fingers into my ass, his other arm wrapping around my waist as he rests his head on my back.

“God, Quin. I fucking...” he trails off, but I know what he wants to say.

He’s been fighting it for a long time now. He wants to say he loves me, but he knows I won’t say it back. I can’t. It wouldn’t be the truth. I’ve never loved anyone, but what I feel for Kaspian is stronger than anything I’ve ever experienced before. I always tell him he’s obsessed with me, but I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t the same for me. I need him in the most unhealthy way.

And to be honest, what he feels for me is probably his own twisted version of love. It’s probably not what other people experience. His version of love changes with his moods. When he thinks he loves me, he’s probably overwhelmed with another emotion. He’s only ever fought back from saying it during the times I allow him to top me, because he’s thrumming with power. He fights it when I’m fucking him hard and rough, because he’s overwhelmed with lust.

We clash because we both lack empathy. We’ll never truly understand or relate to how the other person feels, therefore how can we ever truly be in love? But if he needs to say it, it won’t bother me, because I won’t take it to mean anything more than any other word.

After he finishes preparing me for his cock, he pulls away to coat himself with lube before finding his place behind me once again. He starts slow, allowing me the time to adjust to his size as he pushes inside. Halfway in, he loses control and thrusts deep, burying himself to the hilt.

“Fuck,” we both curse at the same time.

He clings to me, placing kisses down the middle of my back before straightening up and moving in and out.

“You feel so good around me.” He moans. “I love fucking you.”

“Ah,” I grunt, gripping the edge of the counter and letting my forehead drop to the cold granite.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he begs, his voice desperate. “Tell me I’m enough for you.”

“You’re more than enough, Kaspian,” I say through deep breaths. “More than I can handle sometimes,” I add on with a grunt.

He chuckles, gripping me tighter as he thrusts in and out of me. “You

know I'm all yours, right?" he asks. "You own every part of me, Quin. Every filthy, viscous fiber."

"I know," I groan. "I've marked you. You'll never belong to anyone else."

A wanton moan rumbles out of his throat. "I wouldn't be able to handle it if you left me."

"You know I won't," I say, breathless.

"I'd never let you," he bites, thrusting deeper. "I'd kill anyone who tried to come between us."

"I'd expect nothing less."

"Fuck," he roars. "I'm gonna come."

"Do it," I command. "Fill me up."

"Oh god."

His fingertips dig into my flesh as he quickens his pace before sliding all the way in and releasing his load inside me.

"Yes," I moan, dragging out the word.

"Goddamn," he breathes before he has a full body shake that vibrates against mine.

Once he pulls out, I stand up and spin around, facing him. "Get on your knees."

He obeys quickly, opening his mouth before I can even grip my cock in my hand. I caress his cheek before I shove my dick between his lips.

"You're getting neurotic again," I say, my hands going to the back of his head.

He moans around me, his eyes meeting mine.

"You can't fool me," I say, taking my cock from his mouth and stroking it in front of him. "You forget I know your personality traits. Stick out your tongue."

His tongue snakes out, wet and inviting. I slowly slide my head across it, going deep into his mouth before retreating.

"I want your come," he says.

"You want a lot from me, don't you?"

He nods his head.

"And you'd do anything to get me to give you extra attention, wouldn't you?"

Kas grins, looking mischievous.

"I thought so. Lie down. On your stomach."

His brows furrow briefly before he turns around and stretches his body across the floor, utilizing the mat as a protection layer between his dick and the cold floor.

I pull open one of the kitchen drawers, removing a small paring knife before straddling his waist.

“The next time you think it’s okay to kill someone without me, I want you to remember this.” I let the tip of the knife penetrate his skin across his shoulder, dragging it down slightly. “Just like I know what you need and how you get, you should know my desires. Cutting you is nice, and it allows me to enjoy a small amount of my bloodlust, but you know I want more,” I say, making the next cut deeper. “I don’t want to hurt you like that, Kaspian.”

He takes in a shuddering breath as I make another cut, his fists squeezing the edge of the mat. When I give him some reprieve, he breathes deeply.

“I know, but I’ll take it. I’ll accept the pain. For you.”

“I want more,” I say through gritted teeth, restraining my hand from plunging the knife deep into his back. “I’m losing grip on my control.”

“You want more.” He doesn’t form it as a question, just simply repeating what I said.

I finish my cuts, deeper than I usually go, and press my hand into the wounds and feel his blood on my fingers. I smear it into his skin, listening to him hiss and gasp at the pain. With my free hand, I stroke my cock and let the other hand spread the crimson liquid across his shoulders and to his neck.

I press down on the lines, watching as more red drops emerge from his skin, forming small rivulets, and then I coat my fingers once more. I get up and flip him to his back, watching him grimace as I place my hand on his chest. I want to see the blood on him as I come, but I also want to see his face.

“The way you came into my life was a fucking nightmare,” I say, causing him to furrow his brow. “A fucking liar and manipulator. Someone I knew I’d never trust. I wanted you dead multiple times. I wanted it to be me that ended you.” I stroke my shaft faster as I watch him process my words. “You put your trust in me when you shouldn’t,” I growl. “I can’t live without you, and yet, in these moments, when I hold a knife to your flesh, I want to run the blade all the way through. I need a release, Kaspian. Your life is in danger the longer I have to wait, you understand?”

He nods once. “Your darkness doesn’t scare me, Quin. I won’t go without a fight.”

“It’s why we’re meant for each other,” I say with a smirk.

His eyes twinkle. “Come on me. I know you want to mix it in with my blood, you fucking sicko.”

I roll my shoulders and let my head drop back as I stroke. Kaspian spurs me on with filthy words, begging for my release.

“Oh fuck,” I groan, hunching over and shooting my cum onto his chest.

Some of it hits his chin, but he doesn’t move to wipe it off. He just stares into my eyes and grabs my bloodied hand, bringing it to his face. He takes my forefinger and uses it to wipe the cum from his chin until it’s at his bottom lip. His tongue slides out, licking it up before he takes my finger into his mouth and sucks, tasting his blood on my skin as well.

The sight makes my cock twitch, cum still dripping from the slit.

“We taste so good together,” he says in a husky tone. “Like sin and chaos.”

I lean forward and plunge my tongue into his mouth. Several minutes later, we’re a tangle of limbs as we lie on the floor covered in blood and cum—a perfect portrait of everything most people would find disturbing, yet we find typical.

KASPIAN

Once we've showered, and as Quin bandages the cuts on my back, I ask him a question that's been on my mind since the words left his mouth. It's not how he knew I was acting out for his attention, because that's obvious. I know he can see through my lies sometimes. When I'm too angry I'm not good at shielding my emotions. I wasn't out with anyone today, but he seemed to know that. He never questioned who *he* was. It bothers me that he doesn't act jealous, but maybe it's just because he's more secure than I am.

"Why do you consider me a nightmare?"

He chuckles, his voice deep. I watch him through the mirror in the bathroom as he finishes up with the bandage. His eyes meet mine in the reflection, his arm wrapping around my shoulders, his muscular forearm at my neck.

"Nightmares are classified as things that leave people shaken. They wake up with a rapid heartbeat and fear coursing through their veins. The disturbing themes frighten them." He runs his knuckles down my cheek. "I always enjoyed my nightmares. I would wake up and smile, relishing the same symptoms others consider negative. My heart racing, adrenaline pumping, and memories of images that were typically my constant state of mind. They didn't scare me, they gave me a thrill." He grips my chin. "You are a nightmare in the best way. My heart races when you're around. The things we do together make my adrenaline pump, filling me with an intoxication you can't get from any drug on the planet. The dark imagery you're capable of creating with a weapon and your hands gives me a thrill

similar to when I plunge a knife into someone's heart. You are a nightmare, Kaspian, but there's nothing negative about that."

He stares at me for a few seconds before walking away, and all I want to do is tell him how much I fucking love him. It's rare that I'm overcome with these feelings. I don't even expect them half the time. I told Quin years ago I didn't need him to love me because I wouldn't believe it anyway, and I'm sure he feels the same. I don't know that I actually love him. Not the way most people love their partners. We're very different, but I feel something. Who says I need to have the same definition of love as everyone else? Why can't my love be different? Everything else about us is.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and smile. "A beautiful fucking nightmare," I whisper, thrilled by his words.

Quin and I show up to work separately, because he has to be there earlier and stay a little later, but I spot him strolling through the lobby as I stand in the gift shop listening to a tourist tell me about how much her granddaughter would love all the stuffed animals we have.

"Does she have a favorite animal?" I ask, looking past her head of white hair as I track Quin's steps.

"Well, she likes them all," she begins with a laugh.

She continues to rattle on about pets she's had and has, but I begin to tune her out when I notice a man walk up to Quin.

He's just a few inches shy of Quin's six-foot-three frame, and he's wearing an open jacket over his light blue button up. Quin's lips pull into a slight grin as he crosses his arms in front of his chest, the black sleeves of his shirt stretching around his muscles.

Quin speaks, saying something to this man who watches him with rapt attention. He hasn't stopped smiling since he approached. Is this the guy Quin was talking to the other night?

All of a sudden, the man barks out a laugh, leaning forward and playfully nudging Quin's arm. To my dismay, Quin laughs along with him. I'm not sure what's so funny, but if this man touches my man one more time, I'll cut his fucking hand off.

"So, what do you think?" the older woman in front of me asks, holding up

a turtle and a seal.

I snap out of my trance and force a smile as I look down at her. “I say the seal. Everyone goes for the turtles. The seals need love, too.”

Wrinkles deepen around her mouth and eyes when she smiles. “Okay. Seal it is,” she replies, putting the turtle back.

On my way to the register, I keep looking through the glass windows, watching Quin and this man whose name I don’t know. Not yet anyway. The fact that I don’t recognize him means he doesn’t work here, but if that’s the case, why would he have been here after hours the other night?

Quin looks at this watch before saying something and parting ways with the man who’s teetering closer to death than he realizes.

I take the money from the woman and put it in the register, counting out her change. “Here you go. I hope she enjoys it,” I say, handing her the bag with the seal in it.

“Oh, she will. Thank you.”

My eyes flicker up and notice when the man turns around and watches Quin walk away.

I fly from behind the counter, rushing to the door in a blind rage.

“Grayson. Grayson!”

I realize someone’s calling me and turn around to find my co-worker, Tiffany, folding T-shirts and placing them on a round table.

“What’s up?”

“Are you going on break?”

I want to *break* that man’s neck, but I suppose I can’t say that.

“Yeah, just fifteen minutes.”

“Bring me a soda, please?” she asks.

“Sure.”

When I step out into the hall, I spot the man turn the corner, headed toward the bathrooms. I follow him.

While he’s at the urinal, I go straight for the sink, washing my hands as I watch him in the mirror. Me and him are nearly identical in height, he’s got a little more mass on him, but it’s hard to tell his body type through his layers of clothes. I don’t really know Quin’s type or if he has one. I know he’s attracted to both men and women, but I don’t know if he looks for something specific in men.

He turns around and heads for the sink one over from me. He’s decently attractive, I guess. He’s got short brown hair, his face is clean-shaven. Green

eyes sit behind dark lashes.

“Ready for spring yet?” I ask, smiling at him.

Weather is always an easy subject here. Most people are ready for winter to be over, considering it seems like it lasts most of the year.

He smiles. “I don’t mind the snow that much, but it’s definitely too cold,” he says with a chuckle.

“You get used to it after a while, I guess. You from around here?”

I turn off the water and reach for a paper towel.

“I just moved here a couple months ago, but I lived in another part of Alaska, so the weather isn’t too shocking.”

I grin. “Ah. Okay.”

I want to ask if he works here. I need to know if he’s into guys. I want to ask if he’s crushing on a particular security officer who is one thousand percent off limits. I want to know where he lives. What he drives. What frightens him most, but I can’t ask those questions. No. That won’t work.

“Well, if you have any questions about the area, I work in the gift shop. Just swing by.”

He grabs his own paper towel from his side of the bathroom and smiles. “Thanks. I appreciate that. What’s your name?”

I toss the paper towel in the trash and step toward him, extending my hand. “Grayson.”

He slips his hand in mine. “I’m Bryan. I’m a volunteer here.”

My eyebrows lift on this bit of news. I keep my grip on his hand. “Oh yeah?”

He nods. “Well, soon. They have me in training first.”

“Wow, for volunteering?” I ask, tilting my head and slowly letting his hand go.

Bryan laughs. “Yeah, but it’s not too bad.”

I allow myself to check him out, gaze moving from his green eyes to his pink lips and then down his body.

“That’s good,” I say, finding his eyes again, giving him a crooked grin. “You should definitely come find me then.”

He shifts, looking a little nervous, but he nods and gives me a small smile. “I will.”

“Good.” I drink him in again. “Nice meeting you, Bryan.”

“Y-yeah. You too.”

I strut to the door and step into the hall, giving him another glance as the

door slowly closes. He's still watching me, so I wink and watch as he nervously smiles and turns away.

We may have an issue with Bryan, but at least I have an in now. A thrill of excitement floods my veins.

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QUINTIN

On Tuesday at lunch, I find Kaspian in the food court with Bryan. They sit across from each other at a two seater table.

Kas has a certain look when he's flirting. It's slight, and most people wouldn't notice it, but I do. It's in the way his eyebrow arches after he says certain things. It's the way his lips pull up slowly on one end before his teeth dig into his bottom lip, his eyes becoming heavy-lidded before he looks away.

I watched him do this to several women back in Vermont. For all his volatile and impulsive actions, he's quite smart with the roles he has to play. He's the most charming and friendly person you could meet, and if you're lucky, you'll never learn his true nature. You'll go home and tell your friends and family about this wonderful guy you had a conversation with.

His interaction with Bryan appears to be strictly friendly, but just as I'm about to walk away, Bryan reaches for one of Kaspian's chips, popping it into his mouth before he playfully rests his cheek in his palm, watching Kas with a tilted head and flirty smile.

My eyes shift to Kaspian to see his reaction. He stares at him blankly for a few seconds, and I can see something twinkle in his eyes. His lips draw up on one end, his teeth digging into the bottom one, and if I could see his full face, I know I'd see his eyebrow arched. Kas mimics Bryan's tilted head, and then they both start laughing.

I leave before he can see me.

As I walk down the hall, I allow my lips to form my own smile, because I know I get to kill someone soon.

When I get home, I look forward to having dinner with Kas, if only for one reason—I get to hear about how his sights are now set on Bryan.

As soon as I walk in, I smell the aroma of the food filling our small cabin. Kas is at the stove, ladle in hand and apron around his neck.

“Why are you wearing that?” I ask with amusement as I drop my keys and wallet to the table by the door.

He spins around with a smile on his face. The apron says, *can you handle my meat?* “I found it today at the store.”

I shake my head. “Okay. What are you cooking? It actually doesn’t smell burnt.”

“Very funny,” he says. “It’s a new meal. Pretty easy. My friend told me about it.”

“Ah. The friend you went out with the other day?”

“No. Different friend. This one is new.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. He told me about this chili.”

I make my way to the kitchen and peek into the pot. “Looks good.”

“Yeah. I hope so.”

“I’m gonna shower.”

“Okay.”

As I’m going upstairs, my phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” the voice on the other end says.

“Oh hey.” I pause on the steps and look down at Kaspian. He doesn’t turn his head, but I can tell he’s listening by the stiffness in his posture.

“You said maybe I could stop by tomorrow, but I was wondering if today would be okay? I’m actually leaving town early in the morning, so...”

He trails off and I continue up the stairs, not bothering to lower my voice as I head into the bathroom. “Tonight?” I pause for a few seconds, thinking. “Yeah, tonight could probably work. Do you know where the Lowell Point rec park is? I can meet you at that lot.”

“Is that close to your place?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty close. Less than ten minutes away.”

“Oh okay. Yeah, I can find it. When?”

“Give me forty minutes.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“Cool. See you soon.”

I end the call and wait to hear anything from Kas, but when he doesn't come up, I jump in the shower. During the fifteen minutes I'm under the spray of the water, I think about my plan. I came into tonight expecting to hear about Bryan and whatever Kas has up his sleeve, but it appears there will be a change of events. I hate that it has to happen earlier than I wanted, but maybe I can still make it work to my advantage.

When I get out of the shower and dry off, I wrap the towel around my waist and head downstairs to our room where I'll get dressed. When my feet hit the wooden floor of the kitchen, I don't see Kaspian anywhere, but I do spot the apron he had around his neck when I came in...

It's now resting on the cutting board with a knife stabbed through it.

I rush to the bedroom to throw on some clothes, layering up with a T-shirt, hoodie, and a jacket, and jeans and boots. The temperature is only going to drop lower into the twenties as the night goes on. I grab my gloves and shove them in my pocket and then eye the knife standing straight up, the tip buried in the cutting board.

I think to grab it, but tonight's not about me, so I leave the cabin and make my way to my truck.

This night is about to get interesting.

KASPIAN

If Bryan thinks he can play both me and Quin, he's dead wrong. I've been talking to Bryan for a couple days now and not once has he mentioned even knowing Quin. I saw them talking in front of the gift shop. I know they know each other. I know he's the guy who stayed after hours with him, but he thinks I'm dumb. He thinks I don't know about their friendship, and now after flirting with me the last two days, he's going to call my man up and make plans?

I don't think so.

See, I was going to play this out, be more methodical like Quin, but now I'm pissed. I wanted Bryan to be someone for the both of us. I would get to know him, find out details I needed to know—feed my hunter side, and then make sure Quin gets riled up enough by my absence and talk of new friends, just so I could then present him with a gift. He could kill Bryan.

I want him to show me he gets jealous. I need to know he's bothered at the prospect of me hanging out with someone else, especially since I know *he's* been talking to someone. Then, when I bring him the guy he's been talking to, he can prove that Bryan means nothing by killing him. It's for both of us. It's not like he has feelings. He's not gonna be bothered by killing anyone. His bloodlust will win every time and sliding his blade through Bryan's chest will fill him with excitement.

However, now I'm angry. My plan has gone to shit, and I have to get rid of Bryan myself, because I'll be damned if I allow them to get together for any reason.

I rush down the road in my truck, heading for Bryan's place. I'll get to

him before he can even leave. I already found out where he lives, and because we left work at the same time yesterday, I know what his vehicle looks like. He can't hide from me.

Unfortunately, I come across an accident that slows me down. When I pass the vehicles, I see the first one has quite a bit of damage to the front of their car, but without another car in front of it, I imagine they must've hit an animal. Likely a moose. Considering I don't see a carcass on the street, it probably ran off, but with half the road blocked, it definitely keeps me from getting to Bryan as fast as I wanted to.

As I'm approaching the area his apartment complex is in, I see his car leaving the cul-de-sac.

"Fuck!"

I do a quick turnaround and follow him.

If he gets to Lowell Point and Quin is already there, I don't know what I'll do. I hoped to take care of him beforehand.

He makes a stop at a small gas station off Seward highway, and luckily for me, it's the less popular one. If he traveled a few more miles, the next one would've been better lit up, more populated, and he'd be in less danger.

After he gets gas, he pulls into a parking spot alongside the darkened building. I watch from my own spot several yards away as his phone lights up his face from within his car. He's either looking up directions or trying to get in touch with Quin. That thought infuriates me.

I look around and make sure nobody else is nearby. I was sure to never drive in front of the building in case they have cameras, but I know for a fact there are none toward the back of the store. Me and Bryan are the only customers here.

Pulling my hood over my head and shoving my hands into gloves, I get out of the truck and walk around to the bed, opening it up.

Bryan reverses, aiming his headlights in my direction as he heads for the exit. He's slow, still looking at his phone. Doesn't he know that's dangerous?

I take a few steps toward his SUV, noticing he doesn't even look up. A few more steps puts me right in front of him.

He finally glances up and slams on his brakes, and I stumble out of the way. "Hey, what the fuck?"

To his credit, he stops completely and rolls down his window. "Oh my god. I'm sorry, man."

I squint my eyes and look into his window. "Bryan?" I ask, pushing my

hood back.

“Grayson? Holy shit. I’m sorry.”

I laugh and play it off. “Don’t worry about it. Hey, do you have a minute? I’m having an issue with my truck.”

“Yeah, of course. Least I could do, right?” he says with a chuckle. “I could’ve killed you.”

I laugh humorlessly, the smile not reaching my eyes. “Yeah.”

He pulls around and parks next to me, and I wait for him at the back of my truck. I grab the burlap sack, keeping my hand on the rough material as he closes his door.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“That’s a good question, Bryan,” I say before quickly placing the bag over his head and pulling the drawstrings tight around his neck.

“What the fuck?” he barks, hands going for his throat.

I reach back into the truck and grab a tire iron and hit him in the head. His body slumps immediately, so I’m there to guide him into the bed before I tie the strings around the bag and reach for the fishing line. I secure his wrists and ankles, and with a hard push, I get his body hidden under the truck bed cover.

Before I leave, I remove his car keys, wallet, and phone from his car and lock it up.

Now it’s time to go meet Quin.

QUINTIN

I'm surprised when I get to the parking lot and don't see any sign of Kaspian. I was sure he'd come straight here after overhearing my call. It was what I was hoping for, but the lot is empty. That doesn't mean he isn't lurking in the shadows somewhere.

I sit in the truck, waiting for my new friend to arrive. I'm ten minutes early, but he strikes me as someone who would rather be early than late. He thinks I'm taking him home to show off a rare collection of Coca-Cola bottles. I overheard him talking about it to someone else and did a little research on my phone; this way, when I walked up to them I had information to give out. I mentioned having my own collection and we ended up talking for a while about that amongst other things. He didn't believe that I had a rare, amber-colored bottle from 1906, which I don't, because who the fuck is gonna hunt down old Coca-Cola bottles? However, I told him I did. I said he'd have to come over to see them all, including another rarity—a vintage green bottle with Coke product still inside from 1959.

Honestly, if you study enough, you can lie your way through almost anything.

Headlights shine from down the road, and I watch as the vehicle makes its way closer. There are hardly any lights out here, the moon doing most of the work in illuminating the area, however as the driver turns into the lot, I realize it's Kaspian.

He comes to a violent halt in front of me, the truck parked haphazardly in front of mine. When he opens the door, I can see the wild look in his eyes.

I pop open the door and step outside just as he rounds his truck. "What're

you doing?” I ask.

“This is all your fault!” he yells, coming closer as he points his finger at me. “Why couldn’t you just let me do things my way? I was doing this for us. I wanted to bring you a present. I wanted it to be perfect, but you kept talking to him! Am I not good enough?”

My brows furrow. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

He clenches his jaw, rushing to the back of his truck and opening the door to the bed. I slowly make my way to his side and spot a wriggling body with a bag over his head.

“Who is that?”

“The guy you’ve been talking to for who knows how long!” he says, reaching in and yanking the man down, roughly shoving him around until just his head is nearly hanging over the edge.

“Help me! Help me, please! Oh my god,” the man cries, his body writhing as he tries to fight his restraints.

Kaspian looks at me with anger and hurt in his eyes, and then the man pushes himself too far and falls out of the truck and onto our feet.

Just as that happens, another car pulls into the lot, stealing our attention.

“Who’s that?” Kas asks.

I inhale deeply through my nose, wondering what the hell went wrong as I watch Waylen pull his red SUV into a parking spot nearby.

“Who the fuck is this?” I say to Kaspian, nudging the man at our feet as I reach for the tire iron and shove it up my sleeve.

“I...It’s Bryan.”

“Bryan?” I question, bewildered, taking a few steps away.

Bryan screams and there’s no hiding the fact that his body is at our feet when Waylen gets out of his vehicle and gawks in our direction.

Kaspian and I stare at each other, both of us trying to understand what’s going on before we’re forced to come up with a plan.

“Wait here,” I say under my breath before I turn and face Waylen. “Hey,” I greet, raising my hand.

“What’s going on?” he asks, his face blanketed with concern.

I walk closer to him, shaking my head like I’m disappointed with the situation. “I drove up and found these two. I don’t know what’s happening. Do you have phone service? Mine is out.”

He watches the scene behind me for a few seconds before he turns and makes his way back to his car to reach for his phone. As he leans toward the

center console, I slip the tire iron out and hit him in the back of the head just as he's standing up straight. Waylen drops and half falls into his car.

Spinning around, I walk toward Kaspian, gripping the tire iron before placing it in his truck. "We got a lot of shit to figure out. Give me some of that fishing line."

Kas hands it over and follows me to the red SUV. "Who is this, Quin?"

"This is Waylen," I answer, dropping to a squat to get the line wrapped around his ankles. "Why the fuck do you have Bryan?"

"Is that not who you've been talking to?"

"No. I've talked to him maybe twice in passing. I barely know the guy." Kas goes quiet while I get Waylen's wrists tied together. "Help me get him in the backseat."

Once we get Waylen laid across the seat, we walk back to Bryan who's still screaming and crying. We pick him up and toss him back into the bed, closing it up.

I stare at Kas and wait for him to say something.

"I thought you were talking to Bryan. I saw you guys in front of the gift shop. I heard you with someone after work one night. Not to mention the late hours and random calls. What was I supposed to think? What would you expect me to do?"

I crack a grin. "Exactly as you did, but I thought you'd at least get the guy right."

"What?" he asks, head cocking to the side.

"All of it was part of my plan. I was giving you what you enjoy. The hunt, the chase, the ability to find out every little detail of what I was doing, who I was talking to and why. I wanted you hostile. You know I love it when you're vengeful."

"You were doing this for me?" he questions slowly.

"Yes, but it didn't turn out as I hoped. You still got those feelings, but you got the wrong victim."

He looks at his truck. "I got you Bryan." My brows draw in as I tilt my head. He continues. "You're right. I got the wrong guy. I thought maybe something was going on, and I decided to insert myself into his life. I wanted to find out everything I could and then bring him to you so you could feel his blood on your hands while ridding me of a problem I thought I had. But then when I thought he called you tonight, and you were going to meet up, I knew I needed to fix the problem myself. I wanted to punish you by keeping you

from killing him. I was going to do it in front of you.”

I step forward, grabbing him by the throat, our bodies pressed against each other. “Kaspian,” I start, staring into his eyes. “You’re my beautiful nightmare. The only person I ever want to deal with on a regular basis.”

His lips quirk. “So romantic.”

I pull him forward by the throat and plant a kiss on his lips. When I pull away, I say, “Waylen is a traveler, just making his way through. That’s why I picked him. I knew he wasn’t from here and didn’t plan on staying long. What about Bryan?”

Kas looks sheepish, biting on his thumb nail. “Well, he just moved here a month ago. He was taking a course to volunteer at the aquarium.”

I think about that for a minute. “So, he likely doesn’t know many people in the area.”

“He doesn’t,” Kas confirms.

“But people at work will wonder what happened to him.”

“Maybe they’ll think he just quit. It’s not like he was officially working yet. We could tell them he stopped by and said he had an emergency back home and had to leave.”

“We won’t insert ourselves in anything unless it’s necessary, but his family might get worried and try to reach out if he happened to tell them what he was doing here.”

Kas shakes his head. “He moved from Fairbanks, but his family lives in the lower forty-eight. He doesn’t have a close relationship with them. I already found that out.”

I tilt my head from side to side. “Regardless, he has to go now, and we just need to make sure there’s no evidence to be found. People might’ve noticed you talking to him at work, but we’ll worry about that later if we need to.”

“His car is parked at a gas station about twenty minutes away.”

“We’ll take care of it, but first...”

Kas smiles that evil smile I enjoy so much. “Yes. But first.”

KASPIAN

When we get back home, we drive past our cabin, getting as close to the shed we have in the back as the trees will allow. We unload Waylen and Bryan and lay them across the workstations, if you will. When we settled in here, we bought two portable work benches to put in here. The aluminum material allows a quick and easy cleanup with a pressure washer.

The small, battery operated space heater in the corner keeps us from freezing while we're inside. I make sure everything is set up in the shed while Quin runs back to the cabin for everything else we'll need.

We have several LED lanterns placed around the room to give us enough light to see what we're doing, but with both benches out, we're very short on space. There's a row of hooks along one side, holding a variety of tools and weapons. Nothing anybody would think twice about out here in the wilderness. With all the wild animals, everyone has some sort of protection.

I can't believe I got things wrong. Quin wasn't contemplating cheating on me. He was thinking about me the entire time. I admit my temper has a short fuse. I struggle with making rational decisions, but it really couldn't have turned out better.

The shed door opens, letting in a blast of cold air before Quin closes it again.

"Anything you don't want to burn, put in here," he says, handing me a plastic bag.

I remove my jacket and boots but keep everything else on, and he does the same, going one step farther and taking off his hoodie, leaving him in a long sleeved shirt, jeans, and socks.

The plastic tarp on the floor makes noise as we move around, but it allows us to easily roll it up and toss it out once we're done.

While the two men writhe under their restraints and grunt behind their gags, Quin steps up to me and rests his hand on my neck.

"I wanted this to be my Valentine's gift to you. I'm sorry it's early."

My heart thumps in my chest, eyes widening with glee. "You were planning a Valentine's Day surprise?"

He rolls his eyes. "We can celebrate early."

I cup his face between my hands and kiss his lips. "I fucking love you, Quintin Black."

He grabs my waist and gives me a diplomatic look. "Mmhmm."

"Well, I feel something very strongly toward you right now," I amend, not wanting him to be uncomfortable.

"Show me later," he says, squeezing my ass before turning to Bryan.

From a shelf in the corner, he grabs his favorite weapon—the stiletto knife. Its double-edged blade is thin and sharp.

"You wanna go first?" he asks.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I shake my head. "I want to watch you."

He walks to Bryan who's been able to see us since we removed the burlap bag from his head, but hasn't been able to make much noise due to the rag stuffed in his mouth with tape keeping it in place.

"Hey, Bryan," he says, looking down at him. "You weren't a part of my plan, but sometimes shit happens." Quin turns and looks at me, his eyes shining with eagerness. "I can't say I'm unhappy about it though. Kaspian gives me the best gifts."

I smile like the Cheshire Cat, moving around to the other side of his table so I can watch his face as he works.

He takes his knife and cuts through the fabric of his sweater and shirt, splitting them down the middle without so much as nicking his body. Bryan cries and fights his restraints, but he doesn't realize he's giving Quin what he wants. He thrives on panic and fear. We both do. Just so we can watch it slowly drain away with the blood from their wounds.

Quin lets the tip of the knife dance around Bryan's chest, watching it heave with frantic breaths. His fingers press against his side, counting the ribs. When he gets between the fourth and fifth rib, he slides his hand closer to the center, knowing exactly where the knife needs to go to penetrate the

apex of the heart.

When he positions the blade, he stares at me, then with a quick and forceful thrust, the blade enters Bryan's chest. His eyes drop to the wound, watching as the blood begins to pour out.

His eyes darken as the crimson color begins to stain Bryan's pale skin. He jams the knife in deeper before releasing the long, skinny blade. Blood spurts out and Quin smears his fingers through the warm liquid, his eyes closing briefly as he inhales deeply through his nose.

Quin likes to begin his kills this way—a callback to his Heartstopper days. The Heartstopper was the name they gave him back in Washington. A serial killer who was never caught. But because of his signature, and just in case bodies are ever found, he does more to hide any connection to his past.

With the blade back in his hand, he goes to work, stabbing and cutting in random places on Bryan's torso, painting both of them with that beautiful ruby red color. He's breathing hard and sweating by the time he's done. I blame myself for some of his pent up rage. I did wait a long time before finding him another victim, caught up in my own fairytale of us living happily ever after. Selfishness is a trait I have, but I'm trying to be better. For him and him only.

When he's done, he leaves the knife next to the body. I get up and make my way over, leaning into him, unconcerned with the blood all over his skin and clothes.

"I'm sorry for making you wait so long."

He kisses me. "Just don't let it happen again."

"Yes, sir," I reply in a teasing tone.

"Now, it's time for your gift," he says, leaning against the worktable with Bryan's body on it. "Go on the other side of yours so I can watch."

"Will you hand me the gut knife?"

I don't have a favorite weapon, per se. I use what I can, but since we have a variety here, I figure I'll go with what I've used before.

Waylen watches me with pleading eyes, his cries and yells throughout the entire time Quin was killing Bryan has taken a toll on his vocal cords. He's lost a lot of energy, and even his muffled moans and pleas sound hoarse.

"Sorry, Waylen. I know we don't know each other, but nothing you say or do will help you now. You see, you were part of a well thought out present for me." I look up at Quin and grin. "I can't turn down a gift this precious, from someone who means so much to me."

Quin's lips quirk up on one side, his handsome face splattered with drops of blood.

I take the knife and place it at the hollow of his throat. As I stare into his brown eyes glistening with tears, I plunge it in deep before tearing across the side, making sure it hits the jugular. His eyes are frozen, stuck on my face as he feels his life draining from him. His blood explodes from his veins, quickly covering his neck and dripping over the sides of the table.

Quin gets up and comes closer, pulling the knife from his neck and inspecting the blade.

"Happy early Valentine's Day."

I grin. "I thought you'd forget again."

"You know I'm bad at stuff like this, but I know you enjoy it. Everything about us is different from other couples. I won't give you flowers and back massages, but I can give you what you really want, even if you don't know it at the time."

I grab his hand. "I'm glad you know me so well. I'm sorry I messed things up."

"I wouldn't say that," he replies, looking over at Bryan.

"I got caught up in a fairytale version of us and forgot about your needs. I still watch you and follow you. I realize you need more."

He holds my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Yes, but that doesn't mean I need to be with anyone else. I don't want to kill you the way you want to follow me."

"You just want to hurt me."

"Mark you," he says. "As mine. But the longer I go, the harder it gets to stay in control, you understand?"

I nod, grabbing onto his shirt. "I need you inside me."

"Let's go to the house. We'll clean up after."

We quickly strip out of our bloodied clothes and leave them on the tarp, ready to flee the shed in only our underwear, boots, and jackets. We're sure to secure the padlock, even though nobody comes out here, and run into the cabin, laughing like a couple of kids as we attempt to get out of the cold as quickly as possible.

Once we're inside, the mood rapidly shifts into one full of lust and desire.

QUINTIN

In the bathroom, we remove our remaining clothing pieces and step under the shower head, the hot water warming us up while also washing blood down the drain.

Kas instantly gets on his knees, his eyes focused on mine as he takes my cock into his hand and brings it to his mouth. His tongue slides between his lips, swirling around my tip in a sensual dance before he envelopes me in his warm mouth.

I close my eyes and drop my head back, the water pouring over my face as I scrub away any blood that's there before focusing back on Kaspian.

His perfect lips wrapped around me are only heightened by the fact that he's got blood splattered on his neck, the droplets spreading up his chin and on his cheeks. Blood freckles. They're the best kind.

Before he moves to stroke me with his crimson coated hands, I pull him up.

"You can't taste this blood, Kas. It's not mine."

I take a washcloth and wash his hands and arms before he grabs it and does the same for me.

"Does that mean I *can* taste yours? You only ever let me taste my own."

I contemplate for a minute, rinsing my hair out as I continue to watch him. "I've never been on the other side of a blade."

He eyes the thick scar on my neck. "You never told me what happened there."

With a deep inhale, I blow out the air in my lungs and say, "Self-inflicted. I was young and starting to have these urges and thoughts. I knew something

was wrong with me, but I fought it for so long. I wanted to see the blood. I wondered what the blade would feel like against my skin because I wanted to know what other people would feel if I ever got to that point. I didn't have much control then. Didn't know how to handle a knife as sharp as the one I got my hands on. It went deep and I had to come up with a lie to tell my parents."

"You know I won't go too deep," he says. "Just the tip," he finishes with a smirk.

"Okay."

His eyes widen and his lips part. "Are you serious? I didn't think you'd actually say yes."

"You better do it before I change my mind."

He shuts off the water and steps out of the wet room, stopping in front of the mirrors to grab some towels. When he turns, he notices the cuts on his back from our time in the kitchen.

"What does it say?" he asks, getting closer. "I thought it was just random."

"Nothing I do is random," I say, toweling my hair off.

"I'm sort of random and you do me," he says with a grin. I just wait for him to read the letters backward in the reflection. "Mine."

His eyes land on my face, emotion behind them I can't quite read. "You're mine. That's nothing new."

He studies me for several seconds before looking back at the cuts that are beginning their scarring process. "I don't know why I'd ever doubt you."

"Because we have trust issues. We'll continue to have problems and fights, but you're always going to be mine, Kaspian. You think I'd let anybody else have you? Touch you? Hurt you?"

He growls. "You're gonna make me say things you don't wanna hear," he says with a sly grin. He steps forward and grabs my ass while kissing me. "Meet me in the bedroom."

"Hurry up," I say as I walk out of the bathroom and start descending the stairs.

In the bedroom, before I can lay down, Kas comes rushing in, throwing down towels and placing a few metal instruments on the nightstand.

"What're those?"

"Scalpels."

"Since when have you had scalpels?"

“I’ve had them for a little while. Just waiting for this moment. Lie down.”
I do as he says, eyeing him with curiosity as he starts reaching for things.

“Are you performing surgery now? Because I’d like to keep all of my organs.”

“I’d never take any of the important ones,” he says with a wink. “Look, I’m an artist. If I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it in the most precise way possible.”

“I’m sorry my cuts aren’t up to your standards,” I say sarcastically.

He scoffs. “I love them because you did them.”

Once he has everything ready to go, he grabs lube and starts prepping himself.

“I thought you were cutting me.”

“I’m going to, but you’re a virgin. You’ll need all the distractions you can get.”

I twist my mouth at him. “Why don’t you put your mouth to work and suck my dick again then.”

“Yes, sir.”

I didn’t expect him to relent so easily, but I enjoy the feel of his mouth on me once more, his saliva coating my shaft as he moans around me. His other hand moves behind him, getting ready for my cock.

After several minutes, he releases me from his mouth, grabbing the lube to squirt on his hand before stroking me.

He straddles my hips, slowly taking my length inside him until he’s fully seated. He rocks back and forth a few times, and once he’s comfortable, he takes one of the towels to wipe his hands before resting them on my chest as he rises and drops.

“You feel so fucking good, Quin.”

He rolls his hips, making sure I’m deep inside him before he rises up and slowly drops down, over and over.

“Fuck, Kas. You look so good when you ride me.”

“Mm,” he moans, slowing his movements before he leans down and kisses me. “I’m glad you enjoy it, but now I’m about to hurt you.”

I groan when he stops moving, then watch as he reaches for the scalpel. He brings it to my chest and looks me in the eyes.

“Don’t move. Squeeze the pillow or the covers.”

I grunt my response and wait for the blade to cut my skin. I focus all my attention on his face, watching the way his eyes narrow slightly as he focuses,

and the way his brown hair falls over his forehead, the wet strands sticking to his skin.

I've memorized every inch of him already, but I go over every line and curve in his face, and then a sharp burning sensation drags across my skin.

I tense up, gripping the blankets at my side as I clench my jaw and groan through the pain.

"You're okay," he says soothingly. "Brace yourself."

The same sensation hits again near the place of his last cut. He only works for another minute before he puts the blade down and starts rocking his hips.

"You good?" he asks.

I nod once, feeling both the hot burn on my chest and his tight heat around my cock. "You're done?"

He smirks. "No, but I don't need you going soft on me."

I grab his hips and thrust, filling him up as he cries out. "Does it feel like I'm soft?"

"Oh fuck. No. God, you're so hard."

"Mm," I groan.

Blood drips down my chest, falling down my side, and it only spurs me on. I fuck Kaspian hard and deep until he tells me to stop.

"I have to continue," he says, breathing heavily.

"So do I."

He picks up the scalpel and points at me. "Yeah, but I have the weapon."

"Like that means anything."

He shakes his head, a grin on his lips, and then he starts dragging the pointed tip across my flesh once again. I squeeze his sides on accident, making him wince before I drop them to the covers and gather the material in my fist.

His lines are precise. The two times I've cut words into him, I'd been angry and frustrated, but I still did my best in making the words legible. Any other cuts have just been small markings that don't create anything. I imagine whatever he's doing now will be like art. His sketches and drawings are incredible, and in a different life, he could be very successful as an artist.

Once he puts the blade down again, I quickly flip us both over, needing to ravage him. My chest burns like a mother fucker, and it's hard allowing this kind of pain to happen to you without fighting back. It's not in me to let someone hurt me. I've always been the sadist, and I definitely have more

respect for the way Kas easily deals with my need to hurt him.

With his thighs resting over my forearms, I thrust into him hard, dousing the pain I'm in with the feeling of ecstasy I get when I'm inside him.

Blood drips from my cuts and lands on his chest and neck. I keep going, moving faster, pushing in deeper, wanting there to be absolutely no space between us. I want to mark him from the inside and make sure he remembers who he belongs to. That nobody will fuck him the way I do.

"Quin, oh my god," he cries. "Yes. Fuck. I love it. Fuck me. Fuck me," he begs.

My blood falls to his face and on the pillow below him. It drips down my arm, and the sight of it makes me harder and hornier. When a few drops fall to his lip and the corner of his mouth, my heart slams against my chest even harder, but when his tongue comes out to lick the droplets and bring them into his mouth, I think my heart may stop beating completely.

"Fuck, Kas."

"You taste so good, baby. You're in me now. We're one."

"Christ, you're gonna kill me." I groan, feeling my orgasm approaching.

"Never," he whispers huskily, his hand reaching up and running over the marks on my chest.

When he brings his fingers back, they're covered in my blood. My eyes widen, my nostrils flaring as he reaches over to grab the scalpel.

With a quick nick, he cuts open his skin on a negative space on his arm, between the tattoos that're inked there. Blood trickles out and he rubs his fingers over his cut, mixing our blood.

I can't take it anymore. I drop his legs and brace myself over him, my mouth going to his neck as I suck in deep breaths. "The way you know me, Kas," I say, keeping my pace up. "It's like a fucking dream. You're meant for me. Only me."

"Only you," he breathes.

I roar as my orgasm hits, my back bowing as my cum fills him up. I feel like I come for minutes, my body shaking and cock twitching.

I pull out of him slowly, my body already feeling like Jell-O, and then stay on my knees between his legs.

"I want you to stroke your cock and come in my mouth. I want the blood on your hand to touch my lips the same time your release hits my tongue."

His lips form a smile. "I will grant you that wish, but I have to finish my masterpiece first."

I flop onto my back beside him. “Okay. Finish, so you can finish.”

He gets up and takes the scalpel, bringing it to my chest. I’m still high on endorphins, so I don’t even brace myself this time.

“I’m almost done.”

After a couple minutes, he puts down the blade and then straddles my chest, avoiding the wound as best he can by keeping his body mostly on the other side.

Towering over me, he takes his cock in his bloodied hand and begins stroking. The tip of his dick touches my lips, and then I stick my tongue out so he can rub it across the slickness.

“Are you ready to taste us? Your blood and my cum. How the tables have turned,” he teases.

“I want it,” I breathe.

He gets closer, putting his dick in my mouth, his fist hitting my lips with every slow stroke. With his free hand, he grips my hair, moving into my mouth deeper. He makes a point to rub his hand across my lips when his dick touches the back of my throat, wiping the blood across them.

Kaspian pulls back, stroking faster until his muscles get tense.

“Oh fuck.”

“Give it to me,” I say.

“I’m...I’m about...Oh god,” he roars, his release hitting my throat first, before he pulls out of my mouth completely and aims it on my tongue. When I close my mouth to swallow, he rubs his slick head across my lips, smearing his cum and my blood together. My tongue slides over my top lip first before cleaning up the bottom, tasting the mix of the two liquids. He pushes into my mouth again, both of us moaning.

After a few more seconds, he eases away and drops to his side next to me, and we quickly begin to devour each other. Our tongues collide in battle—mine wanting to force the taste of us into his mouth while his seeks it out.

When we pull apart, simultaneously we both say, “So fucking good.”

KASPIAN

We don't have time to bask in post-coital bliss, unfortunately, but before we get up to clean up after ourselves, I pull Quin up and bring him to a stop in front of the mirror on top of our dresser.

"Don't look yet," I say, angling his body away. "Let me clean it first."

I take one of the towels on the bed and rush to the sink in the kitchen to get it wet before rejoining him in the bedroom.

As carefully as I can, I clean the carving, wiping away all the blood that dripped and smeared across his skin. Quin hisses, clenching his jaw tight as I finish up.

I spin him toward the mirror. "Look at my artwork," I say, standing behind him.

He takes a step forward, inspecting the curves and lines.

"Wow," he says, his fingers moving to trace it before thinking better of it. "It looks good, Kas."

I beam, grabbing him by the shoulders, turning him back to me so I can get another look. My mark on him is simple yet speaks volumes. The tail of the letter Q not only begins deeper inside the circle, but it extends farther down creating the letter K in a somewhat fancy script. I can't get the perfect curves like I can with a writing utensil, but I did my best.

"The two letters are combined and linked together," I say, looking into his eyes. "This one little line here turns this shape into a Q instead of a circle, but also gives the K a starting point. We give each other what we need, Quin. I thought it was perfect for us."

He takes my hand and squeezes. "It is."

“I guess I should bandage you up.”

“I’ll do it,” he says, moving past me to head for the door. “Get a fire started out back.”

I nod and begin to gather clothes, but Quin comes back in shortly after leaving. He pushes his naked body against mine as his hand grips my hip.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

I smile against his lips before we kiss. “Happy Valentine's Day.”

He’s gone before we can say anything else to each other, and as I start stripping the bed, I notice the clock reads a minute past twelve. It’s officially February fourteenth.

It took forever to get everything done, having to clean our own blood off ourselves before starting to mess with the bodies in the shed. Using thick, black tarp, we wrapped each body individually, sure to remove any personal belongings beforehand. We loaded them into the back of my truck and rolled up the plastic on the floor and put it into a trash bag. Every piece of clothing, as well as wallets and phones, are burning in a fire.

With their bodies in the truck, we drove nearly two hours south and parked near the shore of Resurrection Bay. Quin unloaded the canoe from his truck, and one-by-one, we secured the bodies with rope tied to two concrete blocks, taking them out several miles before being tossed overboard.

After that, we had to get to their vehicles and drive them to harder to find locations, yet close enough to hiking areas that when found, people could assume they possibly died in a fall or by a bear encounter.

By the time we’re done completely, it’s almost eight in the morning and the sun is coming up. Thank goodness for these late mornings in Alaska at this time of the year. We had more time under the cover of darkness to get things done.

If Quin wasn’t as responsible as he is, we’d have called out of work, because we have to be there in thirty minutes. I wanted to call out. I begged him to find an excuse that would get us both out of having to go, but he doesn’t want to appear suspicious. If anyone were to remember we were out of work on the first day Bryan doesn’t show up to work, he doesn’t want to be caught up.

I understand, but damn if I just want to sleep.

“Maybe we should rethink this whole killing thing. I’m fucking exhausted.”

Quin slowly turns his head, cup of coffee in his hand. We stare at each other a few seconds before we start laughing.

“Right. Well, it wouldn’t have been so bad if there had only been one.”

“Hey, I apologized,” I say, pulling my jacket on.

He smirks. “It worked out.”

“The best Valentine’s ever, I think.”

Quin takes a sip of his coffee, putting the tumbler down before putting his boots on. “I’ll come find you at lunch.”

“Or will I find you?” I say with a grin.

He steps forward and gives me a kiss before gathering everything he needs and walking out the door.

When we get home from work, we both fall asleep within the first thirty minutes. We talk just long enough to confirm that nobody mentioned Bryan or Waylen, who apparently, though just a traveler, did frequent the aquarium quite a bit due to its close proximity to his rental.

Quin wakes me up in the only way a person should be woken up, with his mouth on my cock. I spread my legs wider, stretching my arms out to the sides as I look at the time. It’s already six in the morning. We slept for nearly twelve hours straight.

“Oh fuck,” I moan, reaching under the covers to put my hand on the back of his head. “Mm. So good.”

He takes me deep into his throat before releasing my cock and licking and sucking my balls while his hand continues to stroke my shaft.

“Oh god, I love it.”

His tongue travels up my erection before enveloping me into his wet mouth once more, using his hand to continue the stroking motions that bring me to the edge of my orgasm.

“I’m gonna come,” I grunt out, shoving the covers off his head so I can watch.

Quin’s dark eyes meet mine right before I come, filling his mouth.

“Okay, your turn,” I say, trying to catch my breath. “I want to gag on it.”

“You want me to fuck your face until you’re a slobbering mess?”

I nod, biting down on my lip. “Yes, please.”

“Stay there,” he says, crawling up my body until his knees are on either side of my chest.

I lift my head and he grabs hold of it, guiding me to his cock.

He thrusts into my mouth, doing exactly as he said he’d do, making me drool around him as I struggle to catch my breath.

“You look so fucking good with my cock in your mouth,” he pants, pulling out completely and gripping his shaft with one hand. “Let me see it.”

I stick my tongue out and flatten it, giving him the perfect platform to slap his cock onto. Saliva drips from my tongue as he guides the tip of his dick across it.

Once he’s fully inside, he grips my hair in his fingers and fucks my face. I close my lips around him and twirl my tongue as much as I can.

“Oh fuck,” he growls. “I’m gonna come straight down your throat.”

I moan around him, waiting for it. And then it hits, his warm release shooting into my mouth, hitting my throat, and then dripping to my tongue when he pulls back.

I swallow and whimper around him, drinking everything he gives me. Once he’s done, he moves to the side and falls to his back, and I turn to my side to face him.

Softly, I touch around the area of the Q and K on his chest.

“Stop obsessing over your work,” he mumbles, eyes still closed.

I grin. “Well, you know I’m obsessive.”

“And full of yourself.”

“Should I not be?”

He snorts but stays quiet for a little while. “You know, I was thinking.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Even though I know I said we’ll always encounter problems and have trust issues, I think we got caught up in too much normalcy. That’s not us. It’s fine to have a place to live and do everything to keep up appearances, but I think we need to do a little more to make sure we’re both perfectly content.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We can plan a trip. I know how much you enjoyed the road trip on the way up here. What if we pick a month to travel and have some fun along the way?”

“Mm,” I say with a smile, getting up on my elbow. “And by fun you mean...”

“You know what I mean.”

“That’s exciting.”

“Maybe toward the end of the year. The aquarium closes for the harshest months.”

“Yes! That sounds perfect.”

He grins. “Good. You start figuring out where you wanna go and what places will work best for us. Nowhere near Vermont or Washington, obviously.”

I get up on my knees, excitement taking over. “I will start looking into it today and will steer clear of our previous residences.”

Quin rolls out of bed. “We still have several months, but I’ll start looking for used RVs.”

“Oh, yes. That way we don’t have to be seen at hotels.”

“Exactly.”

“So, December?” I ask.

“Yep.”

“I love your idea of holiday celebrations, Mr. Black.”

“And I enjoy the gifts you give me, Mr. Black.”

He turns away and reaches for a shirt, ready to start his morning routine and completely unaware of what those words just did to me.

Yeah, we’re fucked up. We do things in ways others don’t. Our love language is violence and our troubles run deep, but you can’t tell me we aren’t the perfect fucking couple.

NOTE TO READERS

Thanks for reading! I fell in love with Kaspian and Ezra (Quin) when I wrote *Dysfunctional*. If you haven't read it yet, you can still go back and enjoy their journey. I was so happy to have the opportunity to bring them back for this anthology.

If I'm a new to you author, when you take a look at my backlist, you'll find, as my tagline states, *Books for Every Mood*. I write both MM and MF. I have some lighter reads set in college, some that have a little more emotion in my small town series about four brothers, and some standalones with their own vibes. You can also find several types of tropes in each one, but what you'll find in each is spice! They may vary in levels, but I love when my characters do the deed, so expect sex. Always.

I'm working on a dark(ish) diverse mafia romance now, so stay tuned and follow me on your social media platform of preference. I'm on all of them, and you can find me and my books at the link below. A quick thanks to Becca Steele for inviting me to be a part of this amazing anthology. It's been a joy to get to know all the authors involved. Also, thanks to my husband for reading this story and helping polish it up. I love you.

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FORGIVE ME

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TRIGGER WARNING

This is generally dark and contains lots of blasphemy.

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There was brutality in his love.

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RECONNECT

We were friends once upon a time. Two scared kids sheltered in the back of the church, a massacre bonding us in blood. Ripped out of his arms and shoved into two totally different lives, but never did I think he would turn into this.

I didn't know him. He stood over us like a God, exalted and beautiful. A smile that would have school girls fawning and grown woman swooning. He spoke the word of God—while I sat, a sinner.

The same start took us in wildly different directions.

He was forgiveness while I was vengeance.

Both doing the Lord's work, or so I told myself.

We all had to sleep at night.

We didn't talk about it. We didn't speak aside from my weekly confession. He pretended not to recognize me behind the screen. Or maybe he didn't, our friendship existing in another lifetime—one most would try to forget. But if that were the case, would he have condemned my sins? He should have given more than a couple of prayers as my penance after I confessed to atrocities that would turn the stomachs of even the most heinous villains.

I'd grown to cherish our time. Pouring out the worst of me, hidden behind a screen in a dark confessional, in graphic detail. There was nothing I wouldn't do for my job, and I was well known for accomplishing my task, no matter the difficulty or the odds.

Then he'd forgive me. Or act as a vessel of it. My penance a pittance. It almost felt wrong, but the sessions became addicting. I couldn't help

imagining what could have been, had our families not been ambushed that night.

If he had kissed me and no one had died.

It kept my hope alive while I sat in the back row in the shadows of the choir loft, a single face in his nameless crowd of thousands. For he was loved, and in these modern times, for a Catholic priest to be as loved as this, was rare. Religion more outdated and dying with every year that passed, but not in this sleepy town on the Eastern Seaboard. Week after week, every seat in the antique church was filled. But it wasn't just that. Father Anthony got his parishioners to help with the soup kitchen and the homeless shelter. They came out in droves for toy drives, and when Father Anthony needed them, they came, checkbooks in hand.

I'd never seen a man of God bring out as much good with zero judgement as Anthony did.

Like he hadn't started life a villain.

In a life where I'd lost all belief in anything, *he* felt like a life raft for my damned soul. A single fresh breath of peace before I returned to my hell.

Maybe that was his whole appeal in a world of selfish sinners. We clung to his holiness. As if our reparations could be purchased.

I laughed, but quickly stifled it with a cough when it drew the attention of my fellow parishioners. Anthony's eyes lifted from the text he read, seeking out the cause of the disturbance. They never landed on me. Like he avoided looking in my direction in any public form. We were strangers, after all. No matter how much we'd shared as children or in the confessional, it didn't change the reality of our lives.

They could never collide.

Not when I was as good as a ghost and he was the light I'd been taught to hide away from.

Mass ended. First Friday with standing room only. The line for confession stretched the length of the church and moved like molasses. Inch by inch, hour by hour. Absurd after an evening mass on a Friday, but not for Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Church.

There was always a line here.

Every night of the week, he drew crowds like a celebrity.

They'd tried splitting the work, bringing in another priest to hear confession to take some of the load off Anthony, but it remained the same, with people willing to wait hours for a few minutes alone with him. I'd

always wondered if they waited for the same reason I did week after week. For twenty minutes of heated breath exchanged behind a screen.

The strain, the desire to fall to my knees for a wholly different and indecent activity. Most of him hidden from view, but the way his cassock fell across his knees, revealing bare ankles for me to lust after like some sixteenth-century prude. In a world of scantily dressed bodies, his modesty became a cruel tease. The collar tight against his throat, restricting every swallow, reminding us both of his vows. The riches I'd exchange for a glimpse, for a chance to be the fingers undoing his buttons each night.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," I whispered as my knees hit the harsh cushion of the kneeler. My voice was husky after the hour of fantasy while I'd waited for my turn. "It's been two weeks since my last confession."

"You skipped a week."

The altered script gave me pause. "Yes, Father—I'm surprised you noticed with as many loyal parishioners as darken your door."

"I always look forward to your presence in my box." His reply left me speechless.

"You know me?" I asked at length.

"I've known you my whole life." There was strain to his tone, and I couldn't believe I imagined it. "The screen offers less privacy than you imagine, Finley." The slight accent in which he spoke my given name brought a wave a nostalgia I never wished to experience again. Nostalgia for a time long dead. For a mother who'd long ago left the living, and for a childhood stolen.

I hadn't gone by Finley in almost as many years. They'd hoped changing my name would change my nature, but it hadn't. It was impossible to escape a life of violence when born into it. It was all I knew.

"I wasn't sure you remembered," I murmured.

"How could I forget." His words made my heart ache.

"Some people forget on purpose."

"I've found there is no healing or forgiveness in such measures." Anthony's voice came between a clenched jaw.

"Why have you never acknowledged it before?" I shifted on my knees, uncomfortable with my secrets being known to another. Uncomfortable and aroused. How humiliation turned me on.

He'd always known, much to my detriment when it came to him.

"To what end? Are you here to reminisce what we lost, or forge

connection to the past? I thought you were here for your soul, child.”

“Is that why you absolve my mortal sins week after week?” I asked, lifting a hand to drag my fingers across the screen, like I could syphon connection from it. Better it separated us. I already went too far.

“There is only one type of sin I cannot forgive, and I do not think even you are capable of it.”

“What kind of sin is that?” I’d been raised Catholic but I’d never heard any sort of thing about something being unforgivable.

“Matthew 12: 31-32 speaks on it— Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come. Do you reject God or the Spirit, Finley? Do you speak so in public, condemning those who believe, child?”

“No.” Not even when I didn’t believe. I considered myself an atheist for a long time, until I drove two hours outside of D.C. only to stumble upon a relic of my former life. I’d looked for him for years, searched in and out of our former habitat. All the gutters he might be hiding in, only to find him in the most unexpected of places.

I hadn’t confronted him, instead, he’d converted me.

“I didn’t believe so, thus I act as a vessel for the forgiveness from the Spirit promised all of mankind.”

“Other priests would tell me to turn myself in or—I don’t know—not a few rosaries.”

“This has been weighing on you for some time?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“You are not killing the innocent, which would be murder.”

“I guess it depends on how you define innocent.” I laughed, but it wasn’t funny.

“Are you not tasked with this in defense of your country?”

“I am, but how does that change anything?” It wouldn’t change the sick satisfaction I took in my work. The ways I used it to seek revenge for my mother and sister. How thirsty I’d grown for blood after being a timid child.

“The church teaches war is morally permissible and at times even necessary.”

“Says man, not God. Would God condone our wars for greedy men?” I

didn't think so. I couldn't believe God would give us a pass.

"Only God can condemn us, but a man speaks on his behalf."

"How can a man know the mind of god?" I'd let him condemn me if it meant another taste. But I daren't suggest such blasphemy.

"If you don't believe in the Pope speaking on behalf of God, more of this falls apart than you'd like. We have to have faith."

"I guess the faith part has always been hard for me." I hadn't had faith in anyone since that night. Not the system, not the government, not the betrayal served by our families.

"Would you like a more harsh penance?" he asked, coldly.

"Yes."

"Is that for personal satisfaction or because you think your soul needs it?"

"Is there a difference?" I swallowed, all the ways *he* could punish me filling my mind.

"Of course there is. Punishment isn't for personal satisfaction."

"Can it be both?" I asked, not wanting to lie to him. This box was the only place I was honest. "Shouldn't penance make us feel better?" I sickly twisted the use to my own design, and I was sure he'd see through it.

"I don't think there are rules, child." His answer was unexpected.

"I'm not a child anymore." I pressed my forehead into the screen. I hadn't been since we were fifteen years old.

"We are all children of God."

"I don't feel like it."

"What would you like me to call you if not child? We are all lambs to the great Shepherd."

"I don't feel like a lamb either. I feel like I was made a lion and there is no way back." Who could make me get on my knees as the monster I was?

"You will always be a little lamb to me." He paused for a moment. "Isn't that why you make the drive here week after week?"

"What?"

"To regain your stolen innocence from you." His words were careful. I hated that he could never be careful with me. Not after I felt how violent his love could be.

"Not the innocence. The love." My head snapped up as I tried to meet his eyes in the low light. "I didn't think you wanted to remember *me*."

"I don't think there are many who've forgotten you, little Lamb."

“You, not those people.”

“I choose to remember.”

“Is that allowed in your profession, Father?” I asked, dying to see more than a shadow of his face, needing his expression to confirm the truth in his words.

“I think God understands we were human before we were priests.”

“And when you become priests that all goes away? It can’t just vanish. You don’t miss any of it?”

“I miss it. We all suffer with temptation.” His jaw flexed, or maybe it was a trick of the flickering candles.

“And how do you resist, because I can’t.” I’d used so many people trying to find the quiet he brought to my mind, but none accomplished the task.

“Prayer and grace and sometimes—we sin.” His voice broke on the last and I risked, for the first time since stumbling into this church, moving around the screen to take the seat in front of him.

Our knees brushed in the tiny space.

His knuckles were white in his lap, hands clasped in strain, eyes lowered, and just as beautiful as he’d been on the pulpit.

“Do you sin?” I asked, knowing better even as the words spilled from my lips.

“I’m a man. Men are fallible.”

“That’s not an answer,” I pressed.

“Yes. To say otherwise would propagate falsehood.” Still he wouldn’t look at me.

I inched to the edge of my seat, knees pressing. “Did they teach you that at seminary?”

“What?” he asked, finally lifting his blues to meet mine.

Tragedy. Hope. Sincerity. Every word he’d spoken had been the truth. He couldn’t lie to me, not after the way he’d bared himself to me. Anthony’s eyes were windows to his soul. The same way they’d been as a teenager.

“To speak in religious riddles?” My fingers crept to the edge of my knees, brushing over his.

His eyes closed at the touch. “Seminary changes our minds and the way we experience words.”

“Your experience with words?” I asked, not sure what he meant, or if this was another riddle.

“God created the world with words. They have meaning and power, more

than most of us imagine. We create our reality with words.” He held my gaze, and I realized this was a mistake.

How could I look him in the eyes and not want what we had been back? After twenty years apart, my mouth still hungered for him, and my skin ached for his touch for every depraved thing he’d write into my skin.

“How does that change the way you speak? You are more careful about your words now? To what fucking end?”

The curse didn’t so much as bring a flinch from him. He couldn’t erase all of what we were. “I weigh the words I put out into the universe because I know they write my reality, and what I’m inviting into my life.” All so matter of factly, but Anthony had always been more practical than I’d been.

I felt deeply, made decisions on those feelings. He’d never let himself decide anything based on a temporary emotion. He thought long and hard before coming to a decision. So the evolution of that bleeding into even his spoken words made sense to his character. We’d both become calculating, but in opposite ways.

“And what are you inviting into your life,” I asked, not sure he’d tell me.

He mulled the question over before he answered. “I ask for God to give me what I can handle and entrust me with what He deems necessary as his servant—His vessel.”

“What does seeing me invite into your life?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer or the final dismissal. A door closed, one that kept me from madness far more than I’d ever admit. Like I could seek salvation at his hands, and that gave me enough hope to go on. “Do you wish He wouldn’t have led me back to you?”

“I would never turn away a man seeking redemption.” His words wavered like he was holding back. “I trust in Our Savior. He’s brought me this far.”

“So you have no feelings about it?”

“I have feelings, I’m not void of emotion.” His eyes pressed closed and I hoped his struggle was as great as mine, as evil as it was to wish it upon him.

“What feelings?”

“Longing.”

“And?” I pressed, not sure what I hoped to receive from this exchange.

“Pain.”

“I cause you pain?” I asked.

“You cause me to miss what never could have been. Your face reopens old wounds.”

“I’m sorry if my coming here hurts.” I made to get up—to escape. The last thing I wanted to do was bring him my pain, or the pain from our past, if he’d moved beyond it. I didn’t want to share my misery. “It was wrong to come here.”

He grabbed my wrist before I could make my exist. “Pain can’t be avoided. We do ourselves a disservice in this life and cause more pain by trying to avoid it. Harm comes when we wallow or sink into frustration over pain.”

“I don’t know how to escape it.” I twisted to peer at him over my shoulder. Another mistake. The thoughts his presence put in my mind...

“Don’t escape it. Embrace it.” He didn’t release me, so I returned to my seat, my hand clutched in both of his.

“That’s why I’m here.” Or maybe it’s why I was drawn to this place.

“After all these years?” Anthony asked. “Why now?”

“I didn’t know where you were. I sit in churches often when I pass through towns. People leave others in churches alone. They are great places to wait out time.” Would he scold me for desecrating holy ground with such activity?

“So you stumbled into my parish?” His kind brow wrinkled with confusion. “Or did you seek out vengeance?”

“Wholly by accident. Vengeance has never been my design.” After years of searching for Connor McGrath I’d found Father Anthony in his stead—no Father Connor or Father McGrath, which might have given me an easier time. Maybe he’d forsaken his Irish name to wash away the sins of our fathers and let himself be reborn free from his sins. I would have never known, not a trace of the change in any data base I could get my hands on. All traces of him vanished at eighteen. Even his face had morphed with age, distinguished the young man I knew, but I’d never forget those blues. “Fate. I would say.”

“God works in mysterious ways.” He stayed quiet for a long moment. “If not vengeance then why would you want to see me? Why would you return so frequently?”

“Are you hiding?” The thought hadn’t occurred to me, but my very presences here might put his life at risk. “I can stop visiting if you wish to leave me in your past. I wouldn’t lead harm here.”

“No!” Heart behind his word, stirring my chest. Maybe he wasn’t as void of feelings as I suspected. “Our fathers are long dead and their legacy washed

into the gutters. I don't think those who took over would fear a priest returning to claim an empire of dust." His fingertips traced the lines of my palm. "What keeps you returning, then? I can't imagine your job brings you so far north so frequently. Surely you could go to any church for forgiveness."

"You." I dropped the word like a hundred pound weight at his feet.

He didn't speak at first, but he didn't release my hand either.

I waited, my patience a true virtue.

"Why me? I can't imagine after what I did to you that you'd look kindly on me."

"You're the only familiarity I've ever found." I didn't think the truth would fix my admission, but I was out of lies. "Both our families were ripped from us." It wasn't the whole truth.

"You wouldn't have it back, would you?" He searched my face, looking for something there. A spark or maybe some evidence in my expression.

"No, I fear where both of us would be if that night hadn't ended in bloodshed." But I also fantasized about it. Fantasied about growing old with him and how different we'd be had we not been separated.

He nodded. "I would be a substantially different person. God had a plan and rescued us both from the atrocities that life would have brought."

"Do you regret it all?" I asked, and maybe it was the pinnacle of what brought me back week after week.

"No. Not all of it." Hope blossomed with his words.

"What don't you regret?"

"You, I never could stay away from you." He met my eyes. "God must give me strength to resist you even now."

There was finality in his statement, and I fled without my penance.

CONFESSION

My departure brought deep sorrow, hope a vile thing when left to rot. For how could it be more than it was? He wasn't free, and I wasn't in any place to be a partner. He was married to God, and I my work.

It didn't stop my return. Part of me hoped the winter would thaw and I'd stop thinking about that night. That the finality of his rebuttal would bring me peace, but as spring bloomed at our feet and the warmth brought storms to our shores and my mind, nothing changed. Turmoil turned in my gut as I longed for him. The greatest sin, stealing a servant of God for my own pleasure.

I resisted, only reaching out for him in my sleep, glad I no longer shared a barracks with a host of men to ask questions. My depravity was kept secret with my other misdeeds.

I suffered the affliction of him alone.

Bore it in the weight of my day.

Ached as I sat under his pulpit.

And thirsted for it as I took my place on the other side of his screen another night.

"I was wondering when you'd return to confession," Anthony said after I recited the holy words to begin the sacred right.

"I wasn't sure you'd want to see me again." I wasn't sure I could behave. But was omission the same as lying in God's eyes?

"I'd never deny you forgiveness, little lamb, nor this place."

"What if I desecrated this space?" I whispered, not sure I wanted him to hear me. I'd fucked my hand to visions of it night after night, prying open his

thighs as I sunk between them here, to service him. To make him miss me as much as I missed him.

He shifted, and silence ached between us. “What brought those thoughts to mind?”

“I’ve had them since I first saw you behind the altar.” The admission made me lighter, and maybe that was bad. He didn’t deserve the weight of my impure thoughts.

“Me...? After?” His voice came breathless.

“Are you surprised?”

“I thought you’d hate me.” The tenor of his words changed. Lowered.

“I never hated you. I loved you.”

“After all I’ve done, how can you say that?” Regret flooded the space, making breathing hard.

“Do you forget who you were to me before? You were my protector. My safety.”

“All the more reason to despise me. I took your darkest secrets entrusted to me and turned my back on you.” It was almost an apology. I’d never hoped for one. I’d have come back had he uttered it or not.

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“I’m not sure I can forgive myself for what I did to you.”

“Aren’t you in the business of forgiveness, Father? Is your sin so grave you cannot ask God for forgiveness?”

“Don’t call me that.” His gasp strained.

“Father? Isn’t that what you are?” I pressed, taking joy in the strain in him.

“Not to you, never to you.”

“What are you to me?” I asked, all delight stripped from my voice.

“I don’t know.” His head hung, haunting in the shadow cast by the screen.

“Why does it bother you when I use that word?” I thought I knew why.

“I believe you know.”

“Does it give you impure thoughts, Father?” I pushed my luck, but I’d avoided him for months. I didn’t know what it would take for me to stay away from him, but I couldn’t. Weeks of resisting had only made the urges greater. Even a detox hadn’t prevented my return.

“Is your design to torture me for my abandonment? Is that why you return week after week?”

“Only if in torturing myself, I torture you.”

He exhaled and brought his tented fingers to his lips. “Why do you torture yourself?”

“I can’t stop.” I moved to sit across from him, against my better judgement. “The thought of not coming made me miserable.”

“You’re called to be in this place?”

“Maybe.” Called to him. “Do you want me to stop coming?”

“No.” Firm and decisive, leaving no room for questions.

“Why do you believe I’d want to torture you?” I wanted the truth. Maybe he wouldn’t give it to me but I’d try.

“I left you. I abandoned you and left you to deal with the loss alone. I don’t have a good excuse. I thought if I got away, then I’d stop thinking of you. Stop wanting you. How wrong I was.” His teeth dug into his lower lip, and I fed on the desperation in it. How much restraint he must be holding.

“You did.” We both fell silent, but I wouldn’t let him off so easily. “How do I torture you?”

“Surely you know?” It was a question. He didn’t know for certain.

“Do you *still* think of me like I think of you?” I asked the question I’d kicked myself for not over and over.

“Yes.” So simple and yet so complicated.

“Why did you have to get away from it?”

“Could it be anything else? I don’t regret that night. Or what passed between us, only that it couldn’t be, not in that life, not with our fathers who they were. I had to abandon it all to be free or we’d never have escaped it. We’d have turned into our fathers.” Anthony’s words were definitive. He believed it and I did too.

We’d been headed there.

“What do you regret?” I pressed on the edge of my seat, ready to fall at his knees at the first inkling he would accept the advance.

“That I was never given the chance to atone for what I’d done to you. The torture I’d inflicted.”

“Is that why you think I’m here to torture you?” I asked.

“I’d deserve it.” He believed that.

“My aim is much the opposite.”

“I’m not sure which is worse.” His hands lay half clutched in his lap like he was split between action and inaction.

A man on the brink.

I his failure.

“If you like men, why would you join the church?” I changed the subject, my hands draped over his knees.

“I owed a penance. I didn’t know any other way to pay back my sins. To find peace.” His head dropped forward.

“Do you not believe you are deserving of forgiveness?” I asked again. “You gave away your entire life to atone for sixteen years?”

He closed his eyes, a single tear streaming down. “I’m a monster, and the cincture is the only bind I’ve found to contain it. If not for God, I would have become my father.”

“You’d never be your father.”

“I have desires. Urges. I would be him if I ever let the monster out. I can never allow that to happen. I’d have gone back and rained hell on his enemies all in the name of what? Regaining a life I never wanted? I can’t.” His voice trembled with the admittance.

“Surely those urges could be sated in other ways,” I whispered, encouraging.

“You know they can, but I gave those up too.”

“What did you give up,” I pushed, and I’d keep pushing until I saw a glimpse of him.

His hand snapped out and grabbed my throat, controlled and precise with the speed and accuracy of a snake. “I want to hurt you and not because I hate you, but solely for my own pleasure.”

I pressed into his grip. “What’s stopping you?”

Arousal burned in my veins, and I might die if he didn’t do something.

“I told you, I can’t risk letting the monster out.” He was hard under his cassock, the outline of him betraying even the thick fabric.

“So what, you deny it forever and risk snapping when you can’t take it anymore?” I stroked my fingers over his wrist in adoration, no attempt to break his hold on me.

“What other choice do I have?” His grip tightened and the lines in his face eased.

“You let it out in controlled bursts, with a willing vessel. Maybe this is why God brought me to your threshold.”

He quivered.

I feared losing him.

Any second, he could flee and refuse to see me again.

“I can’t.”
“What if I beg?”
This time he fled.

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INSISTANCE

A rare sick day. In all the time I'd come to this church, he'd never missed a Friday night Mass and confession. Sick.

Sick.

I said the word over and over to myself as I sat through the unfamiliar service. Anthony had a way about him, and cadence to the Mass—the delivery as sacred as the sacraments. He had a candor in his humility. I'd never witnessed anything like it.

This new priest felt—lacking.

I didn't stay for confession.

Another week passed, another Friday missed. Anthony was avoiding me. Was he afraid of himself or me? Both, if I had to guess. My line of work came with the combat of avoidance. I killed the men with the best protection. The most paranoid men no other agent could lay their hands on, I stalked until I learned their ways. Patience was a virtue, and I had it in abundance. Or maybe it ran through my blood, my mother gifting me more than her green eyes. She'd been the best enforcer the Irish mob had ever seen, but it didn't save her in the end.

And it wouldn't save me either.

Not when I outlived my usefulness. But I wouldn't let that day come. Not for a long time. The government was kinder than the mob, but not by much. I'd be retired as soon as I became inconvenient. We all knew the ways of it.

I'd probably go much the way of our parents: A massacre. Some days, I felt it like a whisper on the back of my neck, a promise from the universe to correct what should have been twenty years ago. But not before I earned it.

On his absence the third Friday, attendance waned. How fickle the flock. They came for the savior, but not anyone would do. Did God judge them? I'd always wonder. I came other days at random times, venturing in for both Masses and holy hours. He became a ghost. Whispers of sightings but never any release. Still I came, serving my vigil.

Summer captured the East. It came late but with a vengeance, turning the sun filled vacation days sour. Beaches were packed with people seeking any sort of relief from the heat. With the heat came the worst of mankind—tempers razor thin while the weather threatened to turn. The humidity set in, and tourism dwindled.

Stiff. Sticky. Stifling.

I sat in the back of the empty church, sweat dripping down the back of my neck, shirt sticking to my skin. The fans barely offered any reprieve.

“Do you come here to worship at God’s altar, or mine?” His familiar voice broke my suffering. He was different. Less exuberant—or maybe exhausted. Shadows lived under his eyes, and he carried himself like a man returning from war.

“It can be both, can’t it? You said there were no rules.”

“In this case one is blasphemy while the other will save your soul.”

“Can I confess after my transgression and be forgiven?”

“I told you you could.”

“I want to sin,” I admitted.

“Me too.” His admittance came in a whisper like he hid even from god.

I clung to the power I held in his admittance. Therein lay the real sin. The high I chased, finally born to me in knowing he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

“Is it a sin to admit?” I asked.

“No. We’ve done no wrong wanting a part of us we were forced to abandon.” His voice was barely above a whisper, but the acoustics of the old building carried it, and amplified it.

Good thing we were alone.

“Is imagination sinful?” Because if it was, I sinned every time I sat before him.

“No, even the best of humanity has intrusive thoughts.” Anthony’s words didn’t reassure me.

“What about fantasies?”

“Do you often have such fantasies?” Anthony ventured closer.

“Yes. Frequently.” Daily. Hourly. Sometimes they were my only comfort in a sea of darkness. My only connection with my humanity. They reassured me that I still breathed. Still had desires of the flesh and hadn’t turned into just a cog in the machine of war and industrialization.

“Do they bring you comfort?” How had he guessed? Was he as uncomfortable as I was? I hoped so, for the worst reasons. Was my mind so open to this man? I pulled in on myself, suddenly exposed and raw. Maybe there was no hiding in front of God or his servants.

“Should I confess them before I even commit the act?” Was the thought alone enough of a sin to burn what was left of my soul?

“If you seek forgiveness for thoughts, you may, but repentance means an attempt at avoiding such sins.” Closer still he came, and I was sure it would be to his ruin or mine.

“It sounds like you’re saying if I’m thinking it, I might as well act because God will judge me the same.” My cock stirred under my slacks. The only pair I own, reserved for my weekly drive to church.

“I would never advise to follow the path of sin,” Anthony said carefully.

“Do you think of sinning often?” I asked, taking comfort in the shared human urges. But more than that, I selfishly wanted the answer.

“Far too often for a man of God, but we are weak in the face of the devil’s temptation. My journey, like any other man’s, is to resist in the face of salvation.” Anthony slipped into the pew and sat.

“And what if salvation doesn’t exist?” I asked, doubt driving half of my choices in life.

“We have to have faith in the face of doubt, little lamb. It’s all that separates us from the damned.” He chanced a glance and met my gaze.

“Are desires of the flesh worth damnation?” Because I would sink into sin so fast with him.

“Maybe so. I cannot make that choice for you, Finley. I can only seek to guide you to the light.”

I dropped my head to my hands. Was it so wrong to seek comfort from another man? I was sure he would tell me so, but the knowledge didn’t make me want it any less.

“Do you want to discuss your thoughts? It doesn’t have to be a confession, priests are often used as counselors.”

“You don’t want to know.” Was I the devil if I tempted him into sin?

“I do, Finley. Let me carry some of the burden for you.” His sincerity hurt

worse, knowing what I was about to do to him.

“I want to commit transgressions against God and against you. I want to break your vows and desecrate this holy temple.” I met his eyes as I said the words. Firm and unwavering. I wanted him to feel them as much as I’d suffered with them.

It wasn’t fair, but I wasn’t sorry.

“Little lamb...” He brought his pointer fingers to his lips in the prayer position, removing them from his lap, exposing his hardness.

My mouth watered as hunger stirred in my gut. “I’m sorry for tempting you.”

I wasn’t, but it felt like the right thing to say.

“Do you want absolution?” He hesitated over the word.

“No. It would be a lie.”

The sentence sat heavy between us.

But my soul felt lighter.

“What about me makes these urges worse,” Anthony asked.

Did he want to know?

“Look at me,” I demanded.

He did as I asked.

“Do I make you want to sin?”

“Every day.” He pressed one hand into his hard-on, taunting me with it.

“I’m not here every day.”

He laughed, but it wasn’t filled with joy or delight—this was sinister. “You believe I don’t think of you long after you’ve left? Well into the night? I avoided you for weeks without reprieve. I made myself raw seeking relief and still I’m before you, barely holding it together.”

“Is it wrong that I like it?”

“No more wrong than me not requesting a transfer to another parish,” he said, fingers now wrapped around himself, cassock pulled tight over his thighs while outlining his massive cock.

My mouth watered. Saliva pooled on my lip. I’d never had the pleasure. We’d danced around our demons, barely discovering our needs by the time we were torn apart. What kept me in my seat must have been God’s intervention because in no way did I have the strength.

“Why haven’t you?” I asked him.

“I don’t want to disappear again.” *From you* was left unsaid, but I felt the sentiment.

“Will we always live in the shadows of what will never be?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“I don’t think I can stop myself.” I clutched myself, releasing some of the strain in my tented slacks.

His gaze strayed to the movement, and he groaned. “Let me see you.” He wasn’t asking.

I took my time undoing my button and lowering my zipper, anticipation building between us. I kept my gaze on the side of his face as I slipped my hand inside my briefs, freeing my cock. The tip wept and stiffened, impossibly harder with his eyes on me.

“Stroke yourself.”

I did as he asked in front of God, nothing shielding the lewd act. We were exposed for anyone to happen upon in the wide open nave.

“Squeeze,” he commanded.

My fingers hugged my thickness, putting on a show, dying for him to touch me, but his gaze was enough to bring me to the brink. I wouldn’t last long. “Connor.”

“No,” he snapped, his hand darting out to grab my jaw to drag me closer, bringing us thigh to thigh. “Anthony. Do you understand. I left Conner for dead.”

“I understand.” I feared he’d vanish again, and this time I’d never see him again.

“Keep stroking.”

My hand returned to what it had been doing, fear still coursing through my veins. His attention returned to my cock, making me throb. His grip tightened. I’d have bruises. The thought nearly made me come.

“Show me how you touch yourself when no one’s watching. I want to see your most intimate moment. How you touch yourself when you think of me.”

Groans fell from my lips as I licked on my hand, neck strained with the angle, but none of it stopped me. I returned slick fingers to my cock, fucking myself with the new slickness. Eyes half closed, breathing jagged, losing myself to the fantasy come to life. He didn’t have to touch me for me to feel it. I felt the intent, the hand on my face enough to bring me to release.

His lips ghosted over mine. My eyes snapped open, confusion washing through me. “Do you remember kissing me before it happened?”

I tried not to look at him but his hand restricted the movement. “Yes.

After you beat me with the cincture you'd found in the sanctuary.”

“Our indiscretions saved us that day.” His breath came warm over my lips, making me quiver.

“Will they do the opposite today?” I asked, so close to the edge I nearly fell off with every stroke.

“I don't know.” He kissed me then, full on. Claiming my mouth as he'd claimed my body twenty years ago.

Pain erupted across my face. I came, shuddering in gasps. Heat stinging deep in the tissue. Ecstasy ruining me for anyone else every again.

He laughed, touch turning gentle, stroking and caressing my face through the last of my orgasm. “Our demons remain the same.”

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SIN

“Will you haunt me until my death?” Anthony lit candles, methodical. One by one. Not in a hurry, the way he did it every night.

“Am I a haunting? A ghost of your past?” Made bolder by last week’s trespass, I didn’t take my usual seat.

“You’re late.” He didn’t look at me. Didn’t see the blood under my nails. Didn’t notice the dirt on my face. Would he care? Would he know our time was marred by death and think differently of me?

Death was easier as an abstract concept. Normal every day people knew wars killed people, and they accepted that as the price of the purpose sold to them by politicians. But when faced with the grim and gruesome reality of it, most balked and fled.

“A job kept me.”

He froze, candlelighter half way to its purpose. “Funny how I, the monster, ended up the servant of God, and you, the innocent, ended up the killer.”

“Irony at its best.” I stayed where I was, hand on the ornately carved bench, in the pew I considered mine. I didn’t move to sit, expecting the worst.

“Your father wanted you to be a monster. My mother never wanted me to follow in her footsteps. Funny how we both defied their wishes.” It wasn’t funny, but I still laughed.

“If they wanted to comment, they should have lived.” He cast a glance over his shoulder.

“Too true I guess. They don’t get to choose our paths from beyond the

grave. I wonder if we'd have disappointed them?" I didn't wonder. I was sure my mother would look down on me.

He lit the candle. Then the next. And a third. "We are both serving a higher power. Mine God, yours government. They would have hated it." A hint of joy crept into his words.

"Do you delight in it?"

"A little. I think they deserve it for what they did."

"Which part? The killing or...well, the rest." I didn't begrudge either of them. Only that it brought about their ruin.

"Both. I say no prayers for their souls." His words were defiant.

"I don't wish my mother ill. Their deaths were punishment."

He laughed, letting the monster bleed into it. "Not enough. Not nearly." And it was justified. My mother had never been motherly, but she hadn't beat me within an inch of my life when her mood turned like Anthony's father had.

Any time they caught us whispering or looking at each other across the room. How he screamed slurs at Anthony and stomped every last soft thing out of him. But his father misjudged my dedication to loving a monster. I liked him better for it. Every bruise Anthony gave me was cherished because they were given with love. Starved for affection, I'd lick Anthony's blood off a knife if he commanded it.

We fell into silence, but a comfortable one. He finished his tasks but I didn't sit, instead moving with him. Parallel to him. He on the outside me on the inside, both towards the altar. He cast a glance over his shoulder.

"Are you not praying tonight?" he asked.

"I'm here, isn't that enough?"

"Tonight it can be," he agreed, finishing the line of candles, casting the church in harsh light. His face in shadow, deepening his features. "Are you here for confession then?"

I was here to see him. I was always here to see him. "Confession ended an hour ago. I'm surprised to find you still here." I expected him long left for the rectory.

"I sat vigil."

"Is it a holy day?" We've been raised catholic, but my brain had long purged such dates from memory.

"For you."

"You waited?" I smiled, stepping foot into the transept around the front of

the pews.

“I look forward to our time.” He bowed to the altar and took a step toward me.

My smile widened. “The best part of my week.”

“No rest for my little lamb.”

“Your lamb? Do you mean God’s?” I asked.

“Tonight I mean mine.” His words were firm, no room for interpretation.

“Will you let the monster out tonight?” I took another step towards him, but he didn’t move.

“I don’t know if I can hold it back any longer.”

My heart quickened, but I didn’t move.

We stared across the vast church, both of us waiting, my stomach in my throat. I didn’t dare speak and break the moment. I would wait forever until he was ready. I’d waited half a lifetime already.

“Come here,” he said at last.

I moved before his word had fully registered.

“No.” He snapped.

I froze.

“On your knees.”

I dropped.

“Crawl.”

ATONEMENT

My hands hit the cool stone, scraping on the ancient floor as I moved forward. My vision only the bottom of his cassock, moving as he shifted his stance. I stopped at his feet, not daring to look into his eyes. The temptation to see the monster there great, but I still clung to the worry he'd flee. But it wouldn't stop me from doing all in my power to coax the monster out of where Anthony had buried him.

My Monster.

He hooked a finger between my lips, forcing my face up, spitting into my mouth. A smile spread over my lips, filthy. Just like I remembered him.

"I won't hold back. I can't." His cadence came tense. "Once I release my hold on him, there is no telling what he will do."

"I want all that you are."

His eyes squeezed shut, jaw flexed. "Be sure, lamb. Be entirely sure you know what you do."

"Please." I uttered the word like a prayer.

His fingers worked open buttons at the waist of his cassock in quick time, while his fingers hooked behind my teeth. He opened his belt and forced his cock down my throat. Savage and unforgiving, fingers still in my mouth, while his free hand grasped my face. I opened my throat and took it. This wasn't for pleasure. For him or me. This was possession. To drive his point home. His tip hit the back of my throat, his pelvis abused my lips. They'd bruise. Every movement screamed aggression, but his gaze told a different story. His eyes filled with adoration, and I would have let him do a hundred times worse for one of those looks.

My lungs burned, and my vision started to narrow, and still he took my throat without reprieve. Without warning he slowed, changing from deep strokes to fully buried. He ground his pelvis into my face, balls heavy. This brought about his moans, taking pleasure from it at last.

I smirked around him.

He withdrew without a word.

Void. Vacant. Abandoned.

Leaving me coughing and sputtering on the ground, trying to regain my breath. I heaved, nearly collapsing.

I sat on my heels when my lungs stopped burning, and my vision returned, searching for him. He was nowhere in sight. I pushed to my feet to find him behind the altar. He stripped off his garments one by one, folding them before setting them aside with reverence, stripped down to his undershirt, collar and slacks. Belt still open but cock tucked back into his black boxers.

I whimpered, crossing the space. "Here?"

He nodded. "If I'm destined for eternal damnation, I'm going to earn it."

"How do you want me?"

"Exalted." The sneer to his lips told me more than the word. He fingered the collar.

"Let me?" I stepped around the altar.

His hand dropped away. I removed the collar, and then when he didn't stop me, the shirt, but when my hands went to the waistline of his slacks, he stopped me, spinning me around. He ripped my slacks down to my ankles. I squirmed, having pictured this particular violation since we were teenagers. The fantasy had morphed over the years, and I never imagined it would be bent over an altar, but I wouldn't rebuke it. This was his God, not mine.

"Hands behind your back."

I obliged, offering my wrists.

He looped the belt around them, pulling it tight as he forced a hand into the center of my back, making me bend. He poured something down my split while fingers found my hole warm and slick. I twisted, curiosity getting the better of me. Where had he come up with lube in this place? I expected to be fucked half dry with saliva.

Chrism oil.

"Isn't that..." My mouth hung open.

"I don't want to wreck you. Not yet. What use would you be for me later

if I destroyed your hole on the first go?”

I whimpered. “Are you going to use me a lot?”

“One time won’t sate the monster, little lamb. You are mine tonight. You can choose to leave in the morning, but I’m not letting you out of here until then.”

My body shuddered with the promise, high on anticipation. Rough fingers entered me. He used the belt to pull me onto them, fucking me deep.

Burning, filling, stretching.

It had been a long time since I’d been with anyone else, and my body protested. How had I found this place? I thanked God as Anthony violated me over the altar, and maybe it was wrong, but I didn’t think so. Nothing about Anthony had ever felt wrong. If he was wrong, I was wrong, and there was no fixing it.

He added another finger. “I’ve been imagining this since that day.”

“Since we kissed?” I stammered, back arching, my cheek against cool holy linens. “You’ve been imagining me?”

“Would there be anyone else?”

“It’s been twenty years. There could be,” I said, sorrow filtering through me for what was taken away from us. Our first times with one another.

“There has been no one else.”

“What?” I gasped, because he chose that moment to roughly twist inside me.

“You’ve never loved anyone else?” I asked, sad for him if it was true.

“I’ve never touched anyone else. Just you. You’re the only one who’s ever carried my marks.” He laid his hand over my cheek, sealing the statement in flesh.

“Wait...”

He paused mid pull back. “Yes?”

“You’re a virgin?” I asked, not wholly believing it.

“You have made me come before. Did you forget?” He spoke with a calmness that shouldn’t be possible with the ruthless way he fucked my hole.

“I didn’t forget, but that was two teenagers dry humping in dark corners. We never...” I’d never even seen his cock until he’d rammed it down my throat.

“If you believe penetration denotes virginity, then yes, I am a virgin. I entered the seminary at eighteen.”

“There was time between...” I hated the thought of anyone else touching

him. I would kill them in cold blood if he ever let slip their names.

“Soon as they put us into witness protection, I decided I needed to atone.”

He teased his tip against me, not withdrawing his fingers. I strained so I could watch his beautiful cock entire me. Thick and veiny. I wanted it in my mouth again, but this time slower so I could take my time to fully enjoy it.

“Do you enjoy watching?”

“Yes. I want to finally see how you look inside me.”

He slapped my ass again, keeping to teasing, warming my skin. It stung, but hardly. Kneading between hits while his tip smeared oil along my split. He took his time and my patience began to break.

“Anthony.” Desperation bled into my tone.

“I can feel how much you want me.” He pushed just his tip inside me with his fingers.

I shuddered, squeezing my eyes shut against the pain. “More.”

“Did you say something, lamb?”

“More,” I croaked.

He offered another inch, but nothing more.

“Do I have to beg?” My heart jumped to throat, anticipation killing me.

“No, this is to my discretion. You may beg, and I may enjoy it, but I’ll take what I want when I want.” He wound the belt around his palm, pulling my arms taut, as he forced himself home.

Buried to the hilt, fingers and cock. Entirely invaded. Stretched beyond imagining. And it hurt. It was bliss. There was nothing in this life or the next that would compare to him. I knew it in my bones.

There was brutality in his love. Every thrust reminded me of it.

He released the end of the belt, forcing me up, and flush to him while his teeth found the curve of my neck.

He bit me over and over, adorning my body with marks while he lavishly fucked me. Digging deeper with his hips, the incessant grind pushing me over the edge. Driven to orgasm without warning. My entire body convulsing with the intensity of it.

His smirk pressed into the back of my neck. Filthy satisfaction while I clenched around him. Painting the holy cloth with my seed. Defiling this place, and I would do it again. I would do anything he asked of me. Anything he wanted.

“It was worth the wait. You were worth the wait.”

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RESURRECTION

He'd taken me half a dozen more times. Leaving marks on every surface of my skin. I was art, recreated in my younger image. His art. We sat long after he'd come for the last time with the sun barely cresting the horizon, warming the stained glass with a faint glow. The promise of another bright day. He caressed my skin with physical affection, tracing the outlines of his marks.

I'd dozed in and out, but he'd remained, letting me come down in softness. The monster long sated and the boy I'd fallen in love with in third grade returned to me. He wasn't Father Anthony. He was Conner, even if he rejected the name. My soul tied to his, no matter the names the other called us. Our connection never broken. Would never break.

Even if he asked me never to return, I was sure of it.

"How do we go on?" There was no happily ever after in this. I couldn't see it.

"Neither of us can forsake our gods, little lamb. You can't leave your service any easier than I can leave mine."

"No." The only way they'd let me retire was in a box. I knew too much.

"So, why would we have to change anything?"

"What if I want to see you more?" I asked, pressing my face into his neck, needing all the reassurance.

"Is anyone stopping you from driving up here to your heart's content?" Anthony asked.

"Can you get away that much?"

"I have duties I must preform but aside from those, my time is my own. I

make the schedule for the parish. I can adjust as need be.” He pressed his lips to my forehead.

“Can I stay the night?” I asked, probing the boundaries of our arrangement.

“If your heart desires.”

“Would you like me to?” I don’t know how I’d suddenly returned to the unsure teenager.

“I’ll cherish any time you grace me with. I’ve missed you.” It was the truth. His eyes confirmed. “Are you still concerned?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know.”

“What is troubling you?”

“What about your vows? Will you grow to regret this and me?” Did he even have a conscience?

“No.” He laughed. “My vows haven’t changed. I broke one, but the rest stand. I serve God. I don’t think he begrudges my transgressions or anyone else’s. We are all sinners.”

“I thought you said part of confession was the expectation of correction of behavior.”

“I can’t confess this.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I’m not sorry. So either my other good deeds will outweigh my bad or I’ll spend eternity in damnation.”

“You’d risk burning for the rest of eternity for me?” I asked.

“Hell isn’t fire, little lamb. The church didn’t preach such nonsense until *Dante’s Inferno*. Hell is the absence of God. Every day of your absence was hell. I’m not willing to suffer anymore.” He hugged me tighter, warming me from the inside out.

“And what about the things I want? The vile degradation. The hurt and harm. Wanting the monster. My Monster.” My chest heaved with anxiety. Would he lock that side of him away again? Weren’t Catholics all about missionary and respect?

“Silly lamb, I don’t think God pays any mind to the acts of man when they are consensual adults.” Laughter leaked into his voice. “If you’re getting off to what I’m doing to you, where is the harm?”

“I get off on it.” I exhaled my fear feelings as the bruises set. “But is this a sin? Even if the sex isn’t, what about our love?”

“Loving you could never be a sin. I was mistaken for ever insinuating it was. I may have broken my vows, but touching you isn’t wrong. You are entirely right.” His whisper brought the first reassurance to my soul. “Love is never wrong.”

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SALVATION

The heat broke, and the hot days faded to cool nights. Autumn crept closer, and the leaves began to change. I loved this part of the country for its vibrant colors. Warmth transformed into cool as the world prepared for winter. Sweat turned to sweaters.

And my faith deepened.

The only man I'd ever had faith in, that is.

Our worlds melded easier than I expected, and I grew to love the drive.

"Can we take a drive?" I didn't know the rules. We rarely left the rectory together, which suited my solitary self just fine.

"A drive?" Anthony sat in reading glasses in front of his computer, very much looking his thirty-five, poring over a homily for Sunday.

"Yes, I bought a new car."

He turned towards me, more Connor every day we spent together. The Monster playing but easily sated, returning him to me quicker and quicker. "I saw. Less flashy than the last one. I approve."

The remark earned him a glare. "I only changed the color. It's more flashy because it has a better engine."

"More powerful isn't flashy. My profession appreciates understated."

I'd done it for him, and I was glad he'd recognized it. "Fine, less flashy. I want to see the leaves. I do it every year."

"Like your mother used to with you?" He smiled with warmth.

"Yes."

"I would love to." He stood, leaving his glasses on the table next to his laptop. "How long will we be? Should I arrange for another priest to take my

mass tonight?”

“No, I wouldn’t dare ask you to miss First Friday. It’s October. The sinners need you.”

“Any priest will do.” He disappeared into his room, I assumed, to put on his cassock. They weren’t required when he wasn’t in the church, but he liked to dress the part, never venturing out in just his collar. He returned, fastening the last of his buttons.

“I wouldn’t rob them of you. I know why they flock to your parish.”

He laughed but didn’t argue.

We slipped into the Aston Martin Vantage Roadster in velvet green. The convertible was perfect for this weather, and the entire reason I’d traded in my last model.

We drove. The same paths I took every year, hands held across the console. Beauty in the silence.

“How do you keep blood off the interior?” he asked an hour into our drive.

I laughed at the absurdity of it. “Your preclusion to only killing to make a point is showing.”

His father had forced it on him as the leader of the Irish, with Connor being his heir apparent. He made sure his son was as brutal as he was. But his father had failed. Connor kept every ounce of goodness. A triumph over the savagery of his upbringing and spitting in the face of his father.

“And how would your mother have you murder, little lamb?”

“Enforcers are proving a point, but they don’t have the insulation your father had. If they were caught, they were done for. She had to let it be known the reason the hit was taken but never who it was. She couldn’t take credit or leave witnesses. So her craft came with a different set of skills, and one of them was blood tells too many tales. I kill from a distance if I can at all help it.”

“And what about the car? No one notices a two-hundred thousand dollar car?”

“I only drive stolen cars when on the job. I leave her in a storage unit. I have dozens all over this side of the coast.” I smiled to myself. I could only tell a spouse or a priest these secrets. How it amused me to be spilling them to a priest.

“I see, and when you have to get close to get the job done?”

“I clean up after myself. Rarely do I end up bloody.” Only when I was in

a hurry to see him.

I pulled into a drive and shut the engine off.

“Where are we?” he asked, turning towards me.

“I bought it.” Ten minutes from his parish, tucked against the shore, wilderness, land, leaves, and a river. It had cost a good portion of my savings, but what else would I spend twenty years of paychecks I’d deposited into my account on?

My expenses were bare.

“You jest?” He pushed open the door tentatively, venturing onto the front walk to get a look at her. The front wrap-around porch hugging a lovely old Victorian prize.

“No. She’s mine. I’ll be here more than there.” I meant D.C.

He smiled, and our world was finally right.

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ABOUT J.R. GRAY

Gray is a cynical Chicago native, who drinks coffee all day, barely sleeps, and is a little too fashion obsessed. He writes romance sprinkled with kink, and hot as hell, dark and angsty characters because everyone deserves a happily ever after.

J.R. Gray is Gender Queer and prefers He/Him/His pronouns.

[Read Pretty Wreck a filthy rock star, age-gap, enemies to lovers romance.](#)

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SWEET WICKED THING

JESSIE WALKER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Check out the *Sweet Wicked Thing* [playlist](#) on Spotify.

Content Warning

Please note that this is **dark** romance. The possible triggers are listed below and do contain spoilers, so if you're comfortable to go in blindly, feel free to skip ahead.

This story contains CSA (on-page, minimally graphic), altered reality/dissociation, violence, murder, references to growing up in an abusive/exploitive system (foster care, juvie), alcohol/drug use, cheating (not between MC's), and rough sex featuring mild exhibition, humiliation/degradation, and physical aggression.

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PROLOGUE

O *ne, two, three...*

I'm on a boat, it's storming, and the waves are thrashing the cabin. It smells like sweat and stale beer, salty and pungent.

I imagine it's my crew pressed up alongside me as we ride out the storm raging outside these four walls. We've been at sea for days, with nothing but the ocean and a bar of soap to wash ourselves. It's hot, humid, and rank.

The rocking picks up, and a sharp twinge sparks at the base of my spine, hollowing out my belly as reality creeps into my fantasy.

...six, seven, eight...

Eleven point five.

He never makes it past eleven point five, not when he's drunk like this.

My eyes are squeezed shut. The pillow is damp against my cheek, and I tell myself it's just sweat. Or maybe some seawater spraying in from a crack in the window.

It's hot in here. It smells.

I'm on a boat, I'm on a boat, I'm on a boat, I chant inwardly.

I'm a fisherman. *No,* a pirate.

...nine...

Pirates are strong. They're deadly and brave. No one messes with pirates.

The mattress squeaks beneath me, and I inhale sharply.

Squeak, inhale.

Squeak, inhale—

Groan.

Block it out, block it out.

I squeeze my eyes shut so tight I feel like my eyeballs might pop.

I'm counting and inhaling, choking on thin, musty air. My fingers are buried so deep in my pillow, the cotton pushes my nails back into my skin. It burns, so I push them in deeper.

Eleven...

But then, there's a noise—a creak—that halts everything, ceasing my lungs with a sharp, high-pitched gasp.

That didn't come from the bed, I realize, as the rocking comes to a stuttered stop.

My eyes fly open, the fantasy shattering.

I'm facing the brown paneled wall of my bedroom, but I know it's the floorboard by the door I just heard. I just *know* it.

And so does the man on top of me.

My much smaller body shudders as he pulls away, relieving the pressure, like pulling a stopper from a drain. The bedframe whines.

“What th—” he starts to growl.

I roll my head over just in time to catch the tiny body flying into the room, one that's even smaller than me.

No!

It's dark, but not so dark that I can't immediately tell who it is.

My eyes widen as I take in the little fists bashing Rick's back and anywhere else he can reach, as the older, much bigger man stumbles back off the bed. His jeans are tangled around his knees, and he nearly falls on his backside, catching himself at the last possible second.

“You little fuckin' shit!”

There's a flash of wide, dark eyes—too big for his tiny face—just as Rick lunges at him. Reaching for him, grubby hands flexed and aimed for my brother's throat.

“Vale,” I breathe just as everything goes black.

Blink.

Glass shatters. A grunt of pain.

Blink.

Squelching sounds climb into my ear.

Blink.

My cheeks hurt. My throat hurts. My hand hurts.

It's *wet*.

Blink.

Someone's screaming. A woman.

But someone is laughing too. It doesn't make sense. Nothing is making sense.

Why does my arm hurt? Why is everything so wet?

A tiny hand tugs on my pajama shirt, and I hear my name whispered. *Aston*. And suddenly, the world explodes into color. A mighty gasp bursts from my lungs, almost like a hiccup.

Red. It's all red.

I'm surrounded by it. Even the foggy brown eyes vacantly staring up at me look red.

Heavy footsteps are thudding up the stairs. A woman is still crying, and someone is still laughing. The world is still rocking, too, just like it was earlier, but the pressure is gone. The pain is gone.

"What did you do?" the sobbing female voice screeches from the doorway, just as several dark figures fill up the room, pushing her out of the way. She screams, "What did you do?!"

"Jesus," someone breathes.

More curses, more sobbing, more...giggling. It seems to be coming from everywhere all at once, all this *noise*. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I register lights flashing through the window—red and blue. Sirens fill up the night—*wee-woo, wee-woo!*

I try to swallow, but when I do, it doesn't feel right, doesn't taste right. It's sharp and bitter, like I was licking old crusty pennies, and it doesn't want to go down. It just keeps coming back up.

Oh, I realize. It's because I'm the one laughing.

Hunching my shoulders, I curl backward, my knees coming up to my chest as I try to bite down on the sounds erupting from my mouth. Something warm and clammy brushes my bare butt, and I tense when I realize what it is, but only for a moment.

Something tells me I won't have to worry about *that* anymore.

I laugh even harder. I can't stop. Even when I bring my warm, wet, sticky hands to my mouth, I can barely keep it all in.

"Son..." I hear someone start to say, their deep voice slowed. Warbly, like it's coming from underwater.

The floor creaks. It always creaks in that spot, right next to the door, and a thought occurs to me.

Vale should've known better.

Stupid, stupid, brave little Vale.

Someone crouches next to me, and I flinch, snapping my head toward the strange man now staring back at me, his furrowed eyes now level with mine.

Cops are here, I realize, finally registering the man's uniform, and all I can think is, *Good. Good, they'll finally take us from here*. Relief softens some of my irritation, quieting the awful sounds coming from my lips.

Suddenly, a high-pitched whining pierces the room, seeming to halt everything around me, including the rocking. My laughter, which was already dimming, breaks off with another sharp, hiccupping gasp.

My head whips to the other side, head cocked as I take in the tiny figure sitting next to me shaking like a leaf. Brown eyes wide and too big for his pale little face.

There he is.

For a second, Vale seems to actually be looking at me, rather than *through* me. But it doesn't last long before he seems to retreat again.

"It's okay," I say, cheeks aching with how hard I try to stop smiling. Laughter bubbles up once more. My vision blurs as I try to keep it all in, but it's no use. "It's okay, Valey."

He doesn't blink. He doesn't move. I can't even be sure he's even breathing. I kind of want to shake him. Slap him, even. If anyone should be freaking out right now, it should be me.

"I got him," I whisper.

His eyes well up with tears.

What a little cry-baby, I think fondly. He's only a year younger than me, but he's still so *little*.

A sharp laugh erupts out of me, this time through my mouth. I quickly press a fist to my lips, like I can shove it back in. But it's no use.

"I got him!" This time, my voice carries, loud and high-pitched, threatening to crack, before it breaks off into another round of giggles.

That old penny taste and smell is stronger than ever with my wet fingers mashed up against my mouth. But I don't really mind.

I got him, I got him, I got him.

It's all I can think, all that matters.

"Son..."

My smile starts to slip again as my eyes dart around aimlessly, somehow taking everything in, but not able to focus on just any one thing.

"...we're gonna need you to come with us," a gentle male voice is saying

somewhere behind me.

I seek out Vale once more, begging him with my eyes for...something; I don't know what.

Why does he seem so far away?

Why do I feel so sad all of a sudden?

All the voices surrounding me seem to tune in and out, making it hard to keep track of who's speaking. My chest squeezes, strangling the sounds still trying to escape up my throat.

This isn't so funny anymore.

"How old is he?" someone asks. This one comes from farther away.

"Twelve, I think. Maybe still eleven," a choked female voice responds.

I know that one. Louise. Our foster mom.

What's left of my smile flattens completely as I think, *I'm twelve now, you stupid bitch.*

My eyes burn.

"Something's never been right with that boy. I mean, look at him!" Her voice breaks on a sob. "Look what he did to my Rick!"

"Rick was bad," I hear myself whisper, still not taking my blurry gaze off Vale's blank face. "Very, very bad."

A stillness sort of blankets the room at my softly spoken words.

Vale whimpers, but otherwise remains frozen.

I sense a body squatting down next to me, big and looming, not unlike the one under me.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Aston," I say absently, frowning. I sniff. "Like the car."

He's bleeding, a voice whispers in my head as I drop my gaze to Vale's lap. His hands are bright red, like he's been finger-painting, but he's too old for that now. He's eleven, almost twelve, like me, but you wouldn't know that just by looking at him.

"Are you hurt?" I hear myself ask, voice cracking in a way I've never heard it.

Nothing.

"He's bleeding," I croak, finally turning to the man crouched next to me. A metal plate over his chest reads *Ferris, J.* My gaze drops to where his hand rests on his belt, just next to a gun and a baton. "My little brother's hurt. Can you help him?"

I lift my gaze to meet the pinched gaze of the officer. Thick, unruly brows

dip low over his eyes. He has a pudgy nose and too-thin lips peeking out under his mustache.

“Yes, we can help him,” he says slowly, carefully. His gaze flits between mine. “But you have to be a good boy and come with us, okay?”

I nod. “Sure.” Whatever gets them to help Vale.

Ignoring the cop’s outstretched hand, I drop my hands to Rick’s motionless chest and use it for leverage as I stand, grimacing when I almost slip on his slick skin. His big gut is all ripped open, spilling blood all over the place.

Realizing I’m still naked from the waist down, I quickly reach down and pull up my underwear and pajama pants, cheeks heating when it occurs to me that everyone just saw my penis.

I loved these pajamas, I think sadly as I scrub my hands on the already stained fabric. They have little spaceships on them. I’ve had them since I started living here when I was six. They don’t really fit me anymore, but they’re mine, all mine. Plus, they’re the only pajamas I have.

“Can I get new pajamas?” I say, wrinkling my nose when I realize my hands are still stained red. It’s getting all crusty around my nails. It’s sticky too. I hate being sticky. “Can I shower too? It’s all sticky.”

A beat passes before Officer Ferris says, “Yes. You can have all of that as long as you cooperate.”

Frowning, I glance up at him. *Why wouldn’t I?* I wonder silently. I’m always a good boy. It was Rick who was bad.

Officer Ferris is staring at me, no, *into* me, like he’s trying to figure something out. I stare back until my eyes start to cross, not sure what else to do. People are always staring at me, and it’s not nice.

His throat bobs and he nods, like he’s found whatever it was he was looking for. But he doesn’t seem too happy about it as he turns his head, dipping his chin to talk into his walkie-talkie.

Vale and I had walkie-talkies once. I stole money from Louise a couple years ago, not long after Vale moved in. She was passed out in her recliner, and never seemed to notice that the twenty-dollar bill from her wallet was missing. Probably thought she spent it on more of that powder stuff she was always melting on a spoon.

It was the first time I got Vale to smile. He doesn’t smile often. He did even less so back then. But he lit up like a Christmas tree when I showed him what I bought for us.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Louise rushes out, her nasally voice cracking.

I glance over to find two officers pulling her arms behind her. I hear the snick of metal—handcuffs. Her red-rimmed eyes are wide as they dart around. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t—”

“Ma’am, you have the right to remain silent...”

I let their voices fade as I turn to face Officer Ferris once more. “She was bad too.”

He nods and glances down, lashes twitching over his now hidden eyes.

Lifting a hand, he wiggles his fingers, gesturing at something behind me.

Hands grab my arms from behind, and I widen my eyes. “What—”

“You sure about this?” someone asks as I feel the distinct sensation of handcuffs hooking over my own wrists.

Officer Ferris swallows and meets my gaze once more. “Just a precaution,” he says tightly, thickly, like he’s not happy about this. “You understand, right? We’re just doing our jobs. It’s to keep everyone safe.”

I stare at him, ignoring the way my heart starts to pound loudly in my ears. “But you’ll help Vale?”

His mouth thins, disappearing completely under his mustache. Nodding, he says, “Yes. He’ll be taken care of. You have my word.”

Inhaling deeply, I nod. “Okay.”

Turning as far as the cops let me, I search for my brother. He’s still seated on the floor, staring at nothing once more. A woman—a female cop I didn’t see before—squats down next to him, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders.

He’s shaking, so he must be cold. But it’s summer, so maybe he’s coming down with something. Maybe that’s why he came into my room in the first place—he wasn’t feeling well. It wouldn’t be the first time he snuck into my bed at night, but usually it’s way later, after Rick has left, when he can’t sleep.

“Hey, Valey,” I say.

At first, nothing.

But then he blinks and lifts his gaze just enough to peek up at me through his lashes.

“I’ll see ya later, okay?” I say with a smile. It feels stiff, but I’m not quite sure why. “Everything’s gonna be better now, you’ll see.”

His eyes widen and he starts to shake his head, his face turning a weird

yucky color. His mouth opens as if he wants to say something, but nothing comes out. Not even that high-pitched whining sound from before.

“Let’s go, kid,” Officer Ferris says gruffly, just as the cop who handcuffed me steps into my line of sight, blocking Vale off right as his big, nearly black eyes start to fill with something that looks a lot like fear.

My face scrunches up with a scowl, but I bite the inside of my cheeks, refraining from throwing a fit. *They’re going to help him, just be good*, that voice in my head assures me as they start guiding me out of the room and down the hall toward the steps. *He’ll be okay*.

I do hope they let us live together again though. Maybe if we tell them we’re actually brothers, they won’t separate us. I really, really don’t want to be separated from him.

I feel twitchy at the thought.

Don’t they know he’s mine?

The first floor is dark as we descend the steps, opening beneath us like a giant black pit. It’s broken up only by the flicker of red and blue lights coming in through the thick slats of blinds covering the windows downstairs.

Officer Ferris mutters something into his walkie, just as his fingers on my shoulder tighten the faintest bit, holding me steady as we reach the bottom step.

It’s then, and only then, that Vale starts screaming.

ASTON

Six Years Later

The Eastern Tailed Blue.
Cupido comyntas.

No bigger than the tip of my finger, their light blue gossamer wings flutter over the foliage growing along the chain-link fence.

Distinguished from its other blue brethren by its small thin tail, these little guys are also known for being one of the few species of butterflies that actually flock to humanity. Thriving in areas others would consider *disturbed*. Dangerous and inhabitable.

Most adult Tailed Blues lose their itty-bitty tails, including the one fluttering over the patch of weeds and white wildflowers before me. *Pity*, I think, wondering what awful predator would dare maim such a delicate, unobtrusive creature.

I cock my head from where I sit cross-legged a couple inches away, overgrown grass and weeds curling up around me. Sunlight beats gently down on my face through the thin canopy of trees stretching out over the barbed wire keeping me in, offering very little warmth.

But I'm not yet ready to go inside.

Winter will be here all too soon, which means no more butterflies, and even *less* yard time than I have already for five long months. Maybe only four if global warming is on our side, and spring arrives early, breathing new life into their summer home as it welcomes these fragile creatures back north.

Not like you'll still be here, a voice singsongs, reminding me, prompting a

smile to creep up my face.

No siree, I'll have a garden of my own to tend to by then.

A loud buzzing sound echoes across the small yard, coming from the big gray building behind me, telling me time's up.

Mumbling the quietest of curses, I slowly reach a hand out, approaching the butterfly still lingering by a patch of white petals. The others had dispersed at the sudden noise, leaving their brother all alone.

"Hey, little buddy," I whisper under my breath, curling my finger inward, beckoning it to me.

The butterfly's wings twitch a little harder, like it's readying for lift-off, and I freeze, holding my breath.

Wetting my lips with my tongue, I watch, utterly enthralled, as the butterfly seems to debate with itself. Shifting side to side, wings catching on the slight breeze. Somewhere over my head, a crow caws. Leaves rustle. A car drives by beyond the trees, bass thumping rhythmically, before whooshing away.

Maybe it's deaf, I think, as the butterfly doesn't seem to be startled.

"That's it," I say near-soundlessly as the tip of one gossamer wing brushes my knuckle. "Come to Daddy."

My mouth ticks up as the butterfly crawls up my first knuckle. Gently, slowly, so as not to disturb it, I bring my hand up so it's at eye-level. Sunlight flickers over its pale blue wings, drawing out the faintest shade of gray mixed in.

"Gotcha," I say, smiling.

And in a move too quick for the butterfly to sense, I bring my other hand up, and with well-practiced ease and precision, I pinch its thorax between my thumb and pointer finger, crushing his little itty-bitty heart, and snuffing the itty-bitty life out of him.

"It's okay," I coo quietly. "Quick and painless, right?" I admire its still body. The taut, yet slackened wings fanned out from its narrow, withered body.

Perfect, I think, pride puffing up my chest.

"Yo, James, pick up the pace before they yeet your ass back into the pit."

I stiffen.

Fucking Marshall.

Snapping my head around, I bare my teeth at him as I emphasize, "It's *Saint James.*"

Marshall knocks shoulders with Vinny, one of his little lackeys. “Nothin’ saint-like about this one.” They both snicker and curl their fingers over their head, making the sign of devil horns.

Seriously?

“That wasn’t what Vinny was saying when I was sucking his dick last week.”

They both freeze at my words. Vinny’s face turns beet red, and he sputters, “Wh-what? Fuck you, fag. I’d nev—”

“Daniels,” someone barks. “Kline. Get inside.”

Vinny glares down at the ground and shuffles away. Marshall gives me one last scathing once-over and spits on the ground.

I roll my eyes and turn away. *The nerve of some people.*

“Aston...” a deep familiar voice starts to warn.

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’,” I mutter.

Climbing to a stand, I take great care not to lose my new little friend or break his wings as I slip it up my sleeve, letting it rest just over my fluttering pulse-point. I make sure to tuck my thumb inside my sleeve, cinching the fabric around the heel of my palm so I don’t lose it.

Many a friend haven’t survived this trip in the past, what with having to hide my treasures in my sleeves, fists, pockets, or mouth in order to get it safely to my room.

Not that dead butterflies are considered contraband, technically—at least to my knowledge—but I figure it’s best not to draw attention to myself. I’m sure Dr. Zahiri—the center’s on-call psychiatrist, and the bane of my sheltered existence—wouldn’t look too kindly on my little hobby after all the so-called *progress* I’ve made.

Some people just have no appreciation for the arts.

Bruce, one of the guards who I don’t actually fully despise, waits for me with a dull look of impatience. As usual, I’m the last straggler, but I know they won’t punish me for this, even if I take my time, fluttering my fingers over weeds and bushes sprouting up from the ground. Breathing in the fresh air like it could be my last.

I only go to the pit—solitary—when I do something really, *really* bad. And it’s been a while since I’ve done anything *that* bad.

Usually, if I step out of line, or have what they call an *episode*, they’ll just transfer me to Ashwood instead for a quick little “reset”. Like I’m a computer or something in need of a reboot.

But the other delinquents floating in and out of here don't know that. It would seem my reputation often precedes me—how, I have no idea, but I don't bother trying to change their minds. Fear offers far more protection in a place like this than anything else. Especially when you're a scrawny, skinny thing like me, standing at only five-seven with little to no muscle mass.

And it's not like I *can't* be as bad as they think I can. It's not like their fears are totally unfounded. These days, I'd just much rather have them know what I'm capable of than risk well and truly fucking up my chances of getting out of here.

Only one more week. Then I'll be eighteen, and it's *sayonara* bitches.

"Aston. Stop dragging your feet."

Sighing, I lift my gaze up through my lashes to find Bruce watching me with a knowing look on his rugged face. Not exactly handsome, but better-looking than some of the other guards. He's also one of the nice ones. Gentle, even if he has to pretend to be all stern and scary when the others are around.

"Did you know Tillie has a garden at home?" I say as I stop in front of him. "She's going to teach me how to take care of it when I move in with her."

His brows do a weird little dance and he shakes his head. "I'm sure it'll be great. Let's go."

Not waiting for a response, he steps to the side, gesturing for me to walk in ahead of him.

All the guards call me by my first name, and it's not because I've blown almost half of them. It's just less of a mouthful than *St. James*, I suppose.

I've also been here longer than most of the others, so we're practically family. A kinky one, but a family nonetheless.

Plus, at least Aston is my *real* name. St. James was only given to me because that was the name of the church where I was dumped as a baby. In nothing more than the blanket embroidered with my name and a bright red rosary placed on top of my chest, I became known as Aston St. James, ward of the state of Indiana.

(No, the irony doesn't escape me.)

Whistles and stomping greet my ear when we pass through the rec room. The television is on, playing some football game that seems to have nearly my entire B-Wing cohort in a tizzy.

"Hey, Ass-ton," someone yells out, taking great care to make sure *everyone* hears the way he emphasizes my name. I glance over to find it's

none other than Ty, my newest arch-nemesis. Why am I not surprised?

He cackles as if what he said is the most original thing since sliced bread.
Puh-lease.

Bruce squeezes my shoulder in one of his big meaty hands, giving me a little shove to keep going. A silent warning to ignore the dickhead.

He knows Ty's been testing me for weeks now, all because he overheard I'm not only aging out soon, but because I'll be moving in with my caseworker. One who just happens to be his as well, along with eight other lucky ingrates currently glaring at me from various spots around the crowded room.

Sucks to suck, boys.

As if summoned, a loud female voice rings out from the doorway just ahead of me, silencing the room in a heartbeat. "That's enough, Tyberius."

Someone *oohs* at the use of Ty's full name.

Matilda Jennings.

My sweet, little ol' Tillie.

Standing at five-foot-nothing, with bright red hair chopped short around her ears, her command of an entire room of baby criminals is half the reason why I adore her to no end.

The other half being that I'm her favorite, something that's widely known around here.

Heck, the woman is taking me in to live with her and her stuffy husband, rather than leaving me to fend for myself on the streets. If anyone is deserving of the name *Saint*, it's her.

Maybe if the others stopped acting like uncivilized shitheads once in a while, they would've realized this could've been them too. That she wanted to be on their side. But *nooo*, they just had to go and keep making things harder for themselves. Getting into fights, sneaking contraband, flipping their lid when the cafeteria ran out of pudding cups.

Didn't anyone tell them that no one likes a lost cause?

Tillie meets my gaze, blue eyes unreadable. I watch as they flicker toward my shoulder, growing harder just as her mouth tightens.

As if realizing he's still touching me—not only that but caressing my neck with his thumb—Bruce pulls back his hand like I burned him.

I smirk.

Tillie's fiery gaze meets mine, but I know her anger isn't directed toward me. Not really. It's not *my* fault the guards are so obsessed with me. They're

the ones who should be ashamed for being so weak-willed. From the second I turned sixteen, they've been on me like bees to honey.

A couple even before that, but we don't talk about those.

And despite what the state might say, age of consent means little to nothing in a place like this. Sixteen, or even a week away from turning eighteen, it doesn't matter. It's illegal as fuck, not that anyone cares.

Well, Tillie cares. But she doesn't have a penis. And waving that around is about the only way to get anything done around here. Trust me on that.

"That'll be all, Officer Hammil," she says shortly. Tilting her head, she quietly signals for me to follow her, before turning her back on me.

As I take one last cursory glance around the room, I don't miss Ty glaring holes into my head. I lift my fingers into a V and waggle my tongue between them.

He lurches forward, face reddening.

Not waiting around to see what happens, I quickly skip off to catch up with Tillie. Hoping my new little friend tucked safely against my wrist can wait just a little bit longer.

"Will there still be a garden?"

Tillie blows out a breath, mouth thinning into a smile as her gaze softens on mine. "We'll make one."

I should've known there was a reason she was here. It's Sunday, and she's never here on Sundays.

Something soft tickles my wrist, making me realize I've clenched my hands in my lap, curling my wrist over the crushed butterfly still sitting against my pulse.

Shoot.

Willing myself to relax, I take a deep breath.

This isn't a bad change, I tell myself as I subtly adjust my sleeve under the table, wiggling my fingers, and ensuring my new friend is okay. It's a silent mimic of Tillie's words from only moments ago, after she dropped the bomb on me that she and her husband were moving.

"This isn't a bad change, Aston. This is actually really good for us."

Yeah, for you, but what about me? I wanted to ask, barely holding myself

back.

Apparently, money's been pretty tight for a while since her husband, Walter, was let go from his old job. But most schools aren't exactly chomping at the bit for new principals, so he had to expand his search.

I *knew* this—vaguely—I just didn't think it would take them multiple states away.

Now is he not only uprooting *my* plans, but Tillie's too.

Not that the other dickheads here deserve her.

But still. She does well for herself here, despite not having a penis to wave around. She's earned her respect. Maybe if she had a couple more years to prove herself, they'd even start listening to her, rather than just put up with her.

"I...I am still coming with you...right?" I ask quietly, finally giving voice to the worries thrashing around my skull.

Tillie's blue eyes instantly widen as she starts shaking her head.

Well, fuck, I think with a wince, my vision blurring, much to my horror. *Knew this was too good to be true.*

"Aston, oh my God, *no*, that's not—Of *course* you're coming with us," she's quick to rush out, assuring me in a strong, adamant voice. "That's not changing."

Then in a move that startles as much as it surprises me, she reaches across the table, as if to grab for my hand. I'm sure it's meant to be comforting, but it catches me off guard. So much so that I flinch back, nearly throwing myself out of my chair.

Her face bunches, almost like her feelings are hurt.

But I can't exactly find it in me to care. Not when I've spent the last three months counting down the days to when I'd get to go live with her in the blue-shuttered house by the lake. One with a garden and a porch swing. I have pictures of it in my room, taped to my wall for me to look at when I'm too hyper to sleep.

It was supposed to be *my* house. My first real home. One that's so much nicer-looking than anything I remember living in as a kid. And definitely nicer than this cold, sterile place, or the clinic I've been sent to for little vacations over the years. *Med holidays* is what my team of shrinks called it.

Once Tillie collects herself, she repeats more firmly, "Of course you're still coming with us, Aston." A beat passes. "Look, I know how much you were looking forward to living in that house..." She watches me closely.

“But I think you’ll really love it here. You’ll still have your own room, and guess what? It even has its own attached bathroom.”

But this wasn’t the plan! I want to insist, digging my foot in the ground like I could keep myself from stomping like a toddler.

I barely hear her as I bite the inside of my cheek—hard. I don’t need her or anyone else to tell me how ridiculous I’m being. I *know* I am.

Her lips purse, telling me I’m not doing a very good job at containing my annoyance.

I screw my eyes shut, tight enough to see stars, and then take a deep breath in through my nose. Long and deep until I can’t take any more air in, and then I release it.

I can’t screw this up. Not now. Now when I’m so *close*, I can literally taste freedom on my tongue.

“It has a huge yard,” she says quietly. “Bigger than the one you would’ve had by the lake.”

Everything in me stills, even my thoughts.

Tillie, Tillie, Tillie...

Just when I think she’s finally going to disappoint me, she reminds me why she’s outlasted just about everyone else who’s tried to wiggle their way in.

When I open my eyes, I find hers twinkling back at me knowingly. “Even bigger than the one here.”

I eye her thoughtfully. “Really?” The one here is pretty fucking big, so...

She nods, smiling, like she knew all along that’s what it would take to win me over.

Bitch, I think, a smile twitching along my lips.

“There’s a creek, too, just along the far back of the property. Not quite the same as a lake, but...” She shrugs. “It’s quiet. Peaceful. Quieter than where we live now, even.”

It’s not like you were going to swim anyway, a dry voice reminds me. Unless I wanted to make a complete and utter fool out of myself.

Would be pretty hard to drown in a creek though. At least there’s that.

Biting her lip, Tillie hesitates before adding, “And I think...I think it might be good for you to, maybe, I don’t know”—her mouth ticks up ruefully—“go to school?”

Say what now?

I blink, not quite sure I heard her right.

“School,” I reply blankly, not expecting that.

She nods. “I checked with your tutors to see where you’re at, and you’re not as far behind as I thought.” She smiles. “You’d be a senior.”

“A senior,” I repeat, testing the word out, like it’s something foreign. So *only one year behind...*

“Just think, you’d get to go to prom, you’d get to walk across a stage to receive your diploma...” Her voice trails off with a sort of pointedness I’m not quite sure I understand.

I mean, hypothetically, I do. Hypothetically is how I understand most things.

Mouth dry, all I can do is stare at her as she starts talking again, her voice pitching with excitement as she starts going on and on about all the things I never thought I’d have. But I only half-listen, daring not to hope too hard.

High school.

Prom.

Graduation.

Things I only ever got to see in movies and read about in books.

When I knew I’d be here until I turned eighteen, I just figured I’d be too old for all that stuff by the time I got out.

“Walter already spoke with the Dean—it’s a prep school, so they have one of those—and the guidance counselor, and they’re willing to...try,” she says gently, if not a little pointedly as she tilts her head meaningfully. “You’ve improved so much this last year. It’s been so long since you’ve gotten yourself into trouble.”

Images flash across my head of all the times I got thrown into the pit because I lost my cool. Not that I really remember much. Sometimes things just get a little fuzzy, and when I come to, there just so happens to be...blood. Sometimes a lot.

I shudder.

“Aston.”

My eyes snap open. I didn’t even realize I closed them again.

Oopsie.

Tillie eyes me warily.

Clearing my throat, I give her a small, demur nod. “I’m fine, I just...” Shaking my head, I scrape around for the words I want. “I didn’t think I’d ever get to go to high school.” I even get my voice to crack for good measure.

Her features soften, her gaze turning far less worried, and more sad.

Bingo. “Well, then this is your chance to see how the other half live. Trust me, you’ll probably realize it’s not all it’s chalked up to be.” She laughs a little at that.

Ignoring her, I simply ask, “And if I’m bad?”

Her smile fades just as quick as it came, and she doesn’t say anything right away.

Dipping my gaze, I watch her swallow, and for a second, I see it. That fear. That deep, ingrained *knowing*. But she’s quick to shove it away with her usual cheery optimism. Whether it’s out of sheer stubbornness or sheer stupidity, I can never tell. And I’ll probably never have the balls to ask.

“This is your *only* chance,” she says, an unmistakable gravity to her words, almost like a warning. It belies the bright smile still plastered across her pale, round face.

And I know she’s not just talking about high school, but my future in general.

Tillie might have hope for me still, but I think we both know she only sees what she wants to. And I don’t have it in me to ruin that. I don’t have it in me to be selfless enough to warn her, to make her see what deep down she knows to be true.

That I’m broken.

That I’m not *good*.

I think of the butterfly still tucked safely against my wrist, its little body I crushed with my fingers. I think of the others folded in my notebook back in my room, the one hidden in a hole in my mattress.

Chills spiral down my spine as other memories threaten to rise, ones filled with sticky warmth and vacant dishwater eyes and flashing red and blue lights.

One...two...

I don’t need a psychiatrist or a courtroom to tell me I’m dangerous.

“What do you say, Aston?” Tillie asks, eyes narrowed, almost like she’s testing me.

You’re gonna fail, a voice singsongs, one that sounds a lot like *mine*.

Or rather that...*thing* inside me.

Its promise settles inside me like a boulder, and yet...

Glancing down at the table, I feel a small smile creep up my face. “Do you think they’ll let me join Drama Club?”

When I peek my gaze up through my lashes, I find her blinking, gaping,

clearly not having expected that.

But then she throws her head back, letting out that twinkling laugh of hers that never fails to make me feel all gooey. Softening up all the sharp things inside me.

Tilting my head, I watch the way the tendons in her neck stand out, as if begging for my fingers to crush them. Just like my butterflies.

My mouth waters at the thought, at the images playing out in my head. My heart pounds, fingers trembling as I dig my nails into my palms, imagining it's her skin breaking open for me. It's just...so...*smooth*.

It should be a crime for skin to be so smooth and soft-looking and blemish-free.

But I quickly shove it all down, way down, where no one, least of all me, will find it.

Tillie's good, I remind myself, remind that *thing* inside me, the thing that isn't *right*.

We like Tillie. We want to keep her.

And like hell, if I'm not going to make the best of this chance at normalcy while I can.

Who knows? Maybe this is just what I need.

A fresh start.

Shucks, maybe I'll even get voted Prom Queen.

VALE

One Month Later

“**R**iviera, go long!”

It takes me a split second longer than it should to realize that means *me*, and I quickly run to catch the unexpected pass.

You’d think after five years, I’d be used to my new last name. Hell, it’s printed across my jersey, taped across my locker. I write it on every test and paper, and hear it shouted and cheered at every single game.

It *should* be as apart of me as my first name.

It shouldn’t feel like a lie.

Loud whoops go out around the field as I catch a perfect spiral. Rolling my eyes, I toss the football behind me, not waiting to see who will stumble forward to catch it.

Hands come out to slap mine as I jog over to the bench like I just scored the game-winning touchdown. When really, we’re just warming up before we kick off our biggest, most attended game of the season, one that starts in less than an hour.

The stands are already filling up in a vibrant sea of black, purple, and gray, the official colors of the Grady Prep Warriors. It’s our turn to host this year’s Bell Game—an annual face-off between us and our rivals across the river, in which the victorious team gets claim of the revered Crowley church bell until the other team can win it back.

There’s a ceremony and everything. Then, tomorrow, the big, bronze monstrosity will be loaded back up on a cart and rolled across the bridge

connecting the town.

Well, that is only if we lose.

Starling High School hasn't had a turn with the bell in three years, and we don't plan on giving it up anytime soon.

"Yo." A shoulder knocks into mine, pulling me out of my thoughts. A massive fucking arm reaches around me for the pile of water bottles. I don't even have to look to know the arm belongs to Fletch, one of my best friends, and our star defensive lineman.

"Sup," I say, popping the sports cap on my bottle with my teeth, before tipping my head back and shooting a stream of water down my throat.

Fletch looks around the stadium with hard, determined eyes. "Gonna be a good game. A blow-out." He nods. "Gonna crush them, I can already tell."

I snort softly at that. "Yeah, how's that?"

He cuts me a sideways look, black paint smudged across his bronzed cheeks. It's the end of September, but the sun's been brutal today; not so much hot as bright. He points to his temple, where his sweat glistens just near his buzzed hairline. "I can just feel it."

"With your brain?"

He nods, grinning like an idiot. "With my *soul*."

"And your soul's in your brain?"

He steps back, cupping his junk protectively through his gray compression pants, and thrusts obscenely into the air. "No, man, it's *alllll* in here."

I chuck my bottle at his head, and he ducks just before it could hit him in the nose. He's still laughing as he turns and jogs away to go warm up with his linemen.

"Dick," I mutter with a rueful shake of my head as I remove my helmet.

"That's not very nice," my other best friend, Casey, says. I didn't realize he joined me. He plops down on the bench, legs spread out before him, heels of his cleats digging into the grass. "Good catch," he pants, smirking through his face guard as he glances my way.

"Nice throw," I say dryly.

As the quarterback to his running back, usually I'm the one barking commands at *him* and throwing balls his way. Not the other way around.

We shoot the shit while we wait for the others to run their drills. Soon, we'll be migrating to the locker rooms for last-minute stretching, wrapping, and pre-game rituals. Coach will do his little speech to get us all hyped up,

and then it's go-time.

It's one of my favorite parts of the game. That anticipation just inside the tunnel before we get the go-ahead to run full-steam ahead onto the field. Heart racing. Chest vibrating. Music blaring from the speakers, warring with the thundering crowd as we explode through whatever fancy-ass banner the cheerleaders put together for that week.

Never fucking gets old, even if everything else about high school has.

"Hey, who's that talking with your dad?"

Frowning, I turn my head to follow his gaze.

Over by the concession stand, I can just make out the first three letters of my last name scrolled across a purple jersey. With his back to me, he faces off with some stiff in a suit who looks flustered.

My frown only deepens when I realize whatever they're talking about has got my dad throwing his hands around, before jabbing a finger in the general direction of the field. I can't see his face, and yet it's clear he's pissed about something.

The hell?

Casey whistles low under his breath.

It's not so much that my dad is angry that has me concerned. It's that he's *visibly* angry.

Quentin Riviera is nothing if not carefully controlled. Poised. Hell, I don't think I've ever seen him this animated in all the years I've known him. Even back before he first adopted me, when he had no choice but to stand in front of a courtroom and defend the people who failed me—the *system*—in a state-level court case that reached national news, he wasn't this... expressive.

He won the case, because of course he did. His hand wasn't forced by the state for nothing. The man is a ruthless, callous force to be reckoned with when he has to be.

But despite what prosecutors might say, he isn't heartless.

Hell, to make up for what he had to do, he adopted me. Did what he could to right such a wrong, by saving one of its victims from winding up in another shitty home.

"Vale."

Right. Casey asked a question.

"No," I say in a harsh exhale. Shaking my head, I don't take my eyes off my dad and the unfamiliar man. *Seriously, who wears a fucking suit to a football game?* "I don't."

“That’s our new principal, Mr. Jennings.”

Both Casey and I snap our heads over to find one of the rookies looking off where we just were. He stands with one cleated foot resting on the empty edge of the bench, body turned toward the stands.

“How do you know that?” Casey asks.

Taking a swig of water, the younger kid shrugs before elaborating. “My mom told me. She’s on the school board. I guess the Dean finally found someone to replace O’Malley.”

I glance back over in the direction of the concession stand.

My dad’s gone now, but this Mr. Jennings guy isn’t alone anymore. He’s now been joined by a woman I didn’t spot before. She’s short, wearing a purple Warriors baseball hat over bright red hair that’s been tied into short pig-tails sticking out from under her ears.

Next to her, a lanky guy who’s probably about our age, with floppy golden-brown hair that glints under the sun, stands with his skinny pale arms swinging at his sides as he looks around. Unlike the woman, he just wears a solid black t-shirt that’s too big for his frame over light-washed jeans.

My eyes narrow.

“Oh shit,” the sophomore says. I think his name might be Jake, but I honestly can’t recall. I just know he’s new to the team this year, and he’s a starting lineman. “That must be our new charity case. Mom said the board’s pissed, but the Dean’s allowing it.”

“What do you mean?” Casey says.

My brow furrows as I take in the way the kid’s eyes widen as they seem to be taking everything in. It’s almost like he’s never been to a fucking football game before; he looks mesmerized. Like a little kid in a candy store. He can’t be much younger than me, but there’s just something about him, something...childish? Not quite innocent, but animated.

“Apparently, this guy’s been in juvie for the last five years. Heard he’s a total nut-job. A serial killer in the making.” He chuckles at that, but it’s a wary sound. Like whatever he heard worried him more than he’s letting on.

I stiffen, but I’m not sure why at first. Objectively, the kid looks about as dangerous as a pixie stick. I mean, sure, there’s something...odd about him. Something to his mannerisms that has my instincts on high-alert, but it’s not like—

No, I realize abruptly, watching as this new guy freezes, cocking his head to the side as his gaze snaps toward somewhere off to the right, toward the

stands.

Not odd.

Familiar.

Fuck. Me.

Casey huffs from my other side. “And they’re letting him go to school here?”

“Apparently Mr. Jennings’ wife over there is some kind of caseworker. She vouched for him, claimed he’s stable, I don’t know. Not really sure why the Dean’s allowing it, but maybe it looks good for the school or something...”

They continue to talk back and forth over me, but I hardly pay them any notice as all my attention hones in on the guy practically bouncing on his toes.

My mouth dries, as all the blood seems to flood to my head, rushing through my ears. Memories I’ve kept shelved in the back of my mind sneak forward, sharp and distorted, like shards of a mirror glinting in the sun.

The images aren’t clear enough to pull me under, but clear enough to warrant warning bells.

This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all.

“What’s his name?” I hear myself growl, my voice unnecessarily rough even to my own ears.

A beat passes before Jake or whatever-his-name-is answers, “The new principal? I said, it’s Jen—”

“No. The kid.”

“Oh. Uh, um, I-I don’t know,” he manages to stutter out. He quickly adds, “Mom never told me. Just said he’d be starting up soon as a senior. He’s older, I guess, eighteen already. Should have already graduated, but I guess juvie put him behind.”

Not younger than me then. Which means...

At that exact moment, the guy standing a good thirty feet away seems to realize he’s being watched. Talked about. His head snaps over to where we sit on the bench, his jittery movements stilling as he straightens to his full height.

He’s too far away for me to make out his eye color, but I don’t need to see them to know they’re green, bordering on gray, as they narrow our way.

No, *my* way. He’s looking right fucking at me. And to my horror, I’m helpless to turn away.

Even as the two guys next to me curse, and hastily turn around, I find myself frozen. Locked in place. Held hostage by nothing more than that familiar, penetrating gaze, and something else, something deeper.

Something forgotten.

His mouth ticks up, and my stomach bottoms out, landing somewhere near my feet.

A chill spreads down my spine, pimpling my sweat-slicked arms, as I realize that's not *all* that holds me hostage.

I clench my hands together in my lap, digging my blunt nails into my skin. As if that could somehow ward off the itch crawling through my body, boiling my blood. As if that could stop my too-tight compression pants from growing tighter at the thought of claiming that sinfully pretty mouth for myself.

His head cocks, sunlight bouncing off his golden-brown hair. I can't help but feel like he's sniffing me, even from way over there, sussing out his prey.

Or worse, he recognizes me too...

And senses the reaction I'm having to him.

It can't be. It fucking can't be. This isn't fucking happening.

Before I can even begin to process either possibility, someone appears in my line of sight, just on the other side of the chain-link fence, blocking out my view.

"Hey, babe!"

I quickly jump to a stand, startled out of my revelry as I blink my immediate surroundings back into focus.

Seth's fingers curl around the metal rungs of the fence as I dart over to him.

"What are you doing here?" I all but hiss, my voice harsher than usual. Behind me, someone makes kissy sounds—probably Casey, the dumbass—but I hardly pay him any notice.

Seth's brown eyes widen, filling with something like hurt, before narrowing with a flash of familiar anger. "Nice to see you too."

Blowing out a breath, I try not to be obvious as I press against the fence and glance over my boyfriend's shoulder. Curling my fingers with Seth's, I say, distractedly, softer this time, "Sorry, just lost in my head. You know what it's like before a game."

He's still fucking watching me.

"I thought you were tutoring," I say through numb lips, feeling like my

pulse is seconds away from punching out of my throat.

In my periphery, Seth shakes his head with a quiet huff. “I texted you. Calliope needed to get home early, and...”

His voice fades into the background as all my attention lasers back in on the familiar stranger. Jake’s words play back through my head on a loop.

Juvie...last five years...

Nut-job.

Serial killer in the making.

Eighteen.

Memories push their way up to the surface, this time more vivid than they’ve been in years.

Pale, gray skin. Wide, vacant eyes.

Blood.

So much fucking blood.

There’s a wet, squelching sound, and my hand burns, it stings, flooding with warmth—

“V-Vale?”

My eyes squeeze shut, and I barely manage to hold back my flinch.

How the fuck did he find me?

“You’re hurting me.”

Releasing Seth’s fingers like he burned me, I’m only vaguely aware of him bringing his hand to his chest, massaging and flexing his fingers.

“Sorry,” I mutter, lifting my hand to my face, ignoring the way it trembles as I pinch the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger.

My gut hollows as I almost expect the digits to be wet and sticky and smelling of pennies. Relief is instant when all I catch is a whiff of sweat and dirt.

I’m not there.

“Are you okay?” I hear dimly, Seth’s voice almost piercing as the sights and sounds of the field surge forward, the present once more returning to me. Sharper than it should be.

Knowing Seth’s watching me closely, too closely, I will the tension in my shoulders to unwind, and my heart to slow down.

It’s been years now since I thought about that night, or the boy who lurks in the deepest corners of my memories. The one who once lurked around the edges of my sleep.

“Yeah,” I say quietly, pasting on a look of indifference as I drop my hand

back at my side. This time, I don't tear my gaze from my boyfriend's as I plaster on a small smile and say simply, "Headache. Sorry. Came out of nowhere."

His brow pinches like he's not quite sure he believes me.

Fortunately, before he can say anything, Coach blows his whistle and shouts for us to hit the lockers. *Game time.*

Forcing a swallow, I shrug and say, "Gotta go," and make to pull back my other hand.

Seth grips my fingers through the gaps in the fence, tugging me before I can get too far.

Already knowing what he wants, I step forward and meet his lips through a hole in the fence in a quick, chaste kiss.

"Have a good game," he says softly, before pulling back, my weird behavior from only moments ago already forgotten, just like that.

Typical, I think with a quiet huff. Not that I'm complaining. It's moments like these I'm reminded why I've put up with him for so long.

My gaze flicks between his eyes as I nod.

Stepping back, I finally risk one last glance over his shoulder, not even surprised when I find the guy still standing over there. Watching, as if he never looked away, as if he was waiting for me.

His head is tilted almost curiously, as if he's trying to figure something out. Like maybe how he knows me.

Shit. Time to go.

"Thanks," I rush out quietly, absently, to my boyfriend.

Between the black smudges under my eyes, and the name printed across the back of my jersey, I'm not *too* worried I'll be recognized by this familiar stranger. At least not immediately.

And that's only if it's even who I think it is.

For all I know, this kid is no one at all, and he only *thinks* he knows me, because of how I was staring at him first. Perhaps he was just projecting my own obvious uncertainties and finding something in nothing.

Regardless, I'm quick to reach down for my helmet where it rolled across the grass and shove it over my head. Providing some much-needed comfort from his too-watchful gaze.

Without looking back, I turn away and start jogging toward the rest of my teammates.

The tunnel to the locker room looms ahead just as music starts blaring

from the speakers overlooking the field. People cheer, knowing it's nearly time.

I let it all wash over me. The sights, the sounds...

The orange sunlight bearing down on me.

The fresh scent of grass and dirt burning a pathway up my nose.

The pre-game jitters buzzing through my veins.

I let it consume me and eradicate everything else as my cleats eat up the distance, putting me further and further away from my past.

It can't be him, I tell myself strongly.

It can't be. It's just not possible. The universe can't be that sadistic.

Plus, after what he did, after what the cops walked into...

The mess he left...

The way he was *laughing*...

They would be fools to ever let someone like Aston St. James loose.

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VALE

“So, what you’re saying is I’m fucked.”

Dad doesn’t look at me, just stares straight ahead through the windshield, gaze far-off. “Vale...”

Blowing out a breath, I tip my head back against the seat and stare up at the closed moonroof. Processing what this means for us. For *me*.

We won the game by a landslide, just as Fletch predicted, 42-3. Earning a fourth year with the town’s beloved bell. I should be out fucking celebrating right now, not having a meltdown in my dad’s Lincoln Navigator.

It was easy—too easy—to put all thoughts of Aston and the past to the back of my mind, in favor of turning my focus to the field.

If there are two things I’m really fucking good at it, it’s compartmentalizing, and getting what I want.

And what I wanted was to lead my team to victory, and forget all about Aston St. James and all the shit his reappearance would dig up.

Despite winning, though, my brief reprieve from thinking about the latter lasted only about as long as it did to achieve the former. Because no sooner was it that we took to the lockers in a flurry of cheers and chants and raucous celebration, that I got my first close-up look of the guy I was so adamant to convince myself was a stranger. The guy I was so damn *desperate* to believe couldn’t, in any way possible, be *him*.

Aston St. James.

My once-upon-a-time foster brother.

The boy whose life I ruined.

Just outside the tunnel after the bell ceremony, on the opposite side of the

fence, standing amongst a sea of people converging onto the field to offer their congratulations and celebrate with us, he looked unbothered as ever with his hands stuffed in his pockets. The red-haired woman at his side tugging pointlessly at his arm as she hopped around excitedly

Aston didn't look overwhelmed, exactly. If anything, his face was smooth, absent of all emotion. Maybe except for perhaps idle curiosity as he took all the excitement in.

It was such a stark contrast to the last image of him I had in my mind; I was almost convinced it *wasn't* actually him.

I absently met handshakes and fist bumps of people I knew, but barely registered greeting. Everything around me seemed to fade, growing farther and farther away, as I drew closer to where he stood. Heart racing. Gut in my throat.

I had to walk past him. There was no getting around it. It was the only way into the locker room, other than walking around the field and using the entrance under the bleachers. The guys would notice. It would only draw more attention to my weird behavior.

So I grinned and beared through it, praying to whatever powers that be my roiling gut was wrong.

Even when his green-gray gaze met mine through a throng of people.

Even when he hesitantly lifted a hand in a stilted, unsure wave.

I didn't let a single muscle on my face move, even if inside, I was freaking the fuck out.

If I didn't have my confirmation then and there with that single wave that *was* in fact Aston fucking St. James standing before me, at my school, at my football game, I would've had it not a second later, when my dad came into view. His expression grave and resigned as his gaze flickered between us, before settling on mine.

I barely remember stripping off my uniform and jumping in the shower once I busted into the locker room. Barely remember talking and shooting the shit with the guys, even though I know I did. My smile felt more wooden than usual, my words stilted, but no one seemed to pick up on anything out of the ordinary.

Even after, when I all but ran from the room like the hounds of Hell were on my ass, did anyone say anything other than, "Good game, Riviera," or to ask if I was going to be at McKinley's for the afterparty.

I nodded, smiled, confirmed I'd see them all there, and then I got the fuck

out of there.

My dad was waiting for me in the parking lot, standing outside his fancy-ass black Navigator, hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans. Eyes trained on the ground as if all of the world's problems could be solved in the chipped asphalt of Grady Prep's parking lot.

He barely said a word once he noticed me, other than a quick, "Congrats," as he finally pulled himself away from the SUV to grab my duffel and slap my back.

After tossing it in the backseat, he joined me in the front, sliding behind the wheel.

For a long moment, neither of us said anything. Just watched as game-goers skipped across the lot, finding their cars, and pulling out in a train of unmoving traffic.

Dad started the engine, but made no move to go anywhere.

Finally, I could take it no more, and asked what I already knew, "Is it him?"

A single concise nod is all I got.

"You're not fucked," he says now, voice quiet, and oddly gentle.

I arch a brow, cutting him a look that silently called him out on his bullshit.

"Vale, what happened when you were kids—"

Scoffing, I kick a leg up, resting my heel on the black leather seat. Wrapping my arm around my bent knee, I say, "You really think he's just gonna let bygones be bygones after what happened? After—"

"He had years to—"

I cut him off. "Years to fucking plot his revenge. I mean...you saw the crime scene photos, right? He fucking gutted him. It was a massacre." I wave my fingers. "Not that Rick didn't deserve it, but you know what I mean."

Dad shoots me a harsh look.

Rolling my eyes, I say, "I had every damn right to snoop. It was *my* file."

He huffs. "No, the file just so happened to contain reports of you as a witness and victim. A *minor* at that."

I scowl at that. *Not a fucking victim.*

"How the hell did you figure out the code?"

Shrugging, I mumble, "Maybe try to be less predictable."

He swats the back of my head, and I give him a sharp, narrowed look.

Shaking his head, he says, "I don't know whether to be impressed or

worried.”

“If it helps, I know a really good lawyer.”

By his flat stare, I know he’s not amused.

“Why?” he says after a long moment.

Another shrug. “I was curious.” *Not a complete lie.*

“About what? You do realize how dangerous that could have been for you, right?”

Dangerous for me, or...

Cracking my neck, I shove away that thought and turn to look out the tinted window. With the lot mostly empty now, it seems so much later than it actually is. It’s darker now, too, without all the headlights, making my stone-faced reflection all the more visible.

“Reliving a trauma like that...” Dad’s voice trails off with another long-winded sigh.

“Still here and talking, aren’t I? If I haven’t cracked yet in the two years since I took a peek, I’m pretty sure I’m in the clear.”

He groans. “*Two years? Jesus Christ, Vale.*”

My mouth twitches. I know he’s more annoyed that he had no idea than anything. That I somehow managed to sneak into his office and raid his filing cabinet, without him ever even suspecting.

“You need to be more careful.”

“I was.” *Obviously.*

“You know what I mean,” he says, voice as serious as ever. “You’re not invincible, as much as you like to think you are. No one is.”

Inhaling through my nose, I turn my head to give him a long unimpressed look. “Can I go to the party now? Pretty sure this new development warrants a heavy night of drinking and debauchery.”

He gives me an exasperated look I’ve only seen him wear a handful of times. This whole Aston popping up thing has clearly got him rattled, maybe even more rattled than me.

“You scare me sometimes,” he says with a faint, troubled look in his eye.

Well, that makes one of us.

Fortunately, I have just enough restraint to not voice that retort.

“Sorry,” I say.

Shaking his head, he faces forward once more, and drops a hand to the gear shift. “You could try to sound a little more sincere, you know.”

My lip twitches slightly as I turn to look out the window.

“Apparently,” Dad says, once we’re on the main road, “Aston doesn’t remember a lot about his childhood.”

Frowning, I cock my head. “You mean, he might not remember what happened that night?”

“That’s what I was told.”

I shoot my dad a look. “Our new principal. Jenkins or Jennings or whatever. I saw you arguing with him before the game. Is that what that was about? Aston?”

He blows out a breath, fingers tightening around the wheel as he nods. I’m not surprised. Dad might not play an active role on the board, but he’s a big donor. Of course he’d hear about this before I did.

“Were you gonna tell me?”

He cuts me a sideways look. “I was hoping I could somehow avoid that altogether.”

Ah. “I take it his new daddy wasn’t having it.”

He scowls. “I got the impression he didn’t have much say in the matter. The boy starts school Monday.”

“Then who...” My words trail off as it clicks. That short redhead. His supposed caseworker, if that sophomore kid is to be believed.

“His wife’s apparently very fond of Aston. Has worked with him for years and is certain he’s stable enough.”

“Stable... enough...” I reiterate slowly. “So he’s *not* fucking stable?”

At Dad’s pointed look, I wave him off. *Right*, we already covered that. This isn’t news. Not to us.

Not to those who saw what he did first-hand, whether it be through crime scene photos plastered across a projector in a courtroom...

Or experienced it in its technicolor, high-def, real-time glory.

Hell, I not only *watched* as my twelve-year-old foster brother blindly stabbed a grown man over and over and over again, until you couldn’t see any skin left...

I wore the damn evidence of his sickness.

I was covered in it.

Carried the stains of it in my nail beds for days. The mental scars even longer.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Rick deserved it, but where does the line get drawn?

Glancing down at my palm, I run my thumb over the faint, jagged line

running just over the meat of my thumb. My eyes flick to the little slashes of discoloration down the insides of my fingers, just under the middle knuckles.

“Nothing screams stable quite like pulverizing a man well beyond his last breath,” I mumble, stroking the scar.

Dad inhales sharply. “What was that?”

“Nothing.” I close my hand into a fist and stare straight ahead. “So you think he might not even remember me?”

A pause. I hear him shift in his seat, the leather squeaking. “I didn’t say that.”

“But it’s possible.” Not a question.

He swallows with a loud click, but in my periphery, I see him give a short nod. “Walter said he’d ask his wife about it when Aston isn’t around, but from what I managed to drag out of him, Aston repressed a lot. He apparently...” I sense more than see him cut a glance my way. “Blacks out. When he has an...episode. And then goes on like nothing happened once the dust settles.”

Blinking a couple times, I process what he’s saying.

Inhaling deeply, I stretch my legs out as best I can and tip my head back against the headrest. Lifting a shoulder, I keep my gaze trained forward as I say, “So he didn’t come find me. He’s not here for me.”

“No. Definitely not. It’s just a really poorly-timed coincidence that he ended up here of all places. Walter was...shocked. Definitely caught off guard when I confronted him and brought up what happened back then. One of the reasons they decided he could try school here is because they figured no one would know of him or his story.”

“There’s already rumors. The gossip mongers like to talk. Probably should’ve never even mentioned the juvie thing. What were they thinking?”

Minor or not at the time, the internet hides nothing if you know what to look for.

My phone goes off with a message alert, silencing whatever Dad was about to say. I slide it out of my gym shorts pocket and give the lock screen a cursory glance before it fades to black once more.

“Seth?”

“Yeah.”

“Wondering where you are?”

I huff a noise.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Dad says dryly.

Turning the phone face-down in my lap, I squeeze it with my scarred hand.

The party is in a field just on the outskirts of town, across from where the fairgrounds are. It's only five miles away from Grady Prep, and we're already more than halfway there, so I don't bother replying.

Seth knew I'd be meeting him there after the game. He just assumed I'd be catching a ride with Case or Fletch like I usually do. So he's probably confused as fuck just like the rest of them.

"Vale."

"Don't start."

Dad sighs. "Fine. But you really should put that poor boy out of his misery."

Rolling my eyes, I say, "What did I just say?"

He holds up a hand, thankfully backing off.

We're silent as another mile passes before the woods break off into giant cornfields along either side. My dad eases the SUV to a stop just where there's a short turn-off to the right.

Across the street, there's a big gap in the cornfields where the fairgrounds reside. I can just make out the shape of metal fencing and dark, vacant structures flickering under the full moon.

This time next month it will be all lit up for the annual Crowley Harvest Carnival. A town staple that spans back to when it was founded, or so I've heard.

I fling open the passenger door before my dad can even shift into park, letting in a rush of chilly autumn air into the SUV, and what sounds to be the muffled bass of some screamo song playing from shitty truck speakers somewhere nearby.

My rib cage expands as I jump out, stretching, inhaling the sweet, earthy scent of wood and leaves burning into the night air.

You can't make out the giant-ass bonfire from here, not with the cornfields so tall and dense this time of year. But just over the tops of the stalks, you can make out a couple embers dancing in the night sky. Smoke billowing, expanding, and disappearing.

"Should I expect you home tonight?" my dad asks loud enough to be heard across the front seat.

Gripping the top of the SUV, I duck down slightly to poke my head in to say, "Probably not."

He shakes his head, but is well familiar with this song and dance now. Our relationship might not be of the typical parent and kid variety, but there is a level of respect and trust between us that most don't have.

I know, in a way, it's because I feel like I owe him. I hate that it feels like that, but it is what it is.

Could be a lot worse.

Hell, it *has* been a lot worse.

I might be really bad at doing the whole grateful thing, but I'm not so far up my own ass that I can't see how good I have it.

And it's all because of him.

"I'll call if I need a ride," I say, knowing it's what he needs to hear.

He nods, a silent thank you if there ever was one.

Just as I go to shut the door, he stops me.

"Hey, Vale."

"Yeah?"

"No matter what happens, I have your back. Okay?"

My fingers tense around the doorframe.

I stare at the man who all but raised me. Not only that, but fucking *saved* me in so many ways to count, I don't know where to start.

Throat suddenly dry, I nod.

"Him being here, back in your life...it doesn't have to change anything."

My eyes narrow, because it almost sounds like he's...warning me.

"You saying I probably shouldn't go hunt him down and ask if he wants to be besties?"

His mouth tightens at the corners, bleaching his lips, and it feels like a long moment before he finally responds. "All I'm saying is if it's true and he doesn't remember... I can't imagine it would take much to change that. You get what I'm saying?"

Clenching my back molars, I nod. "Don't poke the beast. Got it."

In other words, stay the fuck away.

He nods back, short and sweet, then throws his hand on the gear shift. "Now go celebrate. You kicked ass tonight, kid. Penn State's gotta be foamin' at the mouth right now."

I give him a small salute. "They better be." Seeing as I've got a full-ride there next year, and don't plan on wasting my rookie season warming the bench.

Throwing the door shut, I turn around and head toward the gap in the

fields that lead toward where all the commotion comes from.

Behind me, I hear Dad get back on the road, his tires kicking up gravel.

Heading in the direction of the party, I replay what he said. Everything he revealed about Aston tonight.

Even if it's just hopeful thinking, my mind keeps snagging on that one little tidbit.

"Aston repressed a lot...blacks out...episodes."

I think about that awkward little wave he gave me tonight when I was leaving the field. The wary curiosity alighting his gray-green eyes as he looked me up and down.

And then I remember the last time I saw those eyes. That face that seemed so...normal compared to what I recalled, the one frozen in time in my mind. So unlike the monster I built him up to be.

Sometimes, like now, I can still hear that childish laughter. Him singing...

The giggles laced with hysteria as he rocked back and forth.

Sometimes I can still remember the blood that coated his hands, his face, his half naked body. The way it splattered everywhere as he sunk the jagged shard of glass in Rick's chest. His stomach...

Over and over and over again.

He was just a kid, for fuck's sake.

My gaze finds my hand, the one scarred, as my steps slow.

So was I.

ASTON

Three Weeks Later

High school. Is. *Awesome*.

It's everything I always thought it would be, right down to the jocks who knock my books out of my arms, and the hoity-toity girls who curl their lip at me and call me a freak.

Just thinking about it warms my fragile little heart with sentiments of, *I belong! I fit in!*

Sure, it would've been a lot cooler if I got to be the one throwing a football at some loser's head, or flipping my hair back with a scoff—*As if!*—as all my friends spoon-fed me praises, and talked shit about me behind my back. But I'm not all that surprised by the way things turned out.

Some people are just not cut out for popularity, and I so happen to be one of them.

Just ask the kids from juvie, and those I ran into during my brief vacays at Ashwood. Be it prison-in-training, the psych ward, or some fancy prep school smack-dab in the middle of nowhere, it's all the same. The adults hate me. My peers ridicule me. I'm a walking, talking pariah.

Gotta love the consistency though.

What they don't know, though, is I'm not easy pickins'. *No siree*. I've been *studying*. For years. Taking notes, watching movies (when I could), and asking questions upon questions. Some resisted my inquiries, but most didn't. Because under all that hate and ridicule, lies something far more vulnerable. Something that ultimately puts me on top and gets me what I need, even if

they won't admit it out loud.

Fear.

So I don't let the name-calling get to me.

I don't let the scornful looks sent my way hurt my frail, little unloved heart.

I know it comes from a place deeper than they can even fathom, and I've long given up on the futile endeavor to learn why humanity has such a penchant for contradiction. Especially when it comes to fear.

There's a serial killer in the house? Okay, let's go upstairs.

See that dark, creepy alleyway over there? Let's go check it out.

Oh, your pulse is racing? Your hands are sweating?

Psh. That's not your body warning you of danger. It's probably just gas, or something. You're *fine*...

I swear, some people wouldn't know what fear is until it slaps them fully across the face.

Hello! Hi! It's me! I am slap, but you may call me Aston.

Someone bumps into my shoulder, causing me to stumble forward. My school-issued loafers squeak over the vinyl flooring.

"Watch it, loser," some guy I've never even seen before says.

My knuckles clench at my sides.

He smirks at me, knowing full-well *he* ran into *me*, before turning away and strutting off into a classroom.

With a sigh, I unwrap a cherry-flavored Blow Pop and pop that sucker in my mouth. I crank up the volume on my Walkman and hook the retro cassette player on the belt-loop of my khakis. Sliding the bulky headphones back up over my head, I let the world around me fade away.

Heart blares into my ears—my favorite band—and I mouth the lyrics around my lollipop as I strut down the halls toward my homeroom. Like this is the opening song to a movie, with me as its down on his luck star.

Gray lockers line up the walls on either side of me, only intermittently broken up by posters advertising the Homecoming dance and carnival happening at the end of the month. I've been here three weeks already, and it still never gets old.

The smells.

The sights.

The lip-curls.

Holding books in my arms like a regular old scholar!

My eyes drift toward the groups of guys huddled right by my classroom. Jocks. Football players. A couple cheerleaders hanging off their arms and everything.

And then *him*.

The quarterback.

He doesn't have a cheerleader though. No, he has a chess player instead. A nerdy, uppity-looking dude who somehow infiltrated the ranks of top popularity, all because he's sucking the dick of the King of the school himself.

Vale Riviera.

I smirk as the name rolls around my head.

Rivierrrrra.

Sounds like something you'd say as you wave a wand at a feather to make it levitate.

"Hey, Jailbait! Nice blowie," someone yells out, loud enough to be heard through the music playing in my ears. My eyes meet the laughing blue gaze of the guy I've deduced is Vale's best friend.

Big, pretty, and blond, and not very smart. *Casey Shrute*.

I catch Vale just as he shoots his friend a weird look, almost like he's amused, but also like he's annoyed. He wears that look on him a lot from what I've seen.

With my thumb, I lower the volume on my Walkman just in time to hear Casey say, "Sorry, I meant *blow pop*. My bad."

I barely pay him any notice.

Pulling the lollipop out of my mouth, I meet Vale's dark, hardened gaze as I give a nice salacious lick of the bulbous candy, and wink.

His eyes widen ever so slightly. Features darkening, pulling tight, before he seems to retreat altogether. His chiseled, perfect face, hard and unmoving as ever.

Gotcha, I think, twisting my lips together to hold back a smile.

"Fucking freak," that bitch attached to Casey's arm like a leech barks out.

I snap my teeth at her, before facing forward once more, popping the lolly back into my mouth. Cranking the music back up, I go on my merry way.

The song playing in my ears fades, switching over to another, so I can just make out the words trailing behind me. "Jesus Christ, did he even look in a mirror when he got dressed today?"

My mouth gapes at nothing in front of me, their words almost halting me

in my tracks. *How dare they??*

Pretty sure that was dear old *Seth* who said that, Vale's nerdy little bitch boyfriend.

Glancing down at my feet as I keep moving, I bite back the urge to turn around and claw off his face.

He's got a nice face, I can admit that. Smooth and blemish-free. *Pretty*, I suppose.

It would be fun to slash it all up with my nails.

I stare down at my socks peeking out from my rolled-up khakis, ensuring no one would miss them. What's fun about fun socks if you can't even *see* them?

They're orange with little pink hearts on them. A combination of my two most favorite days of the year, one of which being Halloween, which is right around the corner.

I may have also stolen—I mean, *borrowed*—one of Tillie's cashmere scarves. It's orange with little gold tassels. I'll have to take it off once I get to homeroom, but hopefully they'll let me keep the khakis rolled up.

The whole uniform thing stopped being fun after the first week, when I realized once again, my individuality was being stifled by an institution. So I've done what I can to spice it up without totally violating the rules.

Rules, rules, rules.

I swear I've only traded one prison for another by coming to this place.

Difference is, here, I can more easily find a way to bend the rules. And that makes it *fun*.

The bell rings just as I reach my destination.

Pausing, I slip the headphones off so they hang around my neck, and cast one last look down the way I came.

Something in me deflates when I see that Vale's no longer there. His friends have yet to disperse, but he's gone. Nowhere to be seen.

With a sigh, I bite down on what's left of my candy, and toss the stick somewhere behind me.

Scurry, scurry, little mouse.

You know I'll always find you.

Of all the gin joints in all the land, I never, in my wildest of dreams, thought I'd find my little Valey here. At some fancy prep school in the middle of nowhere, two states away from where we were fostered together as kids.

Clearly, it's meant to be.

Mr. Shromberg begins the day's lesson, and as usual when I'm forced to sit through these hour-long torture sessions—aka History (yawn!)—I find my mind drifting.

Vale Riviera—Grady Prep Warriors star quarterback—and Vale DuPont—the quiet little boy who maybe kinda, sorta fucked my whole life up—are one and the same.

If I wasn't 100 percent certain before, I am now. I just needed to provoke him a bit to know for sure. Poke and prod, and eventually little mice will reveal themselves, no matter how hard they try to scurry by unnoticed. They always do. They can't help it.

He *is* bigger now though. So much bigger than the boy I remember. Big and broody and downright *sexy* with muscles for *days*.

But I'd still recognize the little boy hiding in wolf's clothing anywhere. Always thought he was so sneaky, so smart. He's never fooled me.

Except for the night he, well, sorta, kinda fucked everything up.

Stupid fucking Rick. Should've locked the door.

Shaking my head, I shove away the memories. Dwelling on that night does me no favors. It is what it is, and frankly, I can't find it in me to regret a single thing.

Pretty sure that's the problem, a voice reminds me.

Yeah, well, Rick looked better with his insides on his outsides, I throw back, mentally sticking out my tongue.

But that's an image better left to appreciate when I'm alone, not in a classroom full of students.

So instead, I think about grown-up Vale.

My mouth quirks as I remember the night of the football game a few weeks back. Watching the way his muscles flexed as he pulled back his arm and let the football sail across the field. The way his ass looked in those gray compression pants.

Drool. Worthy.

And to think Tillie had all but *dragged* me across the parking lot earlier that evening to meet up with her husband, who'd already been there, having had some meeting with the school board. Not that I wasn't willing to go, she

was just *that* excited, and I was...curious. Nothing more.

Apparently, football is a big deal around here. Even for a pretentious, out-of-place prep school like Grady Prep. She didn't want to miss out on the fun. Said it reminded her of her youth, and she was excited for me to experience this rite of passage or whatever.

I mean, sure, their pants are *tight*—it's a glorious sight to see, and provided much fodder for my fantasies—but I don't see how watching a bunch of jocks running back and forth across a field just to catch a ball is as life-affirming as she made it out to be. Or as the guys back in juvie did when they'd stomp and throw shit at the television.

But what do I know? My idea of affirming is seeing how far down my throat I can take a cock before I gag. We all have our priorities, I suppose.

When we reached Walter over by the concession stand just before the game was to start, he was clearly all bent out of shape. Red-faced and seething as he faced off with some slightly younger Hispanic dude who looked too distinguished to be hanging out at a high school football game.

Not that Walter fit in any better in his gray suit. If anyone should've looked out of place, it should've been him. But there was just something about the other man that gave an air of superiority, despite the bright purple jersey he was wearing. The number 33 stamped white across his lean torso.

As soon as our presence was made known, though, he quickly backed off from whatever it was that Walter got him in a tizzy about.

And I remember thinking how *weird* that was in the first place.

My new warden is a bit stuffy and pretentious, yeah, but he's pretty innocuous overall. Spineless, even, but maybe that's just around me. He clearly had no problem standing up to this man, whoever he was, so maybe he's actually a raging dick when his wife's not around to mind him. Who knows?

I mean, it *did* always baffle me how someone as sweet and excitable as Tillie could end up with someone so *boring* after all. There's gotta be some fire in him. But he's all but ignored me since I moved in with them, so I'm not complaining if I rarely get to see it.

Tillie must've sensed the tension between the men too, because just like back in juvie, anytime the inmates would start to get riled, she did that thing she always does, where her voice gets all bright and excited as she asks, "*Everything okay?*" knowing full well things *aren't*, in fact, okay.

There's just something about the tiny woman and her sunny disposition

that never seems to fail to break the ice. Be it in juvenile detention centers or high school football games. You name it, and she's got everyone shitting rainbows.

Or, at the least, not killing each other.

The man who had just been fuming at poor ol' frazzled Walt instantly backed away. Features smoothing over like he wasn't just snarling and clenching his fists in the slightly shorter man's face mere seconds ago.

I'd never seen this man in my life, and yet, as soon as our gazes connected over Walt's shoulder, I got the distinctive impression he somehow knew *me*.

When he quickly turned around to walk away, there was no missing the last name printed across his back, just over the same numbers plastered on the front of the jersey.

Riviera.

33.

The same name and number I'd find emblazoned across a similar jersey moments later on the other side of the chain-link fence.

He wasn't the only one staring at me, but as far as I was concerned, the other two sexy brutes at his side may as well have not existed.

Even before I got number 33's first name, even before I learned the school board was all in a hissy over getting me as their new student because *someone* had to go open their trap about my less-than-stellar record (Walt, I'm looking at you), even before I put two and two together, and realized the man facing off with Walter was the star quarterback of the school's daddy...I felt it.

A change in the air.

A shift in the course of my future.

Those eyes...

Dark and fathomless. Watchful, and yet somehow blank even after all these years.

I couldn't believe it.

Vale DuPont.

The boy who saved me.

The boy who wrecked my life.

The boy I never thought I'd see again.

For weeks now, I've bided my time. Waited to see if he really did in fact recognize me, *remember* me, seeing as *my* name didn't change.

And I've gotta hand it to him—he's *good*. Still super sneaky. Because up until today, walking down the hall, catching that black, bottomless stare...

I thought maybe, perhaps, I *was* wrong. That maybe what happened didn't stick to him like it did me. That somehow, he managed to escape what I never could, despite not even being able to fully remember that night.

I even started to convince myself that maybe it wasn't *my* Vale at all, and it was just a really freaky coincidence that he shared a first name and black eyes with the boy I once called *brother*.

But it is him. It really, really is.

And I'd be an idiot to let this opportunity go.

Fate clearly wanted us to reunite. Now I just gotta figure out *why*.

Tick-tock, little mouse, I think, smiling around the tip of my pencil.

Your time has just run out.

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VALE

I 'm over it.

This day.

This year.

High school.

Seth.

All of it.

The rest of the day passes as dreadfully mundane as any other day. I flit from class to class, giving my teachers and peers just enough attention to keep up with the status quo. I might be the quarterback, but I'm in no way the star of this little show called *High School*, despite what others might think.

It's like those public service announcement commercials that play on TV late at night when I'm trying to sleep. All those bright-eyed, dimple-faced kids showing off their mediocre science fair projects to the soundtrack of whatever empowering song is currently topping the charts. And then some message will scroll across the screen about hope and dreams and community and blah blah blah, as parents and teachers cheer them on, big fat tears rolling down their cheeks.

Gag.

As if childhood dreams ever actually amount to anything purposeful.

"Can I have the bathroom pass?" I blurt out loudly, interrupting my teacher mid-lecture. Her smile flickers with uncertainty, and something sizzles in my chest at the sight. But she's quick to shake it off. Too quick.

I sigh.

"Sure, Vale," she says, nodding toward the little table off to the side of

her desk. I feel several pairs of eyes on me, but it's nothing new.

I quickly sign out and grab the thin red rectangle of wood that says PASS in big, bold, black letters across the front. I loop the frayed rope attached to it around my wrist and head out into the hall.

Flyers for the Harvest Carnival are already posted along the walls, in the gaps between lockers, and hanging over the doorways peppered down the hall. It's not for another two weeks, but it's another one of those traditions the school goes gaga for every year.

I pass the first set of bathrooms, and aim for the stairwell instead, jogging up the two flights it takes to get to the top floor. I'm currently on the west end of the school, and it's unspoken knowledge that the west bathroom on the third floor is where you go for a smoke, or a line, or a fuck, or whatever it is you want to do that requires a bit of privacy. It's the creakiest of creaky rooms in the entire monstrosity that is Grady Preparatory Academy, so anything short of screaming bloody murder wouldn't be heard beyond the thick, heavy door.

Some say it's haunted. That some poor schmuck hanged himself from the exposed pipes back in the '70s.

When in truth, it's just old as fuck. Old and outdated, with a sewer system that's probably older than Mr. Laurant, my English teacher who's gotta be pushing hundred.

It's the only bathroom in the entire school that was never upgraded, and since Grady Prep used to be split in half—boys in the west, girls in the east—unlike the other wings, there's still only one bathroom in 3W.

Unsurprisingly, there's yellow tape crisscrossed over the door and an OUT OF ORDER sign taped over the opaque window. Ignoring it, I push the door open and easily duck through the rows of tape, making my way inside.

Oh, right, did I mention that it's always under construction too? You'd think people would know better than to flush contraband down toilets older than their grandma.

"Well, well, well," a voice says smoothly from across the room, echoing in the cavernous space. "If it isn't Grady Prep's very own Cinderella. Here to revisit your roots in the slums, are we?"

I freeze, eyes widening ever so faintly when I register that not only is someone already in here, but it's none other than Aston St. James.

His floppy light brown hair looks darker in the dim lighting, all the gold the light would normally highlight looking washed out. It's a dreary day, and

the high floor-to-ceiling windows he sits back against are the same opaque, bumpy glass that fills the window on the door. They hardly let in any light.

What he just said finally registers and I feel my nose flare. Defensiveness rocketing up my spine and holding me rigid.

Aston's mouth ticks up, and it's only then that I notice the red tint there. Only this time it's not from a lollipop, but from the chocolate-covered strawberry he currently has impaled on a pocket knife.

Not taking his eyes off me, he brings the fruit to his mouth, and bites just the tip. His long fingers are clasped loosely, carelessly around the knife.

Clearing my throat, I look away.

"Want one?"

A quick, fleeting glance shows a tin of mostly half-eaten chocolate-covered strawberries; no doubt stolen.

"Where'd you get those?" I hear myself ask before I can stop myself.

He's grinning when I meet his gaze. Like he got exactly what he set out for. My neck prickles, and I can't tell if it's just irritation, or something... else.

"That's neither here nor there," he says with a little flick of his free hand. With that same hand, he pushes back his hair from his brow. It's useless. It just flops right back over.

His gray-green eyes sparkle with a mix of excitement and something sharper. Brittle, almost.

"Where's your Prince Charming?" He narrows his eyes. "Come to think of it, I think this is the first time I've seen you without that horrid growth attached to your hip."

So he has been watching me...

I was hoping I was just paranoid.

"Don't talk that way about him," I find myself saying, voice tight with barely restrained ire.

His lips are still tipped up in that seemingly ever-present smirk of his. "Don't talk that way about him," he mocks in a low, singsong voice.

"You're fucking insane," I say, shaking my head.

His eyes flare, and I brace myself for the violence I've heard so much about these last few weeks. Not that he's actually *done* anything. Pretty sure he'd be long gone if he had.

And still, the rumor mill spins.

But color me fucking surprised—and that doesn't happen often—when

instead he tips his head back and *laughs*. Chills race down my spine and I fucking hate it. Fucking hate the effect he so clearly still has on me despite not having actually interacted with him in six years.

“That’s it?” he says loudly. “That’s all you’ve got?” His chuckles are slow to fade, and he’s still grinning when he drops his chin to his chest, meeting my gaze through the fringe of his lashes. “Come now, Valey,” he says much quieter. “No need to be bashful. You don’t have to hold back with me.”

My jaw ticks. “Fuck this, I’m out.”

Turning on my heel, I grip the pass tightly in my hand, welcoming the slight burn from the wood digging into my skin. I’m just about to throw open the door and leave, when his next words halt me.

“Wait, no, I’m sorry,” he says in a rush, and then I hear a shuffle and a low thud. I turn my head just enough to peek a look over my shoulder.

He’s standing now, arms hanging at his sides, fingers twitching by his thighs. The knife is still in his grip, and there’s a stain on the side of his light khakis from where his fingers smeared chocolate and red juices. But he doesn’t even seem to notice. Or maybe it’s that he just doesn’t care.

Again, I find my gaze flitting down to his bright-ass socks.

“Don’t go,” he says in a soft, high-pitched voice, almost like that of a child’s.

My brow furrows as I slowly turn around, taking him in, noting the sudden change in his demeanor. Crossing my arms over my chest, I dart my gaze around his face. His eyes are wide, nearly bulging, like he’s one of those creepy kewpie dolls. He chews on the corner of his lip, eyeing me warily.

He forces a laugh and shrugs his shoulders. “I forgot my manners, it would seem.” He presses the hand holding the knife to his chest and says, “Let’s start over. I’m Aston, like the car.”

I don’t say anything, wondering if this is some sort of joke.

His mouth twitches ever so slightly as he points the knife at me. “And you’re Vale, like a wedding veil, but spelled V-A-L-E.”

Everything in me goes cold as I’m suddenly thrown back ten years, having this same exact conversation with my new foster brother. Saying those *exact* words...

Aston’s watching me expectantly with a steady, unfazed gaze. It should be unsettling, but I’m too busy trying not to lose my shit.

“Right,” I mutter.

“Do you remember me now?”

I never forgot.

Rather than address such a stupid question, I change the subject. “Why aren’t you in class?”

He blinks into a small frown. “Well, I was, but it was awfully boring. At least before, someone was either starting a fight, or having a life crisis, or there was a guard who’d pull me out of class to...well, you know.” He makes a crude gesture with his fist and mouth.

My nose wrinkles. *The fuck?*

He does that creepy bug-eye thing again. “Oh! That’s one of those things I’m not supposed to say, right?” He covers his mouth in a mock show of regret. His eyes twinkle, telling me he’s fighting a smile.

I watch him more curiously now. I knew what people were saying about him, my so-called *friends* included, but I’ve never been one to give much credit to high school gossip. Especially given what I actually *do* know...

But the longer I watch him, the more I can’t help but wonder if he really is well and truly fucking insane. Like, actually, literally off his rocker and in need of a padded room to bounce around.

Dropping his hands suddenly, he twirls the knife around next to his head as he starts pacing in front of the row of sinks. “All these rules, rules, rules,” he says, tipping his head back with a great sigh. “How do people live like this? It’s *exhausting*. Don’t do this, don’t do that.” He tips the knife back and forth, dragging his heels, then toes as he starts pacing backward now too. “Don’t say this, don’t say that.”

He stops, whirling around suddenly to face me. He throws his hands out dramatically. “I’m *trying!*”

I blink and glance around, wondering if he’s still talking to me. “Okay.”

He purses his lips. Then, he brings the knife to his mouth, and nibbles on the flat side of the tip, watching me with furrowed eyes. His tongue pokes out, gathering the chocolate and fruit juices still clinging to the blade.

Jesus.

“You’re gonna cut your tongue out,” I say tightly, grateful it’s just dark enough where I stand that he shouldn’t get a look at my dick hardening in my jeans.

He’s the one to blink at a loss this time. He pulls the knife away from his face, staring at it like he’s just realizing it’s there. “Well, that would be sad.”

A short, disbelieving laugh punches its way up my throat, leaving me in a

grunt before I can stop it. He clearly hears it, knows what it is, and his face softens with this freaky sort of demur look about it.

“What?” I ask suspiciously.

“You like me.”

My brows spike. “What?”

His mouth stretches up on one side, giving him a roguish look as he drops his chin and slinks his way toward me.

Fuck.

My feet start carrying me backward, much to my annoyance. What’s with this guy and his ability to fluster me? Make my body do things before my brain catches up.

“Valey, Valey, Valey,” he singsongs.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t call me that,” he mocks in a baby voice.

My back finds the wall with a thud, and I suddenly find myself less than an inch away from Aston. He’s standing so close, I can feel his breaths on my chin.

“You’re so big now,” he says, darting that wide, unhinged gaze all over me. Like he’s taking it all in, eating me up. Feeding off my energy. Not my fear, because I’m not afraid.

I’m pissed.

“Remember when we were kids? *Brothers?*” he gushes, smiling dreamily. He reaches up and pokes my cheek with his pointer finger. It’s the hand gripping the knife, and I feel my eye twitch at the sight of that sleek, silver blade so close to my face. “You were so tiny. So small and cute. Quiet too, like a little mouse.” He starts chittering.

I swallow hard, jutting out my chin, as he leans up into me, brushing his nose over my jaw. He sniffs and I clench my fists at my side.

He cocks his head and blinks into a frown, his full lips squishing up as he meets my gaze directly. “But you’re not so little anymore, are you? Still quiet, but it’s a good quiet.” He nods as if confirming it for himself.

And then in a move too fast for me to catch until it’s too late, he’s suddenly gripping my dick through my khakis. So preoccupied with the one holding a knife next to my head, I forgot about the other hand.

A grin slides up his face. “Big everywhere, I see. Hard too.”

Rage whites out my vision, and the next thing I know, I’ve flipped our positions. I’ve got a hand wrapped around Aston’s throat, and I’m pinning

him against the yellowy, popcorn-textured wall I was just resting my back against.

His laughter reaches my ears, prompting me to tighten my grip on him until it stutters out.

“Don’t. Touch. Me.”

I can barely get the words out through the gnashing of my teeth. I can feel the vein in my temple throbbing, and I’m pretty sure my face is just as red as Aston’s is slowly turning.

He’s not scared, though. If anything, he looks...enraptured. Shocked in the best kind of way. The sight of those bright gray-green orbs swirling with happiness inches away from me sends a spark rocketing through my body, but I’m quick to snuff it out.

Nope, nope. This is so fucked.

Heavy pants work their way out of my nose, and my heart pounds in a way it never has before. Not from what I can recall, and I recall everything.

“And don’t fucking look at me like that,” I tell him quietly, roughly. “When I walk out of here, you’re going to forget this conversation ever fucking happened. You’re going to forget my name, and forget we ever, ever knew each other. Understood?”

Something dark skitters across his eyes.

Finally. Something to work with.

My mouth ticks up cruelly. “Don’t like that plan? Well, too fucking bad.”

Easing my hold on his neck, I smirk when he sucks in a couple harsh gasps. I reach down, and grab the wrist of the hand still holding tight onto that stupid, precious knife of his, and I bring it between us at chin level.

Biting my nails into his pale, bony wrist, I shake his hand. “Is this supposed to scare me?”

He doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t even glance at the knife between our faces. He merely watches *me*. As if nothing else exists.

“Go ahead then,” I say. “Stab me. Gut me like a fish.”

I regret the words as soon as I say them. Rather than flinch away from my words—from the reminder of what he’s done—Aston rolls his lips in like he’s fighting a laugh.

My gaze volleys between his. “Jesus Christ, you really are crazy, aren’t you?”

“What?” he says, his voice raspy from being choked out a moment ago. “It’s funny.”

Disturbed, for more reasons than one—some of which I'd rather not look too closely at—I step back, releasing him. I take another step back and slowly shake my head.

He's no longer smiling. In fact, his face dulls into something utterly blank. Devoid of any identifiable emotion.

What the hell just happened?

He scratches the back of his head with his free hand, while he closes the switch-blade with a nimble, well-practiced flip of his fingers, before shoving it in one of the pockets lining the inside of his blazer.

For the first time since he blew his way back into my life, I feel...wary.

Nervous.

“Do they know?”

I tense. “Know what?”

His flat gray-green eyes find mine. When he doesn't immediately say anything, I think, *This is it.*

This is the moment it all comes crumbling down.

The moment I lose everything.

“Do they know where you come from?” he says, tilting his head to the side, those full, pouty lips of his for once not stretched taut with a smile.

Jesus. When did I start noticing his lips?

“Do they know the truth about you, Cinderella? Does your Prince Charming know?”

I feel my jaw ticking, but I don't give him the satisfaction of a response.

He makes a small noise of acknowledgment in the back of his throat. Nodding, he says, “That's what I thought.”

And with that, he steps away from the wall, making his way past me, and back toward his spot by the windows.

Turning, I watch as he climbs back up on the radiator, resuming the position I found him in. Legs hanging over the ledge. Metal tin in his lap. A soft glow surrounding his head like a halo.

Taking that as a sign our talk is over, I let the breath out I didn't realize I was holding.

The bell rings suddenly and I realize I've been gone far too long. Mrs. Cheshire is probably wondering where I am, and it's only a matter of time before someone gets sent to hunt me down. If they aren't already looking for me, that is.

Without another word, I pick up the bathroom pass from the floor. I

must've dropped it earlier when my anger took over. It's been so damn long since I lost control like that.

Behind me, I hear Aston humming a familiar tune, "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe," and I freeze. Something tells me the lyrics playing out in his head are not the ones belonging to that stupid nursery rhyme.

Does he...remember?

Bile surges up my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut, quickly forcing it back down along with the memory of his misplaced laughter and high-pitched voice—

"Five, six...Stick! Stick! Stick!"

I shake my head.

Don't think about it.

A pipe creaks loudly, followed by the whine of the door as I push it open.

"Hey, Vale," Aston says quietly from behind me.

I pause, keeping my gaze trained forward.

"Bury it down all you want. But the truth always comes out. Midnight will strike, and the glass slipper *will* fall off." He pauses, then with a stifled giggle, he says, "It is written."

Sucking in my cheek, I bite down the urge to slam the door shut, and let my rage take the reins once more.

"Are you threatening me?" I grit out tightly.

"No," he says, serious once more, in that misleadingly soft voice. "I have nothing to gain from spilling your secrets. I'm far too curious to see how this all plays out."

And for whatever reason, be it delusion or sheer desperation, or some combination of the two, I find that I believe him.

"It is odd, don't you think?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I find him with his head cocked. "What?" I say, though I'm not so sure I want to know.

Liar, a voice objects. I ignore it.

"That somehow, we found our way back to each other. After all these years. Without even trying." His mouth crooks up, and something sinks in my gut at the...Well, I don't really know what to call it.

He looks...hopeful? Excited maybe?

Genuine for once?

I force a hard swallow. "Just a weird coincidence."

He hums. "Maybe." He dips his head to look up at me through his thick

long lashes. “Or we were always meant to be together.”

My whole body stiffens, my jaw ticking, but I try not to let him see that he’s getting to me.

“Tell Prince Charming I’ll be seeing him,” he adds softly, almost as if it’s an afterthought.

“Don’t touch him.” Hell, even to my own ears, I don’t sound all that convincing.

He huffs a sound of amusement. “Believe it or not, but I have no interest in *him*.”

This time, the shivers racking up my spine are near-combustible. Before he can pick up on just how volatile of an effect his words have on me, I whirl around and storm out into the hall.

The heavy door swings shut behind me with hardly a sound.

It’s been three weeks since Aston St. James came back into my life, and until today—with the exception of the Bell Game—he’s hardly spared me a glance. We hadn’t so much as spoken a word to each other. Hardly even passed each other in the halls; I made sure of that.

In fact, until now, I was truly starting to believe he didn’t even remember me.

I should be terrified.

I should be angry and worried and stressing the fuck out.

I should be anything but...

Relieved.

ASTON

I 'm at my first party.

And not just any party, but a fucking *rager*.

“Watch where you’re going, freak!” a girl squeals when one of my wings bats her in the shoulder.

“Watch the merchandise, bitch!” I sass back, before whirling around with a snap of my fingers.

So rude, I think with a dismal shake of my head. I quickly fix the gold crown on my head when it teeters.

Meeting the stares of some familiar faces I’ve seen from school, I give them all waves and little bows and curtsies as I make my way back toward the kitchen to refill my cup.

Loud house music blasts from the speakers in the other room, shaking the floorboards and rattling the picture frames hanging from the walls. I think I vaguely recognize one of the kids in the pictures, but honestly, I have no freaking idea whose house this is.

I overheard there was a party tonight, and being that it’s almost Halloween and costumes were encouraged, I figured it was high time I polished the dust off my calendar and made my grand debut into high society.

And what a glorious debut it’s been so far. I look fucking *ah-mazing*.

Stick an arrow in my ass and call me Shnookums, because Cupid is on the *prowl* tonight, baby. And he ain’t stoppin’ until he gets a little somethin’ somethin’ for himself.

Ignoring the rap blasting through the speakers, I hum and mouth the words to “Somebody to Love” by Jefferson Airplane as I go about making

myself a drink.

A little bit of this, I think, pouring a couple glugs of rum. *And a whole lotta that*, I think, emptying what's left of a carton of pineapple juice into my cup.

I read pineapple juice makes your cum taste sweet, so the more the better, methinks.

Not that I have bad tasting cum. It's actually pretty sweet on its own. I've tried it.

Now, *Clark*, on the other hand...*his* cum was pretty gross. But sucking him off got me extra yard time when Bruce wasn't around, so it was a sacrifice I happily endured.

I wonder if Vale's cum is sweet.

I sigh at the thought, taking a hearty sip of the liquid goodness.

Vale, Vale, Vale.

Why am I not even surprised that's where my head went?

If my brain was a museum, three-fourths of it would already be covered in shrines to Vale DuPont, completely eradicating all the passions and trinkets that came before, like a quick-spreading infestation of the most delicious kind.

Oops, scratch that, I mean, *Riviera*. He's a *Riviera* now. My bad, my bad. One day I'll get it to stick.

To be perfectly honest, though, it's getting hard to remember there even was a before.

Or rather, an in-between.

Like the past six years, give or take, was just one long fever dream. One so tragically empty of the boy with the cute stern face and the nearly black eyes. The boy I once tasked myself with protecting. My *brother*.

He's bigger than you now, a voice reminds me.

Much bigger.

I grin around the lip of my cup at the thought.

Those *arms*...

They could easily pick me up. Throw me over his shoulder. Hold me up as he pounds into my ass with that huge cock of his.

I felt it. Through his khakis. It wasn't just big, it was *hard!*

I can't wait to see it and feel it and taste it...

And those hands! Holy Cher Horowitz, those *hands*.

I reach up and brush my thumb over my neck, recalling the feel of that

monstrous grip squeezing my throat yesterday. Reveling in the memory of our little bathroom rendezvous.

He somehow managed not to leave bruises; the reddened fingerprints have long since faded.

I wish they didn't. I want to feel the press of them forever.

Groaning, I roll my eyes back as I turn around and drop my head against the cabinet with a thump.

He was your brother once, a voice pipes up.

I roll my eyes. *Barely*.

He ruined your life, another voice singsongs, as if trying to burst my bubble.

Pish posh! I silently snipe back with a wave of my hand, before taking another big gulp of my drink.

So I ended up being tossed between juvie and the psych ward for a few years. Was it really that *bad*? Was it really his *fault*? Smelly Ol' Rick had it coming. I was always going to snap. Vale just...sped things up a bit.

At least, that's the story I'm gonna stick with.

Hell, he probably did me and the world a favor. I'm all reformed now and shit.

Nodding at the thought, I take a long sip of my drink. So why dwell on it? It changes nothing.

Plus, he's *farrrr* too pretty to hate anyway.

A noise draws me out of my thoughts, and what do you know, the object of my new obsession has finally graced us with his presence. It was about time he showed up.

I slip around the refrigerator, hiding from sight as none other than the big handed, big dicked Vale *Riviera* enters the house through the back door.

Of course, he's not alone. My nose wrinkles at the sight of that primly, whiny *drag* of a boyfriend gripping his arm.

Mine, I imagine myself barking, snapping at him with my teeth. Kind of like those seagulls in that cute, sad fish movie. *Mine, mine, mine!*

"I told you I didn't wanna come," Vale says. I have to strain to hear him over the music. "Don't get all pissy that I'm not happy. You didn't have to bring me."

Primly Pete or whatever his name is huffs loudly. "You could pretend."

"Why? What's the point?"

I picture Pickle Pete's face turning red. "What's wrong with you today?"

he hisses. “First, you forget it’s our anniversary, and then...” I tune him out as he goes on and on about all the woes he’s been suffering, waiting and praying for him to spontaneously combust.

A guy could dream.

“I’m sorry,” Vale says, not sounding sorry at all. I make a face and mouth into the empty space, *What?* I roll my eyes and shake my head.

A sniff, then, “Let’s just have a couple drinks, say hi, and then we can leave. Okay?”

A beat passes, in which I assume Vale nods, because then there’s a wet, smacky sound that makes me wish I didn’t just chug all that rum and pineapple juice.

Fortunately, a group of people bowl their way into the kitchen, ending their little moment, and giving me the perfect opportunity to sneak out before they see me.

Change of plans, I tell myself with another firm nod.

While Operation Get Vale Naked is still a-go, Operation Get Rid of Poopy Head Pete will now be of the *utmost* priority. I cringe at the memory of them touching. At the sound of them kissing.

Ugh!

Does Vale have no fucking sense of decorum?

I suppose it’s no matter. With a body like that, he doesn’t need to. I’ll show him what he’s missing.

It’s decided then.

Cupid’s villain era is here, and he’s taking no prisoners.

ASTON

“**T**here you go,” I whisper cajolingly, a couple hours later. “That’s a big boy. A good, big boy.”

A muffled groan slips from Pasty Pete’s slackened lips.

I grunt, hefting his upper half onto the bed. “More like *Portly* Pete.” I hold up a hand, and back up. “Not that you’re even fat. You’re actually pretty skinny, I’m just really out of shape. And even if you *were* fat, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. All bodies are beautiful.” I stare at his relaxed face. His droopy eyes. That cute little button nose...

Aw.

Focus!

“Fuck, what am I even *saying*? You’re not beautiful. There’s nothing beautiful about you, or cute, because you stole my man, and that just *ain’t cool*, dude. Not at all. What were you possibly thinking? Does bro code mean nothing to you?” I hiss.

He makes a soft sound, and I pat his head.

“There, there, Pete. It’s okay. I’m here to right your wrongs.”

It takes a lot of grunting and heavy breathing, but I finally, *finally* get his not-fat ass onto the king-sized bed. Once I have him rolled onto his side, I give his butt a little squeeze—What?! It’s a nice ass, even if it belongs to a traitor—then grope his sides, patting around for his phone.

I sing my favorite Heart song under my breath as I take Petey Boy’s hand, and push his thumb over the sensor to unlock his phone. “Thanks, babe,” I say, dropping his hand. He doesn’t make a peep.

Shifting onto my back, I turn on his phone camera and lean against the

headboard, sliding down until both our heads are in the frame.

“Say *Cheese!*” I grin wide, squishing my cheek up against Pete’s chilly nose and take the picture. Sitting up, I find Vale’s contact, and send that baby on over. I then quickly add my number and send his contact info to myself.

There!

I toss the phone on the floor and wait.

Music still plays loudly from the first floor; an occasional cheer rising up the stairs. I’m not sure whose room this is, but it looks hardly lived in, telling me it’s a guest room. From the floor, the phone starts ringing. I ignore it.

Tonight has worked out superbly, if I must say myself.

Not long after the royally doomed couple finally decided to grace the halls of this manor, an opportunity presented itself that was just so *perfect*, I couldn’t help but see it for what it was:

Fate.

Because it was there, just beyond the kitchen, that I spotted a cute little fellow with a goatee that even Captain Hook would be absolutely *envious* of...and well, *he* was in the sneaky process of popping a little pill in a girl’s drink when she was turned away.

Kismet, right?

While Hookie Boy wasn’t all too happy to have gotten caught, he was quick to change his attitude when I made him a deal.

(This is probably the part in the story where you’re wondering if I’m redeemable, right? Well, spoiler alert, I’m not.)

Fast-forward one too many drinks on little Petey’s part, one of which having been doctored by *yours truly*, and another seemingly never-ending half-hour of waiting and watching and more *waiting*...

The door bursts open.

Showtime!

I snap my head up just in time to see Vale coming at me. And boy is he *angry*.

“Hey, Pumpkin!” I chirp brightly as he grabs me by the shoulders in those massive footballer hands of his. I don’t think he even realizes how tightly he’s holding me. Definitely tight enough to leave bruises this time. My chest turns all goopy at the thought.

His hard, black gaze shifts past me to where his sweet little Prince lies passed out in the fetal position. His jaw ticks, and I cock my head with a frown.

He doesn't look... worried, like one would expect after finding out their soon-to-be ex-boyfriend was drugged.

He looks rather annoyed. Inconvenienced, even.

"Did you touch him?"

"I touched his butt."

He glares at me.

I shrug. "I was looking for his phone."

He rolls his eyes, so I do too. He wrinkles his nose, so I wrinkle mine.

"Stop."

"Stop."

He stares at me and I stare back. His gaze flits down, then back up, and he says, "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"I'm Cupid. Duh!" I say, spreading my arms to show off my cute little toga I made with a sheet. Behind me, a pair of white flimsy wings jut out from my back. They're held by clear tape hooked under my pits. I found that along with the gold laurel crown currently sitting atop my hair in the bottom of an old trunk up in Tillie and Walter's attic. (I didn't ask.)

And to top it all off, all up and down my arms and on my cheeks, I stuck little pink and red heart stickers. Just so no one would mistake me for any little ol' angel.

His dark brows arch. "I gathered that. Why?"

I stare blankly at him. "Why not? It's a costume party, Vale."

He studies me with a look I can't place, and I can normally place a lot of looks. But there's something about Vale that's always been hidden from me. Even back when we were kids, randomly thrown together in the same shitty foster home.

His hands drop away all of a sudden, as if he just remembered he was holding me. I sigh, watching as he spins to face the door.

My gaze drops, taking in how well he fills out his jeans. Just the right amount of tightness to give that firmly sculpted ass some much-needed *oomph* compared to our school uniforms.

Garbled mumbling from behind me has him whirling around, and my brows spike at the new view before I can help myself.

Not that I *would*...

"Fucking Christ. Stop."

I pout and glance up to find him glaring at me with his arms folded across his chest. With only a short-sleeved black t-shirt on, I can make out every

taut line of his muscles. Every teal-hued vein branching out down his forearms.

Wetting my lips, I flit my gaze up through my lashes. “Stop what?”

His nose flares, and his lip curls. “You know what.”

“I really don’t.”

He lunges forward, grabbing me by the throat. Just like he did yesterday in the bathroom, only this time he doesn’t try to steal my air from me.

“Stop looking at me like that.” When he speaks, I catch a whiff of alcohol on his breath. *Tequila*, I think. No wonder he’s so feisty tonight.

“Like what?”

“Like you wanna eat me,” he all but growls.

My mouth twitches. “Do you wanna eat me instead?”

He looks me up and down, not even bothering to mask his disgust. It shouldn’t bother me, not when it’s a look I’ve seen aimed my way so many times before this. I’m no stranger to the sneers and wrinkled, upturned noses. Like I’m no better than the dirt on some rich bitch’s Louboutins.

On my feet, or on my knees, it’s always the same. I’m scum. Nothing more than a hole to use, abuse, and throw away like yesterday’s trash.

And until now, I was *okay* with that. So long as it was my idea, and it got me what I wanted, I was peachy keen with it.

And I can’t even quite say it *does* bother me that Vale, of all people, is looking at me like he is now.

On one hand, I want to be a good boy and do everything in my power to wipe that revulsion from his eyes. To drop down on my knees, and let my throat do the talking. I’ve always been so much better at show than tell. When I talk, the words just tend to get all mixed up, fogging the truth of my intentions.

On the other hand...

“Or would you rather hurt me?” I whisper into a sly grin. “Make me pay for what I did to your sweet little boo over there.” I cock my head. “He’s cute. Is he cute under the button-ups and khakis too?”

His mouth thins, and I can’t help but admire the sculpted lines of his face. Like he was carved out of stone. He looks so much older than his seventeen years, and so very little like the mousey boy who tried so foolishly to save me all those years ago.

“He smells good,” I whisper, anxious energy coursing through my limbs, settling my skin abuzz. “Like some fancy cologne. Is that what you like?”

Fancy things. Fancy car, fancy school, fancy boyfriend, fancy life.”

“Shut up.”

My heart thrashes around in my chest. “I could be fancy for you. Tell me what you like, and I’ll find it. I’ll get it. Anything you want.”

Heat flares in his gaze, before icing over. “What’s wrong with you?”

I reach forward, tiptoeing my fingers up his chest. He sucks in a breath, just as I arch my neck, pressing it further into the curve of his hand. “You should know.”

He tenses.

My lashes flutter. “Tell me, Vale *DuPont*.” Something cracks in his expression, and I know I’m getting warmer. Closer. I’m nanoseconds away from breaking him wide open. “How is it that you got to live the Cinderella fairytale, while I was left to roam the gutters with the other rats?”

He seethes, and I push up on my toes, getting right in his face. “Do you remember what it feels like? The blood. The—”

He slaps me across the face.

Hard.

I think it catches him off guard more than it does me, but still. *Ow*.

“Well, that wasn’t very nice, Valeykins,” I say, pouting as I rub my cheek. Poking my tongue around, I’m not surprised when I taste a hint of copper.

My dick gives a jolt. *Fuckkkkk*.

His eyes are so dark, I can see my reflection in their glassy pools. He looks fucking possessed. Fucking *sexy*.

“Touchy, are we?” I whisper. “And to think, *I’m* the one with the so-called temper.”

He shoves me, and the next thing I know I’m flat on my back with one pissed off quarterback seizing me by the neck. I’m beginning to think he has a fetish for this.

Air wheezes out of me, before getting cut off. Only this time, it’s not his hands stealing what little air I had left...

But his lips.

I freeze, my brain stalling as I try to catch up to what’s happening.

He pinches my cheeks with one hand, while the other remains clamped around my neck, holding my head in place as he fuses his mouth to mine. Crushing me with bruising force.

He’s kissing and gripping me so fucking hard, I’m pretty sure my teeth

are about to burst through my skin. Like my brain's about to pop out of my ears.

I feel my legs trying to kick out from under him, but it's no use. He's so much bigger than me. And it's not even like I want to escape. If anything, I just want to curl them around him to keep him here. Never let him go.

But he won't let me.

Not that I think I need to.

He doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon, if his biting kisses and the boner jabbing me in the stomach are anything to go by.

It's a full-on assault to my senses. He's all I taste, all I see, all I smell, and all I hear. And he's the only thing I can *feel*.

His strong thighs straddle my waist as he grinds that big dick of his against my stomach, seeking friction. I can feel my skimpy little toga loosening from his rough, desperate movements. I arch up, thrusting, seeking more friction in the only way I can. Which is not very much.

He pulls back suddenly, releasing me completely. But he still sits on me, so my pitiful whine of protest is simply just that: pitiful.

Vale's lips are wet and swollen, and his cheeks are flushed. Messy dark brown hair flops over his brow, and I realize this is the most unkempt I've seen him since I moved to Crowley.

He's normally so put-together. So in control.

"Don't stop," I rasp.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, it occurs to me that I once thought of this guy as my *brother*. Shouldn't that make this kind of...weird? Gross?

Heat flares up in those bottomless pits for eyes, and I feel a breathy smile stretch across my face as I spread my arms across the bed. Surrendering to the big, bad football player.

No. Nope. Definitely not.

This is fucking *hot*.

My fingers bump into something, and it takes me a second to remember we're not alone. I quickly roll my head to glance over at the figure sprawled out on the far side of the bed. I give his foot a shove, waiting for him to jolt awake.

Nothing.

Turning my head forward once more, I start to say something to Vale, when he climbs off my lap. Panic and desperation roll through me like a tidal wave.

“Don’t—”

My words are quickly choked out by a grunt as Vale flips me over onto my stomach. The air whooshes out of me as I grapple at the duvet. I feel the fabric wrapped around me pulling, and then all at once, it’s gone. Ripped away from where it was covering my bare ass. Exposing my skin to the chilly air.

Something falls to the floor with a thud. *My knife.*

Vale bites out a curse when he realizes I was naked under my costume.

I roll my head, peeking over my shoulder. Wiggling my butt, I say, “Can I at least keep the wings?”

Rather than answer me out loud, he smacks my ass. *Hard.* Harder than he hit my face.

I hiss, bucking forward into the mattress, prompting a dark chuckle from him as he smooths a hand over my throbbing flesh.

Then, suddenly, there’s a hand reaching between my legs, brushing up over my balls so unexpectedly my stomach caves in, and I find myself arching up for him. All but shoving my greedy hole in his face.

He gives my dick a firm squeeze, his hand warm and so, so big, at the same time the other one comes down hard on my other cheek. Not as hard as the first *thwack*, but still scorching.

A moan punches out of me, breaking off into a gasp. Unintelligible nonsense scrambles out from my parched throat as he hums in appreciation. “You like being spanked, huh? Like it when I hit you?”

Squeezing my eyes shut, all I can do is nod.

Pretty sure I’d nod to just about anything right now.

“So fucking needy,” he mutters, almost like he’s talking to himself. He strokes my cock at the same time he spreads one cheek, stealing a peek of my hole. “Such a little slut for it, aren’t you?”

I try not to squirm.

“A pretty little hole for a pretty little slut.” Then without warning, or any prep, he jams a finger in me.

If it wasn’t for him holding me down, I’m certain I would’ve flown right up out of the bed.

“Shh,” he whispers, stroking my inner walls with a thick, punishing finger. The burn is still there, but I’m pretty sure this is the best burn I’ve ever felt in my entire life. “You’re gonna be good for me now. You know this is what you deserve.” His finger twists and crooks, glancing over that little

sweet spot all too fast before he's pulling out.

"Vale," I whine, and I'm not even ashamed of it. Not one bit. I wiggle my ass, trying desperately to thrust it up at him at the same time he circles his fingers around my balls and squeezes. I manage to grunt out a single word. "More."

It *hurts*. Fuck, does it hurt. This need inside me. This emptiness. The vice on my sac. The echo of his slaps. It all hurts so fucking good and so fucking bad, I no longer know up from down. Right from wrong...

Not that I ever gave such follies much consideration to begin with.

"Jesus, look at you," he says, releasing my balls, sliding back up between my ass before letting go of me completely.

Tears crest my eyes as I white-knuckle the paisley printed duvet. Beneath me, my dick weeps into the scratchy fabric like a poor old widow mourning her long-lost love. Lonely, inconsolable, and so, so tragically deprived.

Another hard smack to my ass has red-hot delicious pain shooting up my spine.

"You like it when I hurt you, don't you?" he says, trailing his fingers over my bruised, beaten flesh. "You like being at my mercy, you sick little freak."

I bite the blanket, grinding desperately into the bed.

"That's it," he whispers. I hear the glorious sound of a belt coming undone. The soft *click* and *zip* of his fly. "Show me how badly you want it. You're achin' for it, aren't you? Look at that pretty pink hole, fluttering about, begging to be filled."

Yes, yes, yes!

A dark, wicked chuckle fills the room, and then I hear a loud spit a second before I feel wetness dripping down the cleft of my ass. Rough, angry fingers rub it around my flesh, sinking into my tight heat. I've never felt so simultaneously connected and disconnected from a lover.

I'm nothing more than an object to him.

Property to be used and abused.

But when he grabs my hand, pinning it next to my head, and blankets that big, fully clothed body over me, crushing my wings between us, and knocking against my quivering hole with the blunt head of his cock...

I realize I've never felt so damn owned either.

A whimper escapes me as he begins nudging himself inside me, squeezing that fat head through the first ring of muscle.

He turns his head, licking a stripe up my neck. He hums, nipping my skin

with his teeth. “You’re a sweet little thing, aren’t you?” He says the words so quietly, I can’t even be sure they’re for me. “Sweet under all that filth.”

And then with one firm, powerful thrust, he blows his way through whatever resistance was left, impaling me on his thick, long cock. Bringing forth a noise out of me, the likes of which I’m not even sure is human. It’s all guttural and whimpery, and if I had any shame, I’m pretty sure I’d want to die from it.

“Fuck yes, Sugar, scream for me,” he growls, clamping his teeth down on my shoulder and sucking my skin like his life depends on it.

Scratch being owned. I’ve never felt so *loved*.

So worshiped.

Fingers clench around mine, while the other hand squeezes my waist. Blunt nails dig into my skin as he fucks into me hard and fast. Not bothering to wait for me to adjust.

I lift my sweaty head from the bed, rolling it to the other side.

My eyes collide with a droopy, glassy set of blue peeking down at me from the head of the bed.

Oh, hi there, I think, a breathless smile creeping up my flushed face.

Fortunately for me, Vale’s too busy fucking me within an inch of my life to notice that his sweet, sleepy Prince Charming has awoken from his slumber. Even if he’s too out of it to do much other than stare back blearily.

Biting down on my lip, I let my eyes roll back as another, deep-seated groan of pleasure squeezes from my throat.

“Fuck,” Vale pants next to my ear. “How are you so fucking tight?”

I clench my hole around his girth, grinning when I pull out another one of those harsh curses. He’s so deep inside me, deeper than I’ve ever felt anything before.

I’d be scared if it didn’t feel so damn good.

If this wasn’t *Vale* splitting me in two.

Fuck me, little mouse. Fuck me like you mean it.

As if he heard me, he pulls back, almost all the way out, dragging my hips to the edge of the bed so my legs are spread wide, dangling off the side before slamming into me, punching out a sharp yelp.

“That’s it,” he growls. “Let me hear you. Let them all hear you. Let them know how much of a slut you are for it.”

The room steams up. Everything starts to feel hazy and yet *too much* as Vale starts hammering my prostate with quick, short, unforgiving thrusts. The

new angle giving me no wiggle room whatsoever as my wings flop around, drawing harsh shadows over the walls.

My balls and I are at his mercy.

“Vale,” I pant, white-knuckling the covers as my cock drags painfully against the rough duvet.

He hums against my neck, nosing around at the sweat clinging there. Fingers digging into my back with a bruising grip.

A hand slides up, fingers tangling in my hair before he wrenches my head back. His teeth drag along my ear. “Look at you. Cheeks all flushed. Strangling my cock like a good boy.” His other hand stretches around my waist and squeezes as he grounds his dick into me, this time not even bothering to pull out.

He just sits on my fucking prostate like he owns it.

A strangled noise escapes my lips.

“You gonna come?”

“P-please.”

Another low, wicked hum. His teeth are mashed against my cheek, nose flared with his heavy, hot breaths as he says, “Then do it. No one’s fucking stopping you.”

More nonsense fumbles out of my mouth. Pleas and whimpers that have his grip on me bordering on deadly as those cruel fingers slide once more around my throat.

My vision blackens at the corners as he squeezes. Not letting up.

“Come.”

I didn’t realize how close I was until this very moment. Until Vale gave me permission.

No, *ordered* me.

Lungs straining, body quaking, fire licking up my spine...I grind my hips down into the mattress, just two shallow little thrusts.

And with Vale’s big body surrounding me, his hand on my neck, his teeth in my hairline, and his fat dick buried deep inside me—

I shatter.

Spilling hot sticky warmth in the duvet, eyes rolling back into my head, as the world around me fractures in and out.

I hardly even notice him giving one more deep powerful thrust inside me, before he comes apart with a muffled groan buried into my hair.

Hot cum fills me up, flooding my insides, pulling another shudder from

my body.

I don't even realize I'm coughing choking gasps as I can finally breathe again—too distracted by the sudden loss of him as he pulls out to realize he's released my windpipe.

He's not gentle.

Not sweet.

He pulls his dick out of me the same way he first entered me: Callous. Cold. Merciless.

“Get dressed.”

Blinking heavily, I use my boneless arms to push up off the mattress. Nearly stumbling to the floor when I find my feet. A quick glance down shows my cock is red-raw, shaft glistening with sticky cum. The hue matches my sneakers.

Behind me, I feel wetness dribbling out of my sore, used hole.

“What, no snuggle?” I mumble, running my fingers through my hair.

A hand whips out, gripping me by the jaw.

I stumble forward, my chest bumping against his. He's still dressed, while I'm over here, in nothing but my flimsy angel wings and red high-tops, skin flushed and bruised, covered in my own sweat and cum.

Black, murderous eyes glare down at me, and I gulp before I can stop it. My tender throat screaming in protest.

Chills break out across my neck as a prickle of awareness scrapes along the back of my mind the longer I stare into those vacant orbs. Flashes of images flicker over my vision, but like always, that night is mostly shrouded in black.

Maybe I fucked him up more than I thought. Something twinges in my gut at the thought.

But before I can dwell too hard on it, Vale blinks, and whatever weirdness was there a second ago is gone, and I'm being shoved away like I'm nothing more than a useless, discarded rag doll.

He grabs the white, wrinkled sheet from the ground, balls it up, and throws it at my chest. Without a word, he stomps toward the door, only pausing when a muffled moan sounds from behind me.

His hand clenches around the doorknob, and he hangs his head before glancing over his shoulder. I follow his gaze to where little Pete struggles to move. His eyes are cracked to slits, head drooping like it weighs a thousand pounds.

“Mmrr,” he says. Moans, really.

“Great,” Vale mutters.

I cast another glance toward the door, my brows knitting when I catch the tick in Vale’s jaw as he scrubs his hands over his hair. His gaze is trained on the ground, but he suddenly seems miles away, lost in thought.

I take that as my sign to go. I got what I needed. No use pressing my luck.
Patience, little grasshopper.

Quickly, quietly, I wrap the sheet around my waist, knotting it against my hip bone where it starts to sag. Running a hand through my hair, I wince when my fingers catch on a knot.

Without another word, I easily side-step a mute Vale and throw open the door.

Loud, heavy rap music bowls me over, intermingling with the raucous noises of the party still going on strong below.

A couple people lingering by the stairs turn their wide eyes my way when they notice me strutting toward them, gazes dropping to my bare chest. I smirk and give them a wink.

They all but throw themselves out of the way, allowing me to pass by.

More stares greet me as I make my descent, weaving through the bodies loitering along the stairs and down the hall. An open bottle of rum just sitting unattended on an end table grabs my attention, so I grab it, bringing the lip to my mouth.

Music is blasting from the surround-sound speakers, tickling my ear drums. It feels like the whole house is vibrating with each resounding thud of the bass.

Some people laugh when they notice me. Some sneer. Some look horrified by the sheer sight of me.

My skin tingles. Chest feels all warm. Cheeks hurt from sucking in a smile.

I can feel their eyes boring holes into my exposed skin, tracing the bites and bruises that no doubt litter my back, my neck, my arms as I pass them.

My grin turns rogue at the thought, at the images I have in my head.

Did they hear us? Did they hear the way I screamed for him?

Can they see the wet spots in the sheet from Vale’s cum leaking down my legs?

Just as I reach outside, I hand the near-empty bottle to some greasy dude smoking a joint.

With a wink, I say, “Thanks for having me.”

Leaving him gaping after me, I skip down the steps, throw my arms out, grin up at the moon, and howl.

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VALE

*W*hat the fuck did I just do?

Kicking the bathroom door closed, I flip the light on with my elbow and haul a barely conscious Seth toward the tub.

The heavy sound of “6 FEET UNDER” by GRAVEDGR plays from downstairs, loud but muffled as it shakes the floor and rattles the fancy light fixture above the sink. Each pulse sends flickers of yellowy light over the room like it’s a fucking disco ball.

The walls are bloodred, and for a second, my vision blurs, seeing double, as that red seems to reflect off my fingers.

Dropping Seth into the tub with an unceremonious thud, I turn the shower on, letting it run cold. Hopefully, it’ll shock some life into him so I can get him the fuck out of here and forget this night ever happened.

With a sigh, I scrub my hands down my face and head toward the sink.

Gripping the counter, I drop my head, resting all my weight in my clenched fingers.

Looking up through my lashes, I take in my reflection. The hard planes of my face. My dark tousled hair. My nearly black eyes.

I watch as my jaw works and I narrow my gaze, unable to help myself from remembering the way Aston looked up at me only minutes ago. Wondering what he saw in me to prompt that delicate gulp against the heel of my palm.

For a split second, he looked almost...scared.

Petrified like a cute, ruined little bunny.

So unlike the annoying little shit who’d drugged my boyfriend. The guy

who's made it his mission to provoke me.

He looked like my brother, I realize.

The one I remember. The one that came...before.

The ends of my vision turn black as memories invade.

Three... four... you should'a locked the door...

His childish singing echoes, thrashing around my skull.

Images of Rick flash across my mind as I squeeze my eyes shut and drop my head. His snarling face. That heavy gut jiggling about above his open fly. The grubby hands reaching for my neck, his even grubbier dick swinging about.

My nose flares as disgust and something else, something red-hot, sparks a fire in my chest.

I don't realize I've let go of the sink and pulled out the knife from my pocket—the one I swiped from the bedroom floor where it fell—not until I've already broken skin, right over where I cut myself all those years ago on a shard of glass.

Just over the meat of my thumb, I watch as ruby red droplets bubble up from the small nick, and fight the urge not to squeeze my hand around the sharp slick metal.

“V-Vale,” a voice whimpers behind me, but I barely hear him.

Not under the blood roaring in my ears.

My mouth ticks up as I glance up through my lashes, taking in my reflection once more.

Dad's warning from so many weeks ago tumbles through my head.

So much for not poking the beast, I think with a slow shake of my head.

I almost want to laugh at the thought.

Even if worse comes to worst and Aston does remember...

Would anyone actually believe him? Especially after all these years.

Another plea comes from behind me, this one clearer, louder.

Straightening to my full height, I close the knife and slip it back in my pocket. Turning, I stride toward the wet, boneless heap in the clawfoot tub and cock my head.

Seth's blue eyes are bloodshot to hell, pupils no bigger than a pinprick.

He's awake, but he's still fucking out of it. I turn off the icy water pounding down on him from the showerhead.

Does he remember what happened? I wonder, replaying the scene in the bedroom. Remembering the slitted eyes that stared back as I fucked Aston

into the mattress, unable to look away.

Seth's head droops as his eyes flutter shut again, but at least he's able to carry some weight this time when I heave his sopping wet body to a stand.

"Someone's had a bit too much to drink, huh?" I say flatly.

His little moan tells me he agrees, and I give his cheek a couple pats. A drop of blood smears across his jaw, turning pink from the chilly water clinging to his face.

Tucking his head to my chest as I wrap an arm around him, I guide him toward the door. His feet drag, but some part of him must be online, making it so I don't have to pick him up and carry him again. Not that he's heavy, but my arms are tired.

Hell, my whole body is after unleashing on Aston like that.

You kissed him. What the hell was that?

It shut him up, though, didn't it?

"Cabin Fever" by Corpse starts playing as we make our way down the hall, loud enough to drown out the battle going on in my head.

I get a couple side-eyes and wary smiles, but I'm not too worried. It's not like they know for certain what happened in that room. It's not like anyone tried to stop it even if they had heard or suspected something was amiss.

The door wasn't locked. Someone could've come in at any point to see what was going on and tried to put a stop to it.

But they didn't.

Fucking cowards.

And it's not like Seth will remember this night to give any sort of credible account should it even come up.

Just like Aston doesn't remember what happened all those years ago.

The night I saved his life.

The night I stole his future.

The night I damned us to a lie.

This is what you get for poking first, Sugar.

**Vale and Aston's story is far from over.
Sweet Wicked Thing will be converted into a full-length standalone soon.
It's available for Pre-Order on Amazon.**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessie Walker is an indie author based out of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her long-time partner and fur-spawn. Drawn to all things dark and twisted, nitty and gritty, she likes to pretend she's not the hopeless romantic at heart that she is. When she's not drudging away at a keyboard, there's a very good chance you'll find her vegged out on her couch, listening to sad '90s grunge, and dreamin' up all the ways she can make the voices in her head suffer (just so she could put them back together again). She has a BS in Psychology, and will probably diagnose you.

Find out more about Jessie Walker and her work at www.authorjessiewalker.com

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MUSTANG'S TORMENT

A SONS OF EREBUS PREQUEL

MISTY WALKER

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MUSTANG

“Is that new Freewheeler out there yours?” I ask Willy, one of the mechanics.

He slides out from under a Honda Civic. “It is.”

I throw my head back in laughter. “Fuckin’ A, Grandpa.”

“You’re young now, but someday you’ll be old as dirt like me. And when that time comes, you’ll be after comfort.” The deep lines around his mouth bunch together in a pucker.

“I don’t know. I’d sooner drive a cage than a trike.” I barely manage to dodge the wrench he chucks at my head. I was expecting it since it’s not the first time. It clatters to the ground, startling everyone around us. As soon as they realize it’s just Willy being Willy, they go back to what they were doing.

“Get the hell outta here and do something more productive than rib an old man.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I untie the sleeves of my coveralls from around my waist and push my arms through before zipping myself up and walking to the front of The Garage. It’s a boring name for a car repair shop, but Cyrus has never been the creative type. Smart as a whip, though.

At twenty-five years old, he and his best friend, Wrecker, simultaneously opened this shop and founded the Reno chapter of the Sons of Erebus. For a long time, The Garage was an excellent way for them to clean their cash and easily access tools and mechanics to fix their bikes when needed.

These days, the place is legit. Any member of the club with a decent knowledge of engines is afforded a steady job, which isn’t nothing for guys like me with a rap sheet. Especially since the only thing I know is engines.

It's gotten harder the last few years with everything going electrical, but Cy is good about sending us to classes to keep up on shit.

Running a hand through my hair, I watch a blue Limited F-150 pull up to the bay. A godawful noise comes from the cabin, even though the doors are shut and the windows and moonroof are closed. Damn. Sounds like gunshots or some shit. What the hell?

The driver kills the engine and opens his door. First thing I notice is the loud popping doesn't quit when the truck shuts off. Second, the man who gets out is fucking impressive. Three-piece gray suit, white shirt, and an orange tie. He has on aviators and is clean-shaven, with his hair impeccably styled. There's no doubt he's loaded.

Exactly the type of guy who'd like to take my dick for a ride before going home to his wife and kids. This day just got a whole lot more interesting.

"Looks like you got a problem." I walk over and shut the driver's door, not muting the annoying sound but quieting it. Turning to face him, I flash my million-dollar smile to feel him out, but I can't get a read on him with his sunglasses.

"I just bought this truck last week, and it started doing this on my way to work today." He gestures to the truck, and I catch sight of his trimmed, glossy nails. What do they call guys like this? Metrosexual? "I did everything I could think of to make it stop. I turned off the sound system, pulled over and cut the engine, but nothing worked. I was going to take it to the dealership, but they're closed on Mondays."

"Yeah, dealerships don't cater to the customer," I mutter, moving to the passenger side. "Plus, you'd be lucky if they got you in a week from now."

He follows me. "Your place was closest, so I came here."

Opening the door, I locate the fuse box on the footwell and pop it open. After studying the diagram on the back of the panel, I remove the audio control fuse, leaving us in sweet silence.

I breathe a sigh of relief. It was so loud; my ears are ringing after only a few seconds. Can't imagine how damaged this guy's hearing is after driving from the freeway to here. I place the panel and the fuse on the seat before turning around and coming face-to-face with the man.

"Thank god," the man says, removing his sunglasses and giving me a better look at him. Light brown eyes, full lips, and a square jaw with an indent in his chin. He looks familiar. Too fucking familiar.

There's no way.

“What’s your name?” I ask more forcefully than intended, but if this is who I think it is, there’s about to be a problem.

His brow furrows as he takes me in, not answering my question. Instead, recognition gleams in his eyes, and he asks his own. “Mike?”

Goddamn it. I was right. This is the motherfucker who made my life miserable all through school. I’m a confident, grown-ass man now, but back then, I was a scrawny, insecure kid who was put in a school he didn’t belong in. And hell if this guy didn’t let me forget it.

“Jenson Poole,” I deadpan. It’s not a question. There’s no doubt in my mind that’s who he is.

He looks me up and down before taking in our location. “Well, looks like you ended up right where I thought you would.”

I’m not oblivious. I know what he sees. I haven’t had a haircut in months, my coveralls are filthy, I’m caked in grease, and we’re standing in front of a rundown mechanic shop with a bona fide junkyard off to the side. For a guy like Jenson, I’ve always been trash; this just confirms it to him.

“I was fine until your ass showed up.” I slam the passenger door closed and head toward the office.

Noticing I’m not going to give him the time of day, let alone solve the problem with his truck, he growls in frustration.

“Mike, wait,” he calls out.

But I don’t wait. I stride into the office, hoping to find a distraction, but it’s empty. Where’s Tigger when you need him? Seconds later, the bell hanging above the door jingles and Jenson walks in. We stare at each other, neither of us giving in, which is probably shocking for him because growing up, I was the one to cower.

Well, buckle in, motherfucker. I ain’t cowering anymore.

“Listen,” he starts. “I can see you’re still pissed.” I growl, and he holds up his hands in defense. “Rightfully so. I was a bit arrogant in my youth.”

“Damn straight. And from what I can tell, you still are. Why don’t you turn around, get back in your flashy truck, and get the hell out of here?” I point to the door.

Cyrus picks this second to walk in. The old bear of a man looks between us, assessing the situation. “Everything okay in here?”

“It’s fine. I’ll find another shop.” He turns to leave but stops with his hand on the door. “Can I drive it without that thing in it?”

Cy’s brows pitch in question. “Thing?”

I keep my lips pursed tight, but when Cy's head tilts, I give in with a huff. "His fuse. Something's going on with his audio system."

He glances outside, mentally noting that Jenson's truck is worth more than the building we're standing in. I can practically see the dollar signs flash across his greedy eyeballs.

"Fuse?" Cy asks. He gestures out the door. "Let's go take a look."

Goddamn it. Did he not pick up on the fact that I don't want this guy anywhere near me? I stay rooted in the office while the two leave. I'll let Cy reset his system and send him on his way. Until then, I'll hide out.

I watch as Cy speaks with the man who harassed me, embarrassed me, and turned every kid against me without a drop of remorse. Jenson's arms are folded across his chest as he listens intently to whatever Cy is saying, giving me a chance to appraise him. He appears to be doing well for himself; I'll give him that. But it's not hard to do when you grow up rich and spoiled. I'd bet my right nut he was handed a position with his daddy's company right after he graduated from the prestigious college their money also got him into.

Not me. I grew up in Section 8 housing, and even then, it was hard for Mom to make rent. I had no business going to private schools, but Mom—who now lives in our clubhouse and goes by Sugar after adopting all my MC brothers—applied for every scholarship she could find to put me there.

She had it in her head that if I got some fancy education and made friends with the rich kids, I would make connections and be afforded opportunities. But after I saw how intolerant, cruel, and cold those kids were to me, I had no interest in being anything like them.

Cy holds out his hand for Jenson to shake, then makes his way back to me, making sure the door is shut before speaking.

"Take the truck to bay three and reset his audio system. See if that does the trick." He tosses the key fob at me.

"Like hell, I will," I argue.

"Don't test me, boy."

"Come on, man. You have no idea who he is to me," I whine like a toddler.

"What? Did he kick you out on your ass after you boned him?"

Ouch. . . but valid. He knows I have a type.

"No. Good guess, though." I follow him through the side door and into a bay. "You know how Sugar sent me to all those private schools?"

"Yeah."

“Well, that rich asshole out there made my life a living fucking hell all through school. I can’t do this, Prez. I’d be too tempted to snip his brake line.”

Cy stops, turning to me. “Listen. The shop is dead today, and I’d like to make some money, so do whatever you have to do to heal your inner child.” He puts the last part in air quotes. “Upcharge the shit out of him, cut his brake line; I don’t give a fuck. Just fix his damn audio system, get his credit card, and send him packing.”

I’m clearly not going to get out of this, so I roll my eyes and walk my sorry ass out to the truck. Without saying a goddamn word, I get into the truck and start it. While driving it to the bay, I take in the new car smell and relish all the features of this high-end vehicle. I haven’t owned a cage a day in my life, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a nice vehicle.

After parking, I hop out and get to work, if you want to call it that. All I need to do is disconnect the audio component from the power source, wait thirty seconds, and plug it back in. Easy money. But there’s no way I can charge Jenson up the ass for less than a minute of work, so after I unplug it, I seek out Tigger to get the work order sorted.

I find the ginger asshole sitting at the front desk, legs kicked up and a grin on his face as he chats up Jenson. Fucking traitor. He’s been prospecting for the club for over a year now, and so far, he’s had it easy. While we’ve been rebuilding our club after the death of two consecutive presidents, things have been calm. Tame.

I shove Tigger’s feet off the counter and hand him the work order I filled out, ignoring the third person in the room. “You too busy talking to do your job?”

“Nah, man. Just waiting on you.” He brings the computer to life and starts typing. He looks up at me when he gets to the amount I have circled. I narrow my eyes, daring him to challenge me, but like the good prospect he is, he doesn’t say shit about it.

“How long will this take?” Jenson asks.

“As long as it takes,” I grumble.

“I’m going to need a roundabout figure. Thirty minutes? An hour?”

“Are you late for the country club or something?”

“For Christ’s sake, Mike. We were kids, and kids are shitty.” He pops the button of his suit coat and loosens his tie, making me wonder what he looks like underneath all those clothes.

He's clearly taken care of himself, judging by his flat stomach and narrow hips. Goddamn it. Would it be too much to ask for the man I've spent years villainizing to be ugly? Instead, he's even more attractive than he was in high school and let me tell you, it really fucks with a guy's head to get a hard-on for their bully.

"You basically called me trash not ten minutes ago," I remind him.

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Please, just tell me when I can get out of this hellhole."

Then I get an idea. A childish idea but an idea nonetheless. "Looks like we have to order a part. Sorry, but you'll have to come back tomorrow."

"A part? Tomorrow? That other guy said you just had to reset something."

I do my best to look apologetic, but I'm not sure I pull it off. "That's what we thought. Turns out you need a new fuse, and we don't keep those in stock."

Tigger starts to stand. "Are you sure? I think we—"

I quickly clamp a hand on his shoulder and push him back in his seat. "I'm sure. I checked myself."

Jenson runs a hand through his hair, and it only makes it look better. "Shit. Do you guys offer loaners?"

Tigger laughs way too loud and inappropriately.

"No. Not that kind of shop," I say.

Jenson turns away. "Guess I'll call an Uber."

"Good luck with that," Tigger says, and I prop myself up against the wall, getting comfortable because this part's really gonna piss him off.

"Why do you say that?"

"No ride share is gonna come onto Sons' property. They might pick you up on the highway, though."

"Sons?" he asks, genuinely having no clue where he is.

"You see that compound to the right?" Tigger points out the window.

Jenson walks to the window and peers out. "That looks more like a prison with the razor wire going around it."

"Yeah, that's our clubhouse. This shop is owned by Cyrus, the president of our motorcycle club. I believe you spoke to him earlier."

"So what?"

I push off the wall. "You ever heard of the Sons of Erebus?"

His eyes go wide and dance around the office covered in SOE

memorabilia. He's finally getting it.

"I'm the secretary for the club, and Tigger is a lowly prospect." I pound Tigger on the back.

Our reputation precedes us, and not always in a good way. Sure, we do our fair share of charity runs where we raise big-time money for those in need, but that's not what Jenson's thinking about right now. He's thinking about the hushed whispers of murder and violence that can't be proven. And the few times it was proven, our members were put behind bars. He's thinking about how people bend to our will when we're in town because they fear us. Even more, he's thinking he best not piss us off, or he'll be on the receiving end of our wrath.

That's right, motherfucker. The roles have reversed.

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JENSON

How did that scrawny, dirty little punk who used to piss himself when I walked by end up in a motorcycle club? I've vaguely heard of the Sons of Erebus; of course I have. They've been in the news over the years for both good and bad reasons.

"So, you were picked on as a kid and decided a healthy way of dealing with that was to get involved in organized crime?" I ask before I can think about what's coming out of my mouth.

"Hey," the red-headed guy says, but Mike gives him a look that shuts him up. I don't blame him. That look would shut me up too.

"You wouldn't understand." Mike resumes his casual position against the wall.

He's changed a lot since high school. Back then, he took emo to an extreme, which didn't help him fit in with the elitist kids at our private Christian academy. It was clear he didn't belong, which made him an easy target. Though that's not why I singled him out and made him the most hated kid in school.

I'm not proud of how I handled things, but I didn't have the emotional maturity to voice my feelings, so I did what kids do best. I bullied him. It wasn't fair, but life isn't fair. I learned that the hard way and damn well made sure he did too.

"This is all very interesting, but it doesn't change the fact that you're keeping my truck overnight, and I need a ride." I rub at my temples. A headache has been forming since I pulled into this dump, and it's getting worse by the minute. Probably from the fumes.

“I suggest you start walking.” Mike shrugs.

“I can give him a ride,” the redhead offers, earning another searing look from Mike.

It’s obvious he wants to punish me, and I get it. If I were him, I’d make my life hell too, but I have an important meeting in an hour I have to be at. So, if I need to beg or pay my way out of this, I will. Both, if I must.

“Thank you”—I glance down at his name tag—“Tigger?”

“It’s my road name.” He points to his head. “You know, given I’m a ginger. Usually, we don’t get one until we’re patched in, but Prez hated my real name so much I got mine early.”

“What’s your real name?” I ask, despite myself.

“Wallace.”

Mike rolls his eyes and huffs. “No, you can’t drive him anywhere, asshole. You gotta man the desk.”

“My office is just downtown. It won’t take long,” I say.

Mike stands to his full height, and I wonder if he grew after high school or if he just slouched so much before that I never knew how tall he was. That’s not the only difference. He’s bigger too.

I peruse him with appreciation. It appears he’s poured into his coveralls with the way they pull and stretch over his muscular body. By no means is he clean-cut, and his messy hair and overgrown stubble only add to his appeal. Doesn’t everyone love a bad boy?

Being attracted to him isn’t a new thing. Even in high school, all the black, the crazy hair, and his lankiness didn’t stop me from wanting him. He still has soulful eyes that tell a story just by looking into them and a square, masculine jaw that, even as a teen, was covered in scruff. But it was the way he never hid who he was that did me in. Even when he was being shoved into a locker or trash can, he never apologized for being himself.

He was magnetic, and I was jealous.

“I’ll take you.” Mike grabbed a set of keys off the wall and stalked past me, throwing the door open.

“This should be fun,” I mutter.

“Mustang’s a great guy. You just seem to bring out the worst in him,” Tigger says.

“Mustang?”

“That’s his road name.”

“And how did he get his? He looks nothing like a horse.”

Tigger chuckles. “You’ll have to ask him about that.”

“Right.” I fix my tie and button my coat, scanning the parking lot and finding Mike getting into an ancient and dirty tow truck. Looking down at myself, I wonder if I’ll have to burn this suit after today. “Right,” I repeat, pumping myself up. I can do this. It’s just a ride with a grouchy man, and tomorrow, I’ll send someone else to pick up my truck. I’ll never have to see him again.

“Let’s go!” he shouts, and I jog to the truck.

Opening the door, I see the inside is almost as bad off as the outside. The seats are torn and haphazardly repaired with duct tape. At least twenty air fresheners hang from the rearview, and a thick layer of desert dust coats every surface.

“Do you have a towel or something?” I ask, opening myself up to ridicule, but I’m wearing a custom-tailored Armani.

“No, princess. I don’t have a towel,” he huffs.

Seeing no other choice, I dust the seat off the best I can and climb in, carefully keeping my now dirty hand away from my clothes. Once in, I try to latch my seatbelt, but the damn thing looks to have been cut off with scissors. This is turning into a nightmare of epic proportions, and it’ll be a miracle if I live to tell the tale.

“You’re fine. Stop being a pussy.”

“I’m not a pussy. I just prefer not to walk into a boardroom looking like I just went through a dust storm.”

“Pussy,” he grumbles and takes off like a bat out of hell, the force of it thrusting me back into the seat. With every turn, I slide from side to side. The only thing stopping me from slamming into him is the center console between us.

“Can you at least try to not give me a concussion?” I ask.

“Hold on to the “oh shit” handle if you’re that worried about it,” he says, cranking the wheel in a sharp left.

I fly across the seat and hit the console, sending the old paper coffee cups toppling into my lap. I gasp, too shocked to scream the profanities going through my mind. Glancing down, I see someone also used the cups as an ashtray, so not only am I covered in coffee, but now cigarette butts are stuck to my trousers.

“Shit.” Mike splits his attention between me and the road, grabbing the empty cups and righting them. “Sorry about that.”

“Sorry? You’re sorry? I asked you to stop driving like a maniac.” I flick the cigarettes to the ground.

“And I told you to hold the fuck on.”

“I shouldn’t have to brace myself for a damn car ride.”

“I can’t do shit about it now. I said I’m sorry.”

The smell of stale ash and coffee wafts over me, and my stomach turns. “I can’t go to the office like this. You’ll have to take me home first.”

“First? I’m not a damn taxi.”

“Whatever. Take me to the Palladio.”

He side-eyes me. “Of course you live there. Probably in the penthouse too.”

“You would be correct.” I don’t apologize for my wealth because I had absolutely no choice in it.

I reach into my drenched pocket to pull out my phone, realizing I left it back in my truck.

“I don’t have my phone,” I grit through clenched teeth.

“So?”

“So I can’t call for a ride to the office after you drop me off, Mike.”

“The name’s Mustang now.”

“I don’t give a shit if your name’s Pony. I don’t have my phone. I can’t call for a car. That means you have to wait for me to shower and then take me to work.”

“Like hell I do.”

Irritation washes over me, and the urge to pummel this man is overwhelming. I’ve never been in a fight, let alone one with a man who is clearly bigger than me, but in this moment, I’m willing to risk it. That truck has brought me nothing but bad luck since I drove it off the lot. The second I get it back, I’m driving back to the dealership and returning the damn thing.

Taking a calming breath, I reassess the situation. I have to be at this meeting, and *Mustang* will be the one to take me. If I have to swallow my pride and beg, I will, because if I’m not there. . . well, I can’t think about what will happen.

“Please,” I say with as much sincerity as I can.

“Why don’t you just call in sick? I’m sure being the CEO’s kid has some privileges.”

“How do you know I work for my dad’s company?”

“It was a guess. I’m right, though, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

If we were friends, I might expand and tell him how it's not what I wanted to do but being Stratton's son comes with obligations. I might even tell him how my dad has been running the business into the ground and how I finally got him to agree to retire. Then I'd tell him that today is the day he's announcing said retirement, but if I'm not there, he might change his mind. Then I'd be forced to sit back and watch everything my family worked so hard to build crumble right in my lap.

“So? Call in sick.”

I let out a grunt of frustration. “I can't expect you to understand, but this meeting is very important. I can't miss it.”

“Fine. I hope you got some towels because you'll need something to sit on, or you'll just get dirty again.” He white knuckles the steering wheel, making the veins in his hands and forearms pop. My mouth goes dry, and my dick twitches as I imagine that same hand around my throat as he plunged his tongue into my mouth.

“I'm sure I can come up with something,” I say breathlessly and quickly turn my attention out the window. What the hell is wrong with me? I'm no longer a seventeen-year-old idiot without any impulse control. Back then, I allowed myself to follow all those filthy trains of thought involving Mike. I'd fist my cock and jerk off as I conjured up shameful scenes of everything I'd let him do to me.

But not anymore. I banished him from my mind the day we parted ways and haven't thought of him since.

Not often, anyway.

When we reach my condo, he throws an arm across the back of the seat and parallel parks this beast of a truck like a pro. I can't help but be impressed, though I keep it to myself. Compliments won't help the situation.

He turns the ignition off and opens his door to step out.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Coming inside,” he says in a tone that suggests I'm slow.

“No. You can wait out here.”

“Again, I'm not a damn taxi service.”

A knot forms in my stomach as I imagine Mike in my condo. Nope, I can't picture it. But I also can't think of a way to get him to stay put, so I climb out of the truck and, with a lowered head, guide him through the lobby and to my private elevator.

He scoffs about every thirty seconds as we ascend to the top floor and step into my condo, as if my wealth is offending him somehow. Maybe a lesser man would be ashamed but not me. I may have been born into it, but I also worked my ass off to accumulate my own fortune outside of what my family gave me. I didn't choose this life any more than he chose his; what you do with it determines the kind of man you are, and I've done a lot.

"Stay here. I just need a quick shower and a new suit," I say, tossing my wallet into a bowl near the entryway that leads to the living room, where I find Mike perusing. Having him in my space, handling my things, makes me uncomfortable.

"You sure you want to leave me here unattended? A low life like me might steal your"—he picks up a trinket Mom gifted me for Christmas—"whatever the hell this is."

"I'm fairly certain Bergdorf wouldn't match your white trash aesthetic."

"I'm doing you a favor, asshole. The least you could do is drop your pompous bullshit attitude." He turns to the floor-to-ceiling wall of windows. "You'll be lucky if I'm still here when you get out."

He's right. He could just leave, and then what would I do? No phone, no car, no way of getting to that meeting. Anxiety prickles along my skin. I've put years into convincing Dad it's time to retire, and it could all be for naught if I don't get to that meeting on time.

"You're right." I walk over and grip him by the elbow. He stiffens and glares daggers at me. "You're coming with me."

He chuckles. "If you wanted a fuck, all you had to do was ask."

Despite his crassness and my urgency to get out of here, his words go straight to my cock. Thankfully, the head on my shoulders is still in the right place, and I ignore him and tug him to my bedroom.

"Now this is nice." He flops down on my bed, leather boots and all.

"Get your feet off the duvet," I say, stripping off my coat and tossing it in the hamper for my house cleaner to take care of.

"Nah, I'm comfortable like this."

I didn't give in to my twitchy dick a moment ago but seeing Mike sprawled out on my bed nearly makes me rethink my goals for the day. Not even years of his absence have killed my desire to be with him. And why is that? Each time he opens his mouth, it's to spew another insult. He can't stand me, and I'm not his biggest fan. So why am I dying to know what it feels like to be naked with this man?

I unbutton my pants and add them to the pile in the laundry basket. “At least take your boots off.”

He sits up to do that and freezes. He hadn’t seen me strip from his prone position, but he sees me now.

His lips part, and his eyes go half-mast. “You’ve aged well.”

“I wasn’t the one who was all skin and bones,” I say, feeling exposed.

As if coming out of a trance, his posture straightens, and he looks away. “And you didn’t let me forget it, did you?”

“How are you still mad about something that happened in high school? It’s kind of pathetic, really.” I instantly regret my words when a flash of hurt crosses his face. It’s short-lived because that look hardens into one of murderous rage as he jumps to his feet.

“Hell yeah, I’m still pissed. I didn’t want to be at that school any more than you wanted me there.” He stalks toward me, fists clenched. I slowly retreat until my back hits a wall, and he’s inches from my face. “You were the big man on campus, and I was just some scholarship kid with second-hand clothes and a mom who worked her ass off to give me everything she could.”

“You never fought back. Maybe you liked it. Maybe you’re a masochist.”

His hand lands on the base of my throat, and his grip tightens, restricting my airflow. I swallow, realizing I may have taken things too far—back then and right now.

“Like you said, I was skin and bones back then. But I’m not now.”

“Let go, Mike,” I order as though I’m the one in charge when it’s clear to both of us that I’m not.

He turns my head to the side and presses his nose to my temple, putting his lips millimeters from my ear. His hot breath tickles my skin, and despite my dire situation, my dick throbs. “Nah, I think it’s your turn to know what it feels like to have no power.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I gasp out.

“Wouldn’t I?” He presses his body against me, his head tilting when he feels my obvious erection. “Hmm. Maybe the big bad bully likes to be on the receiving end. Is that it?”

“If I’m not at that meeting, people will come looking for me,” I warn. Though right now, I don’t give two shits about anything besides how turned on I am. My sexual tastes have always skirted the border of vanilla, but this is a whole new level.

“Do you want to make up for all the shitty things you put me through, Jenson?” His grip on my throat tightens, and spots fill my vision, yet my cock is weeping for more. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Depends on what you have in mind,” I say through clenched teeth as he loosens his hold on my neck and turns my head to face him. His pupils are blown, making his brown eyes look pure black.

“Get on your knees,” he growls.

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MUSTANG

What the fuck am I doing? Seconds ago, I was planning my escape while he showered, and now I have him pinned against a wall, demanding he suck me off. That's not even the craziest part. The craziest part is that I think he might actually do it. That's what has me frozen in place.

"You want me to—" He swallows hard and looks down.

"One orgasm for years of abuse. I think it's a fair trade." I don't even know who I am right now. This isn't how my hookups go. I'm the good-time guy who makes fucking fun. I'm not the aggressive type who forces men to their knees. Though, maybe I am because my cock is nearly as hard as Jenson's right now.

"You don't even like me."

"I don't need to like you for you to get me off." When he makes no move to lower, I second guess the situation and release him. "That's what I thought. You were too scared back then, and you're too scared now."

It isn't until the words are out of my mouth that I realize how similar this situation is to graduation night, the last time I saw Jenson. I made the mistake of attending the senior bonfire. Jenson and his group of assholes did what they always did and went out of their way to let me know I wasn't welcome. I decided the best thing to do was leave, but Jenson followed me into the forest.

I allowed him to trick me into thinking I was weak and pathetic, so when he cornered me, spewing some shit about me being trash, I stood there and took it. And just like we are now, we were close. Really close. I don't think either of us was expecting it when he kissed me. I wasn't the one to start it,

but I took over the second his lips were on mine. I had his shirt off and went for his belt when he shoved me away.

The things he said after that fucked with my head for a long time. It wasn't until later in life that I realized he was too chickenshit to admit to himself that he wanted me, and judging by the situation we're in now, he still does. Only this time, if he tries to put a spin on this, I'll be ready. I don't take shit from anyone. Not anymore.

"You think I won't do it?" Indignation gleams in his eyes.

"No. I don't." My words are cut off when his nimble fingers work fast and furious unzipping my coveralls. Once he reaches the bottom, he grabs the fabric at my shoulders and tugs. His jaw ticks as he works them down to my shoes, leaving me only in my underwear and tank. I'm too stunned to move, so I stand stock-still, watching his every move.

My cock springs free as he pushes my boxer briefs to the ground and sinks to his knees, placing his hands on my thighs. I nearly come without any contact when he comes face to face with my cock and licks his lips. Every second he stalls feels like an hour. I can't remember ever wanting something more than his mouth on me, and he's taking his sweet time making it happen.

"Don't just stare at it. Suck it down like a good boy."

He glares at me as he takes me in hand, squeezing a little harder than necessary, but the bite of pain feels good. He points my dick straight up and licks the underside from root to tip.

"Oh, fuck." I groan at how heavenly his warm, wet tongue feels. His lips wrap around me, and in one go, he sucks me until my tip bumps the back of his throat. I lift onto my toes, the sensation too much, too soon, leaving me barely clinging to control.

He works me over, bobbing up and down, slurping and sucking like a fucking pro. I weave my hands into his hair, needing something to hold on to. The man is sucking my soul out through my cock, and I am unprepared. When one of his hands moves lower to cup my balls, I know it's over.

I should be embarrassed, but Jenson isn't messing around, and I dare any other man to last any longer than this.

"I'm coming," I announce because I'm not a total tool.

Of all the different ways this could end, he chooses the one I least expect. Both hands return to my cock, and he pumps me up and down with his mouth open wide, the tip of my cock resting on his tongue. Jesus fuck, he wants to taste me? That's my last thought before my entire body lights up like a

goddamn Christmas tree, and an orgasm tears through me.

I fight to keep my eyes open as I feel my cock pulse. Ropes of thick cum spurt from my tip, shooting into his mouth and coating his tongue. His gaze lifts to mine, and for a split second, his angry demeanor slips and I see the desire that was hiding behind it. Knowing he wanted this as much as I do has prolonged my release, sending one more wave of pleasure through me.

His stroke's slow, and I watch with rapt attention as he makes a show of drawing his tongue back into his mouth. I track the movement of his Adam's apple as it bobs with his dramatic swallow. My cock isn't in any position to show more interest, yet it twitches all the same.

"There. We even now?" His stern glare returns as he stands and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Fuck yeah." There's no point in playing it cool when he made me blow my load in less than a minute. Now that I think about it, I should be embarrassed.

"Good." He turns to enter the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Shit. I can't believe that just happened. After yanking up my boxer briefs, I crouch and pull up my coveralls, tying the sleeves around my waist. I should tuck tail and run, but after a performance like that, the least I can do is give the guy a ride. So, I sit on the corner of the bed and wait.

My mind is still reeling when Jenson yells, "Fuck!" With the door shut and the water running, I can't tell what the curse is for. Is he pissed he accepted my dare? Or is he jerking himself off because he was turned on by what he did? It's best I don't find out the answer to that.

Less than five minutes later, the bathroom door opens. With a towel around his waist, Jenson storms into his closet, not sparing me a glance. I run my hands down my thighs, feeling all kinds of awkward. All my previous anger has dissipated with the emptying of my balls, and now I don't know how to treat him.

In no time at all, he emerges from his closet in a clean suit that looks identical to the one he had on before, though this time, his tie is blue.

"Let's go," he says, straightening his tie.

"Yeah, okay." I stand and follow him out of the room.

He stops in the hallway and pulls a stack of towels from a linen closet before leading me out the front door and back downstairs. Just like when we came into the building, Jenson's head hangs as we walk through the lobby and past his doorman. He's clearly embarrassed to be seen with the likes of

me.

Not a word is said as I climb into the truck and wait for him to pile the towels on the seat, giving him the best chance to not soil his clean suit. I was wrong if I thought what happened upstairs would break the tension between us.

There's been a shift in our power dynamic, and now, he's acting like the wounded party, which has my hackles rising again.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I ask as I weave us into traffic.

"Nothing. Do you know where you're going?"

"I'm assuming Poole Enterprises."

"You're not as dumb as you look."

"Listen, I didn't force you to do anything. You could've told me to fuck off, and I would have listened." If he thinks he's a victim here, he's wrong.

"Can you please just shut the fuck up and drive?"

"I need you to say it."

"Say what?" he asks, incensed.

"That I didn't make you do what you did."

"You didn't make me do anything. There. Can you shut up about it now?"

I stew in silence. That didn't sound sincere at all. It shouldn't bother me, but it fucking does. I saw the way he looked at me. He wanted it too. He probably wanted more than that. Actually, that's probably why he's pissed. I got to come, but he didn't get so much as a hand job.

"You got blue balls or something?" I ask.

His head whips around fast. "What?"

"Is that why you're still angry? Because you didn't get off?"

"Is that the male equivalent of asking if I'm on my period? Because I think I now understand why that makes women angry."

"I'm just saying, I'm cool as a cucumber, and you're still spittin' mad. Maybe you need your balls drained."

"No. That's not why I'm angry," he says but doesn't expand.

"I think it is. Listen, I'm an equal opportunity partner. I'd be more than happy to give you a handy before you go in there." I reach over, making a grab for his crotch, but he bats my hand away.

"No, I don't want a hand job. Especially not from *you*." The condescension in his tone gives me pause.

"Still think you're too good for me, huh?"

"You're a criminal mechanic, and I'm about to take over a multi-billion-

dollar company. ‘I’m too good for you’ doesn’t even cover how I feel.”

My face heats, and my hands tighten on the steering wheel. Every bit of pent-up childhood anger comes rushing back to me. If I don’t get this asshole out of my truck right this minute, I’ll have a dead body on my hands. And while I have no problem taking a life, Cy will definitely have a problem with me killing a man because he bullied me in high school. Since I don’t like getting in trouble with him, I pull over to the side of the road.

“Get the fuck out,” I say as calmly as I can, but it still comes out like a sneer.

“We’re five blocks away still.”

“I’m going to repeat myself one more time. After that, I can’t be held responsible for what happens.”

He takes my meaning and opens the door, sliding out and onto the sidewalk.

“Have you ever wondered how you could attend all those expensive private schools?” he asks, nearly giving me whiplash at the randomness of that question.

“I know how. My mom worked her ass off to get me scholarships.”

“Scholarships?” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Can you name one other kid besides you who had a scholarship?”

Confused but knowing I couldn’t be the only one, I sift through the roster of kids I grew up with. Occasionally someone new came in, or a student would move, but for the most part, it was the same group throughout school. And every single one of them was rich and came from powerful families. I stood out like a sore thumb because I was the only one with ripped jeans and dirty shoes.

When I don’t come up with even one name, Jenson continues, “Exactly. Schools like that don’t offer scholarships. They want to keep trash like you far away from well-bred kids like me.” The door slams, and he takes off down the street, weaving through the slower crowd.

I pull back into traffic, my mind racing. If he’s right, and I’m nearly certain he is, how was I able to attend those schools? It makes no sense. Other than chasing Jenson down, I know of one other person who can give me the answers I need. It’s time for Sugar and me to have a talk.

JENSON

“Congratulations, son.” Dad holds a hand out for me to shake. I take it, keeping my grip firm.

Immense pride and relief flood through me. I got to the meeting in time for Dad to announce his retirement and plan to hand everything over to me. The board’s vote was unanimous, and I was named CEO of Poole Enterprises.

“Thank you, sir. Your company is in good hands.”

“I know it is.” Dad opens the cabinet behind his desk. “Sit down. This calls for an early drink.”

I don’t argue, despite it only being noon. I’ve had a morning from hell, and a glass of bourbon is just what I need to settle my nerves. Dad hands over two fingers of his finest, and I take a sip.

My final conversation with Mike plays through my head. Why did I even ask him that question? It was something I thought about often in high school, but I didn’t care enough to figure it out. I guess I wanted to hurt him, and uncovering a lie that lasted his entire youth had the punch I wanted to deliver.

But now I’m curious all over again. Maybe it’s the knowledge that Dad’s control over me is non-existent anymore or the liquor numbing my senses, but I can’t help but need to ask a few questions. Thankfully, he’s lucid today and might shed some light.

Dad was on the school board and was close friends with the school leadership, so he might know something.

“Do you remember that weird kid who went to school with me? Mike?”

Dad’s grin flattens to a straight line. “The scholarship kid?”

“Yeah.” I take another sip. “Except I don’t think he had a scholarship.”

“Why would you say that?” He leans back in his chair. To anyone else, he’d be the picture of calm and collected. But I know his tell, and his neck only turns that shade of red when he’s uncomfortable. Why does this topic make him nervous?

“I interviewed the principal once for the school paper and asked him how many scholarship kids there were. He said the academy didn’t offer scholarships.” I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but seeing Mike again got me thinking.

“Why else would they let a kid like him attend?” Dad drains his glass in one swallow.

“That’s what I always wondered.”

“And why are you bringing this up after all these years? What does it matter?”

“It doesn’t. Except my new truck had an issue this morning, and Mike was working at the shop I took it to. It got me thinking.”

“He’s a mechanic? Sounds about right.” Something about the way he says it leads me to believe he’s not surprised and not because no one expected Mike to make anything of his life.

“Yeah, me neither. So, you don’t know how he got the money for tuition?”

Dad reaches for the liquor bottle, pouring himself another glass. “Why would I know anything about that?”

I shrug. “I thought since you were friends with the administration, they might’ve said something.”

“Well, they didn’t. Now can I have a celebratory drink with my son?” He raises his glass to toast.

“Sure.”

“Thanks for calling The Garage. How can I help you?” a cheery voice answers my call.

“Tigger?” I ask.

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“Jenson Poole. You guys are replacing a fuse in my truck.”

“Oh yeah. How’s it going, man?”

“Good, thanks. I was calling to see if my truck was ready?”

“Yeah, I saw Mustang park it in the lot to be picked up this morning.”

“Perfect. I’ll be by this afternoon to grab it.”

“Sounds good. See ya.”

I hang up my office phone and pick up the new cell I had my assistant purchase for me yesterday. There was no way I was going to show my face at the shop to pick up my old one after what happened at my apartment. Pulling up my best friend Chase’s contact, I shoot him a text asking if he has time to take me to pick up my truck. I’m not sure how true it is that no ride shares will go past the highway, but I don’t want to take any chances. Chase replies, telling me he can run me out there during his lunch.

I have plenty of employees I could task with picking it up, but part of me wants to see if Mike has come to any conclusions about how he made it into the academy. I have my own theories—like his mom sleeping with the headmaster or blowing someone on the board. I saw her a few times at conferences, and judging by her cheap heels, loudly painted face, and tacky hairstyle, I wouldn’t put it past her.

If I’m being honest with myself, that’s not the only reason I want to see him. I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours replaying that blow job, and each time I do, I end up jacking off to the memory. My damn dick has a friction burn from the times I’ve had to relieve the tension.

He has the most perfect cock I’ve ever seen. His size and girth are not extreme, just enough that I’d see stars if I ever had the chance to take him. He keeps things neat and trimmed, something I wasn’t expecting from a man who doesn’t bother styling his hair. And the way it felt to be on my knees for him, his hands in my hair, and my mouth wrapped around his perfection?

Shit. I’m hard again.

I debate slipping inside my private bathroom and taking care of things, but I’m not lying when I say I’m a bit raw. So instead, I adjust myself and get back to work. I have an hour and a half to get through my list of unanswered emails before Chase stops by.

Surprisingly, I’ve just caught up on emails when there’s a knock on my door. Chase doesn’t bother waiting for an answer before he strolls in. As always, he’s dressed to impress in a designer suit, with his signature red silk pocket square bringing color to an otherwise standard suit.

I met Chase in college and brought him into the company when we

graduated. He's next in line for the CFO position, and since the current one is two years from retirement, it won't be long before he's promoted. We dreamed about running this company together, and soon, it'll be a reality.

"How did your brand-new truck end up in the shop?" he asks, grinning.

"I don't want to talk about it." I close my laptop and stand. "Thanks for driving me."

"No problem."

We take the elevator to the parking garage and climb inside his black Mercedes AMG.

"I don't understand why you bought a truck in the first place. Especially now that you're the CEO," he says, backing up. "Plug the location into the GPS."

"You know I like to hike. Your car wouldn't make it to any of the trails I like," I say as I enter The Garage's address.

"You don't need to drive an hour to work out."

"It's not just a workout. It's getting outside, breathing fresh air. You should try it."

"No, thanks. I doubt there's any eye candy on the trails like at my gym. There's this trainer named Landon who has glutes you could bounce a quarter off of."

"What does Casey think about that?"

"She's right next to me, drooling over Landon's ass too."

I laugh. Their relationship is more open and honest than any other I've seen. Chase has never hidden his bisexuality from Casey, and she's never been insecure about it.

Chase makes the turn off the highway and looks around. "You took your truck to The Garage? The Sons of Erebus own that place."

"I didn't have much choice."

"I don't know, man. I've heard some fucked up shit about these guys." He takes the road toward the club's property.

"How would you hear anything about a biker gang?" Chase and I have all the same friends, and none of them would come near this end of town.

"You know Emmett?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, he likes to *hire dates* sometimes, and one of the girls he hooked up with got wasted and started talking. She hangs around the clubhouse and hears things." He slaps my arm. "Like the VP, Rigger, killed his own dad and

is hooking up with his step-sister,” he says in a scandalized tone. “That’s some crazy shit.”

“Emmett likes to exaggerate.”

“I don’t think he’s exaggerating about this.” He stops the car in front of the office. “Need me to wait around?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.” I get out of the car.

“Just be careful. Don’t piss them off.”

If he only knew.

I smile. “It’s just a car shop.”

The bell on the door jingles when I enter, and I’m greeted by a grinning ginger. The kid looks as innocent as they come, and I wonder how the hell he ended up here. But that’s none of my business.

“Hey, Tigger. You got my keys?” I lean over the desk, peering through the window that leads to the bays, hoping to spot Mike.

“He’s on lunch,” Tigger says.

“Who?” It’s a stupid response. We both know I was looking for Mike.

“Sorry. I assumed you wanted to talk to Mustang about the fuse.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, but if he’s on lunch. . .”

“I can have him call you if you want.”

I shrug. “No, it’s okay. As long as the truck doesn’t sound like a war zone when I turn it on, I’m good.”

“Nope. All good.” He slides the invoice over, and my eyes nearly bug out of my head. It’s not that I don’t have that kind of money. I’m just surprised such a small fix costs this much.

“Overnight storage, labor, and a fuse cost three grand?”

Tigger shrugs. “That’s what it says.”

I blow out a breath and hand over my black card. “Put it on this.”

Once I’ve signed and my fob is handed over, I give Tigger a parting nod and head to the parking lot where I spotted my truck. I’ve just opened the driver’s door when I feel his warm presence pressed into me from behind.

His lips are at my ear when he says, “How did you know I didn’t have a scholarship?”

“You spoke to your mom?” He takes a step back as I turn to face him. My breath hitches at just how sexy this man is.

It’s not just the obvious. There are a lot of tall, lean-muscled, bad boys out there. Something else about him is pulling me in. An almost magnetic draw that has me wanting to be near him, under him, on my knees for him.

Again.

He studies his feet, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “She insisted that she applied for and received scholarships for me.”

“But you don’t believe her?”

“No, and to be honest, I don’t even know why it bothers me. What the hell do I care? It was years ago. That part of my life is over and done with.”

“Maybe because you think she was making other concessions to get you there?” I suggest.

He freezes for only a moment as he takes in my words. Then the next thing I know, I’m being shoved up against my truck again. His chest heaves, and anger vibrates off him. “Are you saying my mom is some kind of whore?”

I hold up my hands. “I didn’t say it. You did.”

He rears back his fist and punches me in the face. Then it’s lights out for me.

MUSTANG

“What the hell did you do now?” Cy says when he sees me helping a still-dazed Jenson through the office door.

“None of your business,” I growl.

I’ve made a few bad decisions in my life, some of them after patching into the club, but that was back when I was practically a kid. I haven’t done anything this stupid in a long time. Something about Jenson has me out of control. Ever since yesterday, I’ve been off-kilter, and I fucking hate it. And I hate him for making me this way.

“It is my business when you’re hitting customers.” Cy nods at Tigger. “Go grab an ice pack.”

Jenson leans forward, an angry bruise already forming on his cheek. He prods at it and winces. “I’m fine. Don’t bother.”

“You need ice,” I say, pointing at Tigger, who pivots as we volley back and forth. Deciding he’d rather go against Jenson than Cy and me, he disappears into the back, where there’s a small employee lounge, complete with a fridge and automatic ice maker.

“I think it’s better if I just go.” Jenson stands on wobbly legs.

“Not until you can stand up straight.” I give him a small shove in the chest, sending him back onto the couch.

“For fuck’s sake, Mustang.” Cy’s face contorts into an angry snarl. “Stop hitting the guy.”

“That was a shove, and trust me, he deserves it,” I say.

“I kind of do,” Jenson admits.

With a huff, Cy storms back to the door to the shop. But not before

stopping to drill into me. “Make this right. If I see a lawsuit cross my desk, you’ll be looking for employment elsewhere and be on bathroom duty for a year. And you know my wife makes me eat a high-fiber diet.”

My lip curls in disgust. Charlotte, his wife, is half his age and, for whatever reason, is obsessed with the guy and does whatever she can to keep him healthy. It’s sweet and all, but man, the stench that lingers after his morning constitution. . . no, thank you.

Cy slams the door behind him, leaving me alone with my enemy. My fists still burn for more retribution, but Cy is right; Jenson has enough money to sue the pants off the Sons, and that can’t happen.

“Look, I’m sorry for hitting you,” I say.

Jenson rests his head on the back of the sofa, blinking his swollen eye. “It’s fine. I shouldn’t have spoken that way about your mom.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

At the same time Tigger walks in with the ice, a woman walks in to drop her car off. She looks scandalized as she watches Tigger hand off the ice to the wounded Jenson. We work hard to gain customers since most people don’t want to associate with the club, so having a man on the sofa who obviously just got punched isn’t good for business.

“Let’s go in the back and finish this discussion,” I say.

“Fine.” Jenson makes a pained sound as he stands and follows me through the shop and down the gravel path that leads to the Sons’ property. “Where are we going?”

“My place.”

“You live here?”

“Yeah.” I don’t expand. He’ll see soon enough.

Behind the clubhouse sits a compound of tiny cabins for the ranking members. They’re not much, but they’re home to most of us. Prez doesn’t live in his since taking on an ol’ lady. A few of the guys cycle between staying with their cunt of the month and here, but the rest of us live here full-time.

I get a little antsy as we near my place. I won’t even let my fuck buddies come here, so why am I allowing my childhood bully inside? It’s a sacred space where I can decompress and lock out the world. Being part of the MC is just as bad as it is good, and that bad weighs on me heavily. My soul was lost to the devil a long time ago, and sometimes the only thing that keeps me sane is being in my own space.

I type the code into the lock, and it disengages with a *snick* before I open the door and motion for him to go in. With the ice covering one eye, his balance is off, and he trips over the threshold. I grab his elbow as he reaches out, latching onto my hand with his free one. It's the first time we've touched without malice, and as much as I don't want to admit it, I like it. His long fingers are soft and warm, making me remember how they felt around my cock.

"Shit, man. Cy would have my ass if you broke a leg, too," I say, steadying him.

"Sorry." He doesn't release my hand right away, not even after I've dropped his elbow. Maybe he likes the way it feels as much as I do. But eventually, it gets awkward, and he lets go with a chuckle.

Following him inside, I try to remember if I put my dirty clothes in the hamper yesterday or left them on the ground. I'm not a messy person, but I'm sure as shit not a clean one either.

Wait. Why do I care what my place looks like? His opinion of me means nothing.

"Take a seat. I'll grab us a beer."

"It's one o'clock." He sits in one of the two recliners that make up my small living area, a four-seater dining set and kitchen directly behind it. The bathroom is opposite the kitchen, and my bed is tucked into an alcove next to that. Despite the few windows scattered around, it's dark since the walls are debarked logs and stained a deep brown. But I like the dark. It suits me.

"So? If there's ever a day that deserves an early beer, it's one where you just got coldcocked."

"I guess you're right."

After popping the tops off our beers and handing him one, I sit in the second recliner. "I've been thinking about what you said—"

"I told you, it was wrong for me to imply your mom was doing anything nefarious to secure your tuition."

I pin him with a look. "As I was saying, I was thinking about it, and if—and that's a big if—she was doing favors, you must have theories about who for."

I don't like to think about how Sugar was back in the day, but if I'm being honest, sleeping with someone to better my life wouldn't be out of the realm of possibilities. When I was thirteen, I caught our landlord in her room. They explained it away by saying he was there to inspect a leak, but I always

thought it was weird that he zipped up his pants as he was leaving.

Though thinking she might've used her body for rent money or tuition really fucks with my head, I also know there's nothing that woman wouldn't do for me. Nothing in the whole world. And the second I was grown enough to take care of her, you bet your ass I stepped up and did it, including getting rid of her last abusive boyfriend. I'm not a bloodthirsty man but watching him bleed out in the desert is one of my best memories.

"I really don't, and honestly, what does it matter?"

"I guess it doesn't."

Jenson stands. "Just forget I ever popped back up. I promise it won't happen again."

As much as I hate the guy, thinking about never seeing him again doesn't sit right, but I can't think of one reason for him to stay.

Except one.

"We're not even," I say, standing too.

"Even?" He removes the ice from his face, and I wince. His cheek is so swollen, I can hardly see his one eye.

"I owe you." I shift my gaze to the ground and mumble, "For what you did yesterday."

"You want to give me a blow job?" he asks, a lot less timid about the situation than I am.

"I don't like to owe nobody nothing."

"And I don't want an obligation blow job. Consider us even." He takes two steps before I stop him with my next words.

"What if I want to?"

He smirks. "You want to suck me off?"

"Wouldn't be opposed to it."

He holds out his hands. "Then, by all means."

"Maybe you should sit down or something. So you don't fall over."

His brows lift. "With all this build-up, you better rock my world, Mustang."

I roll my eyes. "Just do it."

He strides over to one of the leather recliners and lowers himself into it, resting his hands on either side. Wiping my damp hands on my jeans, I follow and sink to my knees. He must like this idea more than he's letting on because there's already a hard bulge forming underneath his slacks. I palm him, impressed by his size.

It's a little degrading to practically beg to let me blow him, but I didn't know how else to make him stay. It doesn't mean he has the upper hand. After all, allowing me control over such a vital organ is basically submitting, right?

Just call me the king of justification.

I waste no time unbuckling his belt. He gives me a hand by lifting his hips so I can pull his pants and boxers below his ass to free his cock. Beautiful is the only word that comes to mind as I take his velvety length in my hand. His spongy head is already weeping, so I dip down and lick up the slit. Salty tang bursts on my tongue, creating a hunger that turns me ravenous.

I hum as I take him down my throat. It's been a while since I've done oral on a guy. Usually, there's no time for things like this since the men I sleep with are hiding their extracurricular activities from friends and family. The time that makes up lunch breaks or oil changes doesn't leave time for intimacy. Not that I'd want that with them anyway. It should be alarming that I want it with Jenson, of all people, but his dick sliding along my tongue feels too good to worry about right now.

It's a problem for later. After I make him come.

I take his clean-shaven balls into my hand and roll them before giving a gentle tug. Jenson groans, and a quick glance reveals a blissed-out look on his marred face. His lips part and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. I'm glad he's as affected as I am.

I suck and slurp, making obscene sounds that only turn me on more. Shifting my weight to make more room for my growing erection, I double my efforts, adding a little more suction and moving a little faster, swirling my tongue over his tip with each pass.

"Oh, fuck," he curses as his hips jut up. "I'm coming."

He didn't need to tell me; I felt the first pulse of his orgasm followed by a burst of even more pre-cum. I release his balls and snake a hand under his dress shirt and up to his smooth, rippled abs. Fuck, his body is perfect. Strong enough to handle a man like me but leaner so I still feel like I'm in control—probably a trauma response to all the bullying I suffered, but that's another problem for later.

The second the first spurt of jizz lands on my tongue, I slow down and draw long and hard on his cock, milking every drop I can from him. He tastes so good that I'm disappointed it's almost over. Especially knowing this'll be my last taste.

“Oh god, yes. Keep doing that.” His hand lands on the back of my head, urging me on. It’s not necessary. I’ll do this all damn day if he’ll let me.

His cock twitches once, twice, three times before Jensen releases an audible exhale and slumps back into the chair. With his cock softening in my palm, I release him with a pop and give his tip one final lick.

“Fuck me.” His eyes remain closed as he pulls his pants up and tucks himself back in. “I needed that.”

“Been a while?” I ask.

“Longer than I care to admit.” His guard is down after the orgasm. I like him better this way.

A knock sounds at my door, and I stand to answer it.

“Should I hide or something? Does your club know you’re . . .?”

I huff. “Of course they know. If you remember correctly, I’ve been out of the closet since kindergarten.”

“It wasn’t a stupid question. I wouldn’t think a motorcycle club would be a very accepting place.”

“Yeah, well, they are.” I open the door. “Hey, Sugar.”

JENSON

I remember him saying everyone around here calls his mom Sugar for some reason, which means the person on the other side of the door is his mom. Jesus Christ. Quickly, I stand and straighten myself up.

“I brought you some egg cups for the week, so you have no reason to skip out on breakfast,” the woman says.

“Thanks.” He stands to the side, and she walks in.

She’s exactly as I remember, though many years older. She still has red lips, eyes lined in black, and dark hair teased into a poofy ponytail. I can’t deny she’s a pretty woman. Even at her age, she has beautiful features and a shape that even a gay man can be impressed with.

“Oh,” she says, startled. “Didn’t realize you had company.”

“You remember Jenson Poole.”

“I do.” Her eyes soften, and she gazes at me almost wistfully. “You look just like your father did at your age.”

What the hell is that about? I never met this woman, only saw her in passing.

“How do you know my dad?”

Her posture straightens. “I don’t. Just saw him around at parent-teacher conferences and school functions.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks for the egg cups,” Mike says.

“Of course. I guess I’ll let you two get back to catching up.” She smiles at me, but to her son, she whispers, “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure. I’ll be right back, Jenson.”

The two step outside. Wanting to know what she's saying, I creep over to the door to listen.

"It's casual. Don't worry about it," Mike says in a hushed tone.

"Please, just trust me. You shouldn't fool around with him."

"What's it to you?"

"I didn't want to mention this because it was so long ago, but I used to get on with his dad. If Jenson is anything like his dad, you don't want to go there."

All the air whooshes from my lungs, and I take a step back. That can't be true. Dad would never disrespect Mom that way.

"So that's how my tuition got paid?" Mike grits out, not bothering to keep quiet any longer.

"It's complicated."

"When did it start?"

His mom makes an uneasy noise. "Let's talk about this later."

"No, I want to talk about it now."

"Not with him on the other side of the door."

"I should invite him out here. He has a right to know too."

"No, he doesn't. Neither do you. It had nothing to do with either of you."

"If you fucked him to get me into some fancy schools I didn't even want to go to, then yes, it had a lot to do with me." Mike's tone is laced with venom that sends a chill up my spine.

"I'm no whore, Michael Cohen." Her voice hitches. "It was more than that. We were together for ten years!"

"What?"

I move to the window to see the pair standing face-to-face, his mom at the top of the porch steps and him at the bottom. Mike's arms are folded across his broad chest, and his mom has her hands balled together at her waist.

"A year before I got pregnant with you, I met his dad at the Silo. I was young and broke. He bought me drinks, took me to a fancy hotel, and after that first night, promised to take care of me."

"He was married!"

"I know, but we were in love. He promised he'd leave his wife; I just had to be patient."

"Yet you cheated on him because you got pregnant with me."

"When Stratton told me his wife was pregnant, I got mad. Jealous even. I went out and had a one-night stand. It was dumb and ruined everything

between us.”

“Obviously you didn’t stop things with him since it lasted ten years.” Mike runs a hand through his light brown hair, the same hair I had my hands in only moments ago while he was sucking me off.

“After you were born, everything changed. He stopped paying my bills and only came around now and then.” She places a hand on his shoulder that he shrugs off. “It didn’t matter, though, because I had you, and I did everything I could to give you a good life. Didn’t I?”

“That doesn’t explain how I got into those schools.”

“By then, I had something on Stratton, right? The amount he’d have to pay in child support and alimony in a divorce settlement with his wife would be astronomical. So, we came to an agreement. I’d take care of him when he needed it, and he’d take care of you.”

“I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you would lie to me for all these years. It wouldn’t take much for someone to find out who was paying and then what?”

“It was the risk I took to give you a good education.” She looks around. “Fat lot of good it did since you ended up in a motorcycle club.”

“A club that saved you from being raped and beaten for the rest of your life.”

“And I’m forever grateful. I love the boys, and they take good care of me. I just wish you had done something better with your life, like Jenson.”

“You’d rather me be a rich asshole that treats people like shit?”

My blood boils. He’s known the adult version of me for twenty-four hours and has already made his judgments. I’m not the same cocky prick I was back in high school. Even after everything we’ve done together, his opinion of me hasn’t changed.

“I’d rather you be on the right side of the law and making honest money.”

“If that’s how you feel, maybe you should leave so you don’t have to be around us lowlifes anymore.”

“You’re mad. I get it. Take some time to think it through. You’ll see why I did all the things I did.” She steps around him. “I’m not saying I don’t love the man you are. I’m just saying, this isn’t the life I had hoped for you.”

She walks away, leaving Mike staring at her retreating form.

Unable to stay in this small space any longer, I step outside, ready to get the hell out of here. As I walk past Mike, his expression makes me pause. He’s really torn up about this, and somehow, I feel responsible. I’ve been

cleaning up Dad's messes for years now. Dementia has slowly been taking his mind, making him rash and forgetful. But he's a proud man and refused to step down or tell anyone what was going on with his health. While what he did with Mike's mom can't be explained away by his illness, I still feel like I should make this better.

"You heard?" he asks, shoulder slumped.

"Yeah, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Me too." He tucks his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry about what I said about you. I was heated."

"I know. But I still feel like I should mention that you don't know me anymore. I'm not perfect, but I'm not a hormonal, arrogant teenager either."

"I get that." His brown eyes meet mine. "You wanna get out of here?"

"And go where?"

"For a ride? It's how I clear my head."

I shouldn't. For one, I need to get back to the office. I've already been absent for too long. And two, nothing good can come from spending more time with Mike. That's been proven over and over ever since our paths crossed yesterday.

"Sure." Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"Come on."

I follow him around to the front of the clubhouse. He walks over to a motorcycle, where I'm assuming he's grabbing his wallet or something, but no, he thrusts a helmet in my direction.

"I can't ride on that," I say.

"Why not?"

"I'm in a suit."

"Afraid to get a little dirty?" he taunts.

"No." I take the helmet. "What about you?"

"After the day I've had, I'd be lucky to splatter my brains on the freeway."

"That's not making me feel better about going on a ride with you."

He huffs. "Put the helmet on. You're safe with me."

For some reason, I believe him. There's no reason to, as he's done nothing to instill any sort of confidence. But still, this yearning need to be close to him persists, and I can't ignore it.

After placing the helmet on my head, I stand awkwardly, waiting for further instructions. He swings a leg over the bike, his thick thighs bracing it

as he puts up the kickstand. Motioning for me to climb on, I try to look as smooth as he did but fail, nearly taking us both down.

“Keep your feet on those pegs and hang on tight,” he says before bringing the engine to life.

Tentatively, I wrap my arms around his waist and am met with hard muscle. My cock stirs back to life until he takes off, and I nearly fly off the back. I hold on tighter, more concerned with dying than his rippled abs. Though having my life end on the back of a motorcycle sounds better than dying from a broken mind, the way Dad will.

Once we’re on the highway, I relax and take in the scenery. Some people don’t find the desert an attractive landscape but not me. Despite the warm temperatures today, there’s still snow on the mountains surrounding us and a cloudless sky above us. It’s perfect.

And I’m sharing it all with the least likely of partners.

Guilt hits me that I was so cruel to him for so many years. Immaturity, paired with knowing that I could never be with someone I found myself drawn to, made for an ugly storm. Dad would’ve lost his mind if I brought Mike home in his second or third-hand ill-fitting clothes and long hair. He didn’t care about me being gay but dating beneath my class? That was not allowed.

I deserve all of Mike’s anger and more. I hope he can see past it someday because I can’t imagine feeling this same lustful passion for anyone else.

He turns off the highway and slows as he drives through a neighborhood I’ve never been in. The road opens to a park, where he pulls into a spot and stops the bike. Guessing this is our destination, I climb off and remove the helmet.

Mike grins as he gets off the bike. “Come here.”

“What?”

“Your hair.” His fingers comb through my normally neatly styled locks.

“The helmet,” I say dumbly.

“Yeah, that’s why I don’t even bother with a style. I let the helmet decide how it wants me to look.”

Once he’s done his grooming, I look around. “What are we doing here?”

“Thought it would be a more private place to talk.”

We walk side by side on a path that surrounds the park. Since it’s the middle of a workday, the place is all but abandoned except for a toddler on the jungle gym and their mom.

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I got to thinking while we were riding.” He scratches his scruff, an apprehensive look on his face.

“What?”

“Need you to promise me you’ll stay calm.”

My stomach sinks. I overheard the entire conversation with his mom, and though I didn’t enjoy hearing it, nothing about it would cause me to freak out.

“What?”

“Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise. Spit it out.”

“If my mom got pregnant with me by a revenge fuck around the same time she was sleeping with your dad, how does she know who my biological father is?”

I chuckle at the absurdity. Until I realize the implication. My face falls, and for the second time today, the air leaves my lungs.

Did I just let my half-brother suck my dick?

MUSTANG

“No.” His head shakes violently. “That can’t be possible.”

“See? I knew you were gonna freak out.”

He doubles over. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Because you could be related to me or because we’ve blown each other?”

“Both,” he breathes out. “But mostly the blowing part.”

“I’m not very excited about that either.” I reach out to comfort him, but he smacks my hand away.

“Don’t touch me.”

He’s so dramatic. Though I knew this would happen. I had every intention of just going for a ride since I do my best thinking on the open road. Turns out, I did a little too much thinking because a few minutes in, the idea that we could be related popped into my head and once it was there, I couldn’t unthink it and knew I had to tell Jenson.

“Dude, even if we were brothers, it’d be okay for me to pat your back.”

“Brothers!” He whirls around, his arms flying up as he walks away.

I jog to catch up. “Where are you going?”

“We need answers.”

“Want me to take you to your building so you can talk to your dad?”

“No, he won’t be any help.”

“Why not?”

“Because he has dementia. There’s no guarantee he’ll even know I’m his son today.”

My chest squeezes, and I get the urge to give him a hug or some shit. I

don't know how I'd feel if Sugar didn't recognize me. But I know he'd just push me away, so I tuck my hands in my pockets.

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and mashes his finger into the keys.

"Who are you calling?" I ask. He seems to be on a mission, and I'd very much like to know what it is.

"An Uber."

"I can take you wherever."

"No. You can't. Because if I get back on that bike, my dick pressed into your ass and my hands feeling all of that"—he motions to my middle—"I'm likely to vomit."

"You don't know anything for certain. Try to suppress the puking until after." I stop and watch as he continues his one-man mission. "Where is this Uber taking you?"

"A DNA clinic. I'll send you the address. Meet me there."

I sigh, suddenly feeling exhausted from the day. It's been barely twenty-four hours since Jenson walked back into my life, stirring up more emotions than I've felt in the last ten years combined. Finding a bench, I take a seat, knowing it'll take at least a few minutes for him to get picked up, and I can't handle being around him right now.

My phone buzzes, and after a quick glance, I see it's an address downtown. An hour ago, I thought that there could be something between me and Jenson, something worth exploring. It was a scary thought since I'd never been with anyone who sparked my interest like this before, and I was okay with that. I had my brothers, my club, and my work, and I didn't need anything else.

But last night, I couldn't get him out of my head. Thoughts of making him pay for what he did to the younger version of me soon gave way to curiosity. I wondered what his life has been like, if he's been in a serious relationship, and if he ever thought about me. Then I relived the moment he got down on his knees for me.

The free space in my pants shrinks, and I scrub a hand down my face. If he is my brother, this bodily reaction to him is pretty fucked up. Even so, I find myself hoping and wishing that it won't be true. Could we move past this kind of road bump and explore what's between us? I don't know. Seems unlikely.

I laugh wryly as I imagine ten years from now, together after finding out

we weren't related. Our "how we met" story would be loaded with bullying, revenge, and a DNA test. Leaning back against the bench, I let my head fall backward and groan. I might as well let go of any hope for that.

We're doomed. We always have been.

The second I hear the mail truck parking in front of The Garage, I dash to the office the same way I have every day for more than a week. The lab person said it could take up to a month to get results, but I will have no chill until I see that envelope.

Impatiently, I tap my toe as the older mailman walks into the office and shoots the shit with Tigger.

"I'll take that," I say, unable to sit through any more small talk.

"Oh, yeah. Sure." He hands it over, and I sit on the sofa to flip through it. Most of it is bills and parts magazines, but at the bottom of the stack, I see an envelope with my name on it from the lab.

Setting the rest of it on the desk near Tigger, I take the letter and head to my cabin, shouting to Cy that I'm taking a break. For such a thin piece of mail, it feels heavy in my hand. Decidedly, it's the emotional weight I'm feeling, not the physical.

Plopping down in my recliner, I set the envelope on my thigh and stare at it. A million thoughts have gone through my head since leaving the lab. Most being there's no way Jenson is my brother. It's suspicious that his dad paid for my schooling, but if he thought I was his kid, I can't imagine it wouldn't have gotten out before now. Or maybe it would've. I don't fucking know; I'm not some rich asshole with a lot to lose.

But if I were his kid, would his dad want to know me? With his disease, is it too late? I never had a dad. Mom always said she never even knew his name, that the condom must've broken. With no way to contact him when she found out she was knocked up, she let it go.

I don't allow those thoughts to settle in my head for very long. Because my adolescent desire for a dad is being overridden by a desire to get to know Jenson. And not in a brotherly way. This draw I feel toward him could be explained by some familial, biological connection, but I don't think so. It's more than that. Bigger. And I want it.

I take my phone out of my pocket and bring up Jenson's contact info I swiped from his work order. Did he get a letter today too? Is he staring at it, building up the courage to open it, like me?

Only one way to find out. I press the "call" button and put it on speaker. It rings once, twice, three times, then four. I'm considering disconnecting when he picks up.

"This is Jenson." His voice is low and gravelly.

"Just wake up?"

He clears his throat. "No. I, uh, just got a letter from the lab, and I'm hiding in the bathroom in my office while debating whether to open it."

I chuckle. "I'm hiding in my cabin, doing the same."

We haven't spoken since we left the lab. Jenson made it clear he didn't want to hear from me until we knew one way or the other. I don't know what he's hoping for.

"Should we open it together?"

"Sure."

"Count of three. One, two, three."

A chorus of ripping paper sounds through the room from my phone's speaker and my own hands. I pull out the letter and try to read it, but my anxiety is too high for the words to make sense. I take a deep breath and try again.

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't a chart. The first column has a bunch of letters and numbers I don't understand. The second one has my name, and the third has Jenson's. I scroll down each of our columns, but again, it's just meaningless data.

Then I get to the bottom, where it says, "Interpretation." The probability of us being brothers is less than half a percent. I blow out a breath, not sure what I'm feeling.

Was I hoping I could continue to fuck Jenson or that I had a family out there, even if I have sucked off my potential brother?

I couldn't tell you.

"You there?" Jenson asks, and I startle, forgetting he was on the line.

"Yeah. You see the results?"

"Yeah." His tone is just as muted as when he answered, so I can't tell his reaction any more than my own.

"What do you think?"

"I'm relieved I didn't commit incest." He laughs humorlessly.

“That all this means to you?” I don’t know how else to find out if he wants to continue what we started since I’m not about to go spilling my guts if he’s not interested.

“I mean, what else would it mean?” he asks, and my stomach sinks. I don’t like this feeling. It’s why I never even consider any kind of relationship. Being vulnerable isn’t something I enjoy.

“Nothin’.” I stand. “Well, have a nice life. Wish I could say this has been fun, but you’ve been nothing but a pain in my ass since we met in kindergarten.”

He chuckles. “Same to you.”

There’s a moment of silence while I try and figure out a good way to hang up. When nothing comes to mind, I hit the red “End” button, letting that do all the talking for me.

I toss the letter in the trash and walk back to the shop, letting the last couple of weeks go. I’m glad it’s over, and now that I know how he feels, I can move on and get back to what’s important.

My brothers, my club, and my job. That’s what I should be focusing on. There’s nothing more out there for me. I knew that to my core a couple weeks ago. Jenson fucked that up for a moment, but after that conversation, he’s only solidified my ideologies for me.

JENSON

“What’s gotten into you, man?” Chase asks, kicking his feet up on my desk.

I shove them off. “Have some respect for the mahogany.”

“Seriously, what’s eating your ass?” His brow quirks. “Or should I say, who isn’t eating your ass?”

“Stop.”

“So, are you going to tell me, or what? Because all you wanted was to take over the company. Now that you have, you’ve been nothing but a whiny bitch.”

I haven’t told Chase about Mike, or Mustang, I guess. For one, I’m embarrassed by the little prick I was growing up. For another, it sounds stupid to admit that I’ve fallen in. . . I don’t know what the hell I’ve fallen into. Lust? Like? Whatever it is, it didn’t take long for me to get there, which is not like me. I’m calculating. I consider things for a long damn time before I pull the trigger. But forty-eight hours into knowing Mustang, I’m ready to dive into a relationship?

It’s irrational. I don’t know much about the guy, but what I do know is waving a huge red flag in front of my face. He’s in a biker club. One that is known for its illegal behavior. I can’t have that shit attached to my name or my business.

“Jenson,” Chase says, waving a hand. “Where’d you go, man?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “If I tell you what’s up, I don’t want to hear shit about it. There’s nothing you can say I haven’t already told myself.”

“This sounds juicy. Proceed.” He gets comfortable in the chair, kicking

his legs out and resting his hands behind his head.

I'm going to regret this, but I need to get it off my chest. Maybe then I can focus on what matters, like getting things back on track for Poole Enterprises. My mouth opens, and I spew every single detail at Chase, who listens without showing any reaction. Thank god because if he had, I wouldn't have been able to tell him everything.

"How long ago did you get the results?" he asks once I finish.

"Two weeks ago." *And every hour of each day has been spent thinking about it.*

"Why didn't you tell me any of this sooner?"

"I didn't want to admit the kind of asshole I was or that I was slumming it with some biker."

He tilts his head. "You sound like you're still an asshole when you say shit like that."

"Like what?"

"Slumming it?"

"That wasn't a dig. Or at least I didn't mean it like one. All I'm saying is I sit in a high rise every day, drive an expensive vehicle, and sleep in a penthouse apartment. He's a mechanic, sleeps in a cabin behind a *motorcycle club* compound, and probably murders people on the weekend."

"And you don't hear how judgmental you sound?"

"Those are all facts."

"I'm not talking about the facts. I'm talking about the importance you place on material things when none of it makes you who you are."

"Don't get all high and mighty on me. You're living in the same glasshouse."

"No, I'm not. Maybe I enjoy the perks of being in my position—"

"Like your car," I remind him.

"Yeah, like my car. But *my* dad was a mechanic, and my mom is still a schoolteacher. I bought a simple house in South Reno so I could be close to them, and I spend my weekends fixing up their house. Plus, my girlfriend is a hair stylist who lives with three other girls just to make rent."

"I get it. You're a better man than I am."

"That's not what I'm saying. I don't care where you live or what you can afford. It's how you interact with those not in your tax bracket. And clearly, the answer is you don't because *you* think *you're* better."

"Casey's a hairstylist?" I ask, realizing I never asked much about her,

though I've met her a few times.

He gives me an incredulous look as he stands and buttons his suit coat. "Yeah."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to work."

"But you didn't give me any advice."

He sighs. "My advice would be to take him on a date. Get to know who he is. Be a normal fucking human."

He shuts the door behind him, leaving me with my thoughts. Which is apparently where I need to be right now.

A week later, I'm on the highway, passing the exit to the shop and thinking about Mustang the way I do every morning. I flip on the radio and startle at the loud pops that sound through my speaker.

"Damn it!" I pull over to the shoulder, mash all the buttons, and turn all the dials on the stereo, hoping something will shut it off. But nothing works. My ears ring, and I'm well on my way to permanent hearing loss, so I do the only thing I can think of. I flip a U-ey and turn off toward The Garage.

Once parked, I hop out of the truck and slam the door shut, twisting my fingers in my ears to stop the noise from echoing through my brain. If I could reach in there and shake it free from my brain, I would.

"Again?" Cy asks, wiping his hands on a rag as he approaches.

"The new fuse must've been defective."

Cy opens the passenger door, and five seconds later, we're in peaceful silence. I really need him to show me how to do that.

"Thanks," I say when he rounds the truck.

He studies the little plastic thing with a curious look on his face. "You say Mustang changed it?"

"Yeah, why?"

In the blink of an eye, his perplexed expression is gone and in its place is a broad smile. "No problem. I'll get this swapped out for you."

What the hell was that about?

It's already warm outside, so I step inside the office to find a smiling Tigger.

“Hey, you’re back!”

“I am. That new fuse must’ve malfunctioned.”

He gives me the same look Cy did. “That’s weird.”

“Must’ve been defective.”

“Yeah. Must’ve been.” He stands and opens the door to the car bays. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.” Taking a seat, I pull out my phone and answer some emails while I wait instead of what I want to do: look for Mike. I’ve missed him the last three weeks, which is nuts because we don’t even know each other. The limited time we spent in each other’s company was fifty percent hostile, ten percent pleasant, and the rest of the time, we had our mouths full of each other’s dicks. Not exactly a recipe for building a healthy relationship.

When the door Tigger went out reopens, I assume it’s him, so I don’t bother looking up. But when I don’t hear movement behind the desk, my curiosity gets the best of me. Starting at his black, steel-toed boots, I scan up the body of the man in front of me.

Worn, dark blue coveralls wrap around thick thighs, and the arms of said coveralls hang from narrow hips. A thin white tank covers flat abs. I continue my perusal of his strong, work-roughened hands, thickly veined forearms and muscular biceps, and bare, rounded shoulders decorated in black and gray tattoos. Finally, I reach a scruffy chin and jaw, a ridiculously handsome face with a slightly crooked nose, and dark eyes that are fixed on me.

I stand and button my suit coat. “Oh, hey.”

“Hey.”

“It’s my truck. The stereo was spazzing out again.”

“Took it long enough,” he says cryptically.

I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“I never fixed it in the first place. Honestly, I’ve never seen an audio system do that before, and I have no clue why. I even googled it. There were a few reports of it happening on these newer trucks but no fixes.”

“You kept it overnight,” I remind him.

He runs a hand through his hair, a small grin tipping the corners of his lips up. “Yeah, that was mostly to fuck with you.”

“You charged me three grand.”

He shrugs. “I wasn’t your biggest fan at the time.”

“And now?” My heart pounds against my ribs, knowing what I want him to say, but so scared he won’t say it.

“I’ve spent the last three weeks hoping it’d happen again and you’d come back.”

“Why?”

He takes two slow steps in my direction until he’s standing just inches away and tips my chin up the little amount it takes to force my gaze to his. “I spent years hating myself because of you.”

“I’m sorry. I honestly—”

“I thought it was because I believed all the shit you said about me, but I’ve realized that wasn’t it at all. I hated myself for liking you.”

“I liked you too, and I was cruel because I knew my dad wouldn’t approve. I thought it was the only way to keep myself from doing something stupid, like asking you out. Especially after we kissed on Grad Night. It’s not an excuse, just an explanation.”

“We both did things we weren’t proud of. But we’re grown now and can make better decisions.”

I lick my lips. “Like what?”

“Like this.” He pushes me roughly against the wall, pinning my hands at either side of my head with his own right before his lips crash into mine. This is our first kiss as adults, and it’s nothing like any I’ve had before. There’s no build-up, no teasing, only panting breaths between bruising contact and plunging tongues.

Our mutual erections press together, and I have to remind myself where we are so I don’t do something stupid, like pull his coveralls the rest of the way down. I’m about to say fuck it and do it anyway when the door to the car bays opens. We break apart, but there’s no question as to what we were just doing.

“Fuck. Sorry,” Cy says. Even through his beard, it’s easy to see his flaming red cheeks.

“I’m going on break.” Mike jerks his head to the back door, and I nod.

“Yeah, that’s probably best.” Cy chuckles.

The walk to Mike’s cabin is silent and quick-paced, both of us eager for what’s to come. Once inside, Mike wastes no time yanking my suit coat down my arms before tugging off my tie and ripping open my shirt, sending buttons flying. More clothing ruined by this man, but I couldn’t care less.

“You have no idea how badly I want you,” he says, working on my belt.

“I have a pretty good idea.”

Not wanting to wait for him to finish undressing me before I get to see

him naked, I tug up on his tank top. He takes a break from undoing my pants to lift his arms over his head. His bare chest is even sexier than I imagined. My brain glitches at the sight of tanned skin covered by tattoos and coarse brown hair. With a mind of their own, my fingers weave through it, feeling all the hardened muscles below.

He finally works my pants down, and I divest him of his coveralls, leaving us both in our boxer briefs. Taking my hand, he drags me to the bed and shoves me onto it with hunger in his eyes.

“Can I fuck you?” he asks, digging through his nightstand and producing a condom and a bottle of lube.

“Only if I get to fuck you later.”

He grins. “I can see a delicious cycle beginning.”

I push my boxers down and toss them to the side. My cock is already throbbing and oozing pre-cum, and it won't take much for me to blow. It'd be embarrassing, except Mike pushes down his boxers, and his cock is doing the same damn thing. A chill runs up my spine in anticipation over what it'll feel like to finally have him inside me.

“I've imagined doing this for so long, jerking off to the image of what fucking you would feel like.” He strokes himself lazily as I situate myself at the top of the bed.

“Get over here and find out for real.”

He kneels between my legs and stuffs a pillow under my hips. It would be easier if I were on all fours, but I want to see his every expression when he fucks me. His left hand rubs up and down my thigh, and he drizzles lube down my length with his right before tossing the bottle to the side and taking me in hand.

“Need to prep you first. How long has it been?”

My cheeks heat as I do the mental math. I've been so focused on the company that I haven't taken time for myself in over a year. That's embarrassing.

“A while.”

He nods, not making me give him specifics. Thank god. With his masculine appeal, I doubt it's been more than a week for him. That thought gives me pause. Have I been spending the last few weeks devoting my every thought to him while he was getting ass?

“It's been a few months since I've fucked anyone, and one of our members is a doctor. He makes sure we get tested regularly.”

“Oh.” I didn’t expect that level of honesty.

“I’m still gonna use a condom but thought you should know.”

“I got tested after my last boyfriend because he cheated on me.”

His grip on my cock tightens almost painfully, and I squirm. When he notices my reaction, he loosens his hold. “After I get done blowing your mind, I want his name.”

“Name?”

“Yeah, babe. His name. Me and him got words to say.”

Possessiveness has always been a red flag for me, but for some reason, that isn’t my reaction. Instead, my balls tighten, and my spine tingles. I won’t give him the name, but I like that he feels the need to right the wrongs in my life. And I really like him calling me babe. That’s new too. Pet names always seemed childish before.

Everything with Mike is different.

His left hand tickles along my hip, stopping at the base of my cock to drag his fingers through the pooled lube, then he moves lower to tease my hole. I swallow hard, desperately thinking of everything except how good he’s making me feel.

“Relax for me,” he says, breaching my hole with one thick finger.

“Shit.” Sweat beads on my brow.

He pumps in and out slowly, feeling around until he finds my prostate. His lips part, and his breathing becomes audible. It’s turning him on to please me, which makes holding this orgasm back even harder. I’m regretting not jacking off in the shower this morning.

One finger turns into two as he works me over, scissoring me open and stretching me in the most delicious way. He’s slow and intentional with his movements, not giving in to the lust. When he senses I’m about to come, he backs off, allowing me to get a grip. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life.

“Fuck me already!” I shout out when I can’t take it anymore.

He tsks. “Greedy.”

“I want you inside me when I come.”

He pulls out before sheathing himself with the condom and coating his thick cock in lube. My mouth waters at the memory of just how good he tastes. Right after he got off the last time, he walked away. We both did. Is this just another encounter, and we’ll go back to not speaking once we’re done?

There's no time to think about that, though, because he's closer and positioning his cock. His gaze is fixed on what he's doing, lips pressed together in concentration. I relax my muscles as he pushes in the slightest bit. Fuck, it feels so good. I want more, so I tilt my hips to invite him in the rest of the way.

He swallows hard as he grips my thighs and yanks me toward him, sliding home. We both groan in ecstasy, the only sound in minutes.

"Fuck, babe. You feel so good. This is gonna be fast." He fists my cock. "But something tells me that'll be okay with you."

"All good." I squirm, needing friction.

He grins wolfishly. "Hold on."

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MUSTANG

I don't remember ever feeling like this while fucking. The only word I can think of that fits is "home." I feel like I'm home. Not just because my cock is being strangled by his tight hole. It's greater than that. It's knowing that I'm *with* Jenson, and if he thinks he's going to step out of my life again, he's wrong.

My fist moves up and down his hard length while I thrust my hips back and forth, making sure to grind against the spot inside I know will make him see stars. He grips the comforter at his sides and takes everything I give him. I can sense him losing control, making me feral for his pleasure.

I growl as I pick up the pace, positioning my hand so my thumb can run along the head of his weeping cock. My balls tighten, and white-hot pleasure begins to spread through my body. Jenson yells out a curse seconds before thick ropes of cum spurt from his tip, landing on his abdomen and chest, giving me all the permission I need to let go.

"Goddamn," I roar as I fuck him hard. It'd be better if there wasn't a layer of rubber between us, but that'll come. For now, I relish in all-consuming satisfaction as I fill the condom. Once I can see straight again, I collapse on top of Jenson, my cock regretfully sliding out of him.

"That was. . ."

I know what he means even if he doesn't have the word. I feel it too. His arms wrap around me, and I nuzzle into his neck, leaving kisses everywhere I can reach. Our sweat-soaked bodies cling together, but neither of us makes a move to separate.

"Fuckin' hot," I finish for him.

“Yeah. That.” He traces around the tattoo of a mustang on my upper arm. “How did you get your road name?”

I chuckle, my breath hitting his neck and giving him goosebumps. “One night—after far too many beverages—I decided to go out into the desert and find one of the wild horses that roam around here. In my inebriated state, I was convinced I could tame one. Turns out I couldn’t.”

“What happened?”

“I ran up to the side of one and managed to mount it, but I didn’t last long before it bucked me off. I landed on my ass and broke my tailbone. My brothers found the situation pretty fuckin’ funny, and Mustang was born.”

We both laugh, and I realize how much I like this quiet intimacy we’re sharing. I want more of it. I can’t allow him to walk away again.

I don’t know how to do a relationship. It’s not something I’ve ever wanted until now. But I’m never letting him go, and it’s time he knew that.

“You’re mine,” I say.

He pulls back enough so he can look at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’re in this. Not just for today or tonight, but for a long ass time.”

“It’s customary to have a discussion and make sure both people consent to something like that.”

“Fuck that.”

“So many red flags,” he mutters.

“Babe, I’m a walking red flag. Especially for a man like you. I’m not rich, I’ve never even put on a suit, I curse, I smoke, I drink.” I jump off the bed, realizing I don’t have many reasons for him to stay. “I’m in a fucking motorcycle club, and trust me when I say the sum of all the rumors you’ve heard are true.”

He winces at my declaration, sitting up and watching as I strip off the condom. I grab a box of tissues and pull out a couple for me before handing it to him.

“Then why do you think we can work?” he asks cryptically, not giving me any sign of how he feels about it.

“I’ve never wanted anyone to belong to me before.” Still stark naked, I throw my hands to the side. “But I want you. You in my bed, you on the back of my bike, and you by my side.”

He pushes off the bed and stands in front of me. “Then that’s where I’ll be.”

My frown morphs into a smile. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Seriously. I have my doubts, and we barely know each other, but I want to know you.” He places his hand on my hip. “And I want a whole lot more of this.”

I hug him, loving how he feels in my arms because it feels right. Like this was always meant to be. Like fate was working hard to prove to two bumbling idiots that all they had to do was open their eyes and see what’s been right in front of them since kindergarten.

A laugh bubbles out, and he leans back. “What’s funny?”

“I can’t wait to see the look on my brothers’ faces when they find out I got an ol’ man.”

His face pinches together. “That makes me sound like I’m your dad.”

“Yeah. I guess the literal gay translation of ol’ lady doesn’t really work.”

He flashes me a sly grin. “Unless you want to start calling me Daddy?”

I shove him away and start searching for my clothes. “If anyone is the daddy in this relationship, it’s me.”

“You’re joking, right?”

We argue as we get dressed, but it’s all in fun, and it strikes me that this is the first time I’ve felt truly happy. That black spot in the back of my mind that always reminded me something was missing is now lit up. I’m not a fucking idiot. I know it’ll be hard, and things won’t always be this good.

But for now, I’m basking in the glow.

EPILOGUE

MUSTANG

My head pounds, and my arm throbs as I stumble through the backyard to my cabin. It's been a shit night. That all changes when I see Jenson sitting on the front porch, laptop resting on his thighs, glasses perched on his nose, and collared shirt unbuttoned, revealing the silky-smooth column of his throat.

It's been six months since he brought his truck to the shop for the first time, and we've had our share of complications, but we fought through and are still standing.

It took some time for Sugar to come around. Not only did she remember how Jenson treated me back then but also, she fucked his dad, which was a weird thing for all of us. We haven't told his mom about the affair. With Stratton's condition, it didn't feel necessary. Some sins should die in the grave with the sinner.

I didn't know things would work out the way they have but call it a gut instinct or fate or whatever. Doesn't matter. What matters is that ever since we agreed to be together, there hasn't been one question in my mind about whether he's the right man for me. Not one.

We split time between his place and mine, neither of us willing to give up our homes. It works for now, and as long as we're together most nights, it doesn't matter if we share a place.

I trip, barely catching myself before I eat shit, gaining Jenson's attention.

"Mustang?" Concern blankets his features, and he jumps to his feet, sending the laptop crashing to the wooden planks below. He jogs over, gripping me by the elbows and scanning me from head to toe. "What

happened?”

I’ve come home bloody before, but never this banged up. For any other couple with one strait-laced partner and one outlaw partner, this would be a test. Not for us. I know how this will play out.

“You should see the other guy.” It’s a joke because there’s no way he’ll ever know what happened to that asshole. The only ones who do are him, me, my brothers, and the wild animals in the Great Basin Desert who are making a meal out of him right now.

Jenson doesn’t laugh. “Did Bones look you over?”

He helps me inside the cabin. “Yeah. Nothing a few bandages and rest won’t heal.”

I study him as he slowly strips me of my cut and T-shirt. When he sees the blood-soaked gauze wrapped around my bicep, he gasps. “What happened?”

“I got shot.”

His eyes nearly bulge out of his head. “What the hell, Mustang? Why aren’t you in the hospital?”

“It’s just a graze.” Even though it burns like fuck, I pull him to me. “I’m fine. I’m also high as shit from the pain meds. Will you take my pants off so I can crash?”

This time when he looks at me, I spot a small smile. “You sure this isn’t a ploy to get me on my knees?”

“Babe, I always want you on your knees. But this time, I really do need help.”

He unfastens my belt buckle, then pops the button on my jeans and unzips them. “Am I going to find any more blood?”

“Nah. Not in my pants, anyway. I got hit in the head with a pipe, so there’s a pretty good gash back there.”

He gasps, turning me around to inspect. “Fucking hell. Tell me what happened.”

“One of the new hires at the brothel failed to mention she was under the protection of a pimp, and he wasn’t too happy to lose his best earner.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Showed up with some of his buddies and tried to get inside to take her back. It was a clusterfuck.”

“I’m guessing he didn’t get far?”

I smirk. “Nope.”

Jenson gets my pants down before pulling back the covers for me. After tucking me in, he climbs to the other side, facing me. Despite how shitty the night was, it's awesome to know it's ending like this. In bed with my man.

"I realized something tonight," I say.

"What's that?" He pushes a stray lock of hair off my forehead.

I pin him with my gaze, trying to convey everything on my mind. But it needs to be said out loud. He deserves it.

"I love you."

His eyes soften, and he rests his palm on my cheek. "I love you too."

"Good. Glad that's settled." I draw him in closer to kiss him.

His lips are soft, but my kiss isn't. To me, love is a force. If it doesn't hurt a little, are you even in it? And I'm not just talking about rough touches and a slap on the ass. I'm talking about being brutally honest about the hard stuff and accepting the response you get. Even when it hurts.

I'm lucky that the first time I've ever let someone in, it happened to be the person I was meant to share my life with. It doesn't make it any less scary, but there is a level of comfort there.

I pull away before things get too heated, and I won't be able to hold myself back. I'm only good to my club if I'm healthy and able-bodied. That means I'm taking Bones' orders seriously.

"This is the worst you've ever seen me," I say, wanting to make sure he's okay.

"Yeah."

"How does that make you feel?"

"I'm scared every time you leave the compound, but I also trust you to do whatever it takes to come home in one piece."

See what I mean? He's all in too.

"I will."

"I admit I get a lot of work done on the nights you're away. It's the only thing that distracts me."

Jenson has settled right into club life. He's made friends with everyone here, and my brothers love the shit out of him. Despite everything, he's never judged or spoken badly about anything that goes on around here. When he told me he's not the person he once was and that he's grown and changed for the better, he wasn't shitting me.

"You work too much."

"It won't be forever. The company is finally back on track, and now I can

start delegating.”

“How’s your dad?” I ask.

“He’s”—he frowns—“okay. Mom visits him almost daily at the continued-care facility even though he recognizes her less and less.”

His dad’s disease is taking him fast and furious. It’s devastating to watch. Not because I give a shit about him, because I don’t. That man was an asshole who purposely tried to raise his son to be an asshole too. But he’s Jensen’s dad, and because of that, I care.

“Sorry about that.” I kiss his temple.

“Every day, I get a little closer to accepting that he won’t be with us much longer.”

“But I will, and I’ll be there for you through it all.”

“I know you will.” He sits up. “I better go get my laptop and finish the email I was sending. If it’s not broken, that is.”

I stretch out the best I can and yawn. “Okay, babe. I’ll be here.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

THE END

This is only the beginning of the Sons of Erebus MC. The next book is coming soon, so be sure to head over to my website and sign up for my newsletter!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Misty Walker writes everything from dark and delicious, to sweet and spicy. Most of her books are forbidden in some way and many are age-gap, because that's her jam. She's lived quite the nomadic life, never staying in the same place for long until she met her husband. They've recently settled in Reno, NV with their two daughters, two dogs, and two hamsters, because everything's better in pairs. Misty is fueled by coffee and the voices in her head screaming for their stories to be told. Which is why the coffee is necessary because there are only so many hours in a day and who needs sleep anyway?

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THE RACE BETWEEN THE PRETTY BOY AND THE BAD BOY

NICOLE DYKES

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SEBASTIAN

I fly over the finish line, adrenaline pumping insanely through my body as I make my way to victory lane, ready to celebrate my win. Some of my colleagues love to make a big show of hopping out of their cars, engaging in antics ranging from making snow angels on the finish line to doing literal flips.

But I do what's expected of me, climbing out of my car and waving to the crowd with a big grin on my face, showing off my pearly whites.

I'm surrounded by the pit crew and tons of reporters. The crowd in the stands goes wild, and that high from earlier flies even higher as I'm approached by Leslie Adamson-Phillips, her microphone in hand and red high heels holding her up.

She's smiling as she walks over to me. "Sebastian Harris. You're on a hot streak. Four wins in a row! How do you feel?" Leslie is one of the top sports reporters in the world and is as cool as a cucumber as she begins the interview, knowing I know what to do. We're both seasoned professionals in this business.

"I'm on top of the world, and I owe it all to my team. That last pit stop was a brilliant call," I say into the microphone, knowing how to work the crowd, knowing what I'm allowed to and expected to say after a win.

"I'll say," she indulges me, giving my crew props. But then she leans in, a devilish smirk on her painted red lips. "Lennon was close on that last lap. Were you nervous?"

Leslie knows exactly what she's doing. What she has to do because it's all part of a great big game.

The back of my neck prickles at the mention of Axel Lennon, my nemesis and the bane of my existence. The bastard nearly sent me into the wall, and there's no question of whether it was on purpose or not. He wanted to win. None of that's fake. He wants the title this year, and I'm going to take it from him with this hot streak.

Axel Lennon has had it out for me since we were both rookies a mere five years ago. Always on my ass. Always battling for the title. The man is the epitome of arrogance. And even though I won this race, he's surrounded by just as many people, if not more, than I am right now.

The media scurries for an interview with the *bad boy*.

Because that's his role in the racing world. He gets the black leather jackets and edgy ads, while they put me in the innocent, pretty-boy bullshit.

And it's all bullshit.

Axel Lennon is no more bad than any of us, but his dark hair and eyes, and that sinful body graced with black ink, makes for marketing gold. And pitting him against me, the blond-haired, blue-eyed, clean-cut kid from Kansas, has made a lot of people a lot of damn money.

Axel and me included.

It's not hard to hate him on camera. The guy is full of himself—arrogant and selfish, on and off the track. He watches out for no one but himself. He fights dirty and has no problem slamming a competing car into the wall so he can cross the finish line.

He's reckless with no damn morals.

I hear Leslie clear her throat, her pretty eyes zoned in on me as if she can read exactly where my thoughts have gone, spurred on by her question. "Of course not." I smile big, knowing it'll make my dimples pop out for the camera, and send the viewers a wink. "I have to get going, but I'll see you all at the next finish line."

Leslie thanks me, then addresses her adoring audience before we go off the air. Then she places a hand on her hip, her bright red fingernails standing out against her black skirt. "Admit it. That fucker pissed you off."

I've known Leslie for a while now. Racing is in her blood. Her father was *the* Mitch Adamson—hardcore racing legend, and her brothers raced motorcycles for years. Legends in their own right. And she happens to be married to the top racing agent in the country, Cash Phillips.

The same Cash who represents Axel. Therefore, she's the wife of my enemy in so many ways, but she knows how this all works, and if anyone

knows our *rivalry* is mostly a gimmick, it's Leslie.

"He just wanted the win. Can't fault him for that."

"Knock it off, Sebastian." She rolls her eyes, her long eyelashes fluttering. "This rivalry bullshit is going to get you killed. Either you need to take it more seriously"—she points her finger at me, and then motions over to where Axel is giving an interview—"or you need to call him off. Because *he* is taking it seriously. He's out for blood."

I scoff at that, "Axel hasn't taken anything seriously in his entire life." I'll admit it was a close call though.

"Winning is everything to him." Her eyes meet mine, turning cold as steel. "Don't let them control your destiny, Sebastian. They'll ruin you, and they won't lose a minute of sleep about doing so."

I want to ask her to tell me more, to elaborate on that because it sends chills through my entire body. But she just gives me a sinful wink—rivaling my over-the-top bubblegum-sweet wink from earlier but injecting a dangerous edge to hers—before she calls her crew to head to her next interview.

My eyes move to where Axel stands. His dark eyes look almost bored as he responds to questions in what I'm sure are short, direct answers. He doesn't flirt with the camera. He doesn't say all the right things. I highly doubt his agent, Cash, lectured him before the race about what to say in his interview and definitely won't remind him about it later, like mine did and will.

My agent banks on my good behavior. Cash banks on Axel's wildcard factor. We are not the same.

His role, in my opinion, is much harder. He has to leave them wanting more. He doesn't flirt and get to be cute. He has to push the limits. His job is to make them hate him so much they tune in to see him.

It makes no damn sense to me, but he's mastered it. They can't get enough of him.

The marketing team has spent so much time and money on making us the ultimate good versus evil story. The race between the bad boy and the pretty boy is on.

Who will win this epic showdown?

Only time will tell.

AXEL

I watch Sebastian Harris walk back to his trailer to change, my eyes tracking him far longer than they should, before I look back into one of the many cameras pointing my way. I can't believe that fucker got past me.

I had him.

I so fucking had him, and then, at the last second, he managed to slip right past me and over the finish line. It's eating at me as I stand here and answer the hundreds of questions lobbed at me.

The answer to them all is that I don't give a flying fuck.

And while I do get by with a lot, saying *fuck* on the air wouldn't go over all that well. I'd have to pay a damn fine and maybe even apologize. Who the hell has time for that shit?

I'll save it for the next time someone really pisses me off on the track and I decide to settle it with fists. Which—whether they want you to believe it or not—is allowed because it's good TV. The audience waits for two things during a race—a wreck or a fight. Who the winner of the actual race is, no one really gives a damn about but the racers.

The audience—they're out for blood.

Most of the reporters, with their microphones shoved in my face, annoy the ever-loving shit out of me. But there's one I don't ignore when she holds up the microphone, her red fingernails on display, and her lips turned up in a smirk. "Always playing dirty, huh, Axel?"

"Now Leslie, that doesn't sound like me," I flirt shamelessly with my agent's wife, a woman who I know later will likely have my balls if I push her too far during an interview. But she's the only one in the media I've

found not to be totally full of shit. Yeah, she likes to bait me. But she knows what she's doing, and she goes for the jugular like none other.

I respect Leslie, and I know the feeling is mutual. "Right. That was a dangerous maneuver on the last lap." Ah, the mama bear is coming out. She has a soft spot for Sebastian. Always has.

"Apparently not dangerous enough," I shoot back, and I see the hint of a wicked smile on her face. She's gonna get me back for that.

"Well, second place is good, but we all know you wanted that win. How do you feel about not getting what you wanted, Axel?" she asks, and I want to be pissed, but like I said, I respect her. All the other reporters have done nothing but kiss my ass. Leslie bows to no one.

"Aw, come on, Leslie. Don't break my heart and tell me you're a secret Sebastian Harris fan."

Her eyes meet mine, deadly serious, but light enough not to go too off brand. "No secret about it." No, there definitely isn't. Everyone falls for that angelic, innocent act.

And believe me, it's an act.

"Ouch. I'm wounded," I deadpan. Then Leslie signs off, ignoring my antics before the cameras leave, and it's just me and my agent, Cash, walking back to my trailer.

"You know, Leslie will get hate thrown at her after that shit."

Yeah, my fanbase is rabid as fuck. Team Sebastian? They'll tear her apart.

"Leslie can handle herself. And besides, she started it."

"You in kindergarten now?" he shoots at me, and I grin, a slow, easy, genuine grin because I like Cash. And he also isn't worried about Leslie. She doesn't need to be taken care of.

"I fucking *wish* I was in kindergarten. My biggest worry then was trying to stay awake during naptime so I didn't miss the movie."

He chuckles at that, but then his demeanor turns slightly somber. "And now?"

Something dark flows through me, my mood shifting because he knows, and so do I, but neither of us are going to talk about it. "I fucking hate losing to that perfect little pretty boy."

He laughs again as we reach my trailer, and I open the door, both of us walking in. "That pretty boy earned that win, and once again, you were the goddamn villain trying to wreck him. What was that all about?"

I unzip my jumpsuit, annoyed because in that moment I wasn't really thinking. My instincts took over, and I just wanted to win. "Winning."

He nods like he knows exactly what that means, but he isn't pleased. There's a lot of pressure in this world. To win. To play the part. To do what you're told, when you're told. And while to most, I seem like the rebel, it's a lie. But I do it better than everyone else, on and off the track. "You going to behave at the charity event tonight?"

Cash and Leslie host a dinner for St. Jude's Children's Hospital every year. Cash lost his first daughter to illness when she was a little kid. He's been pretty damn vocal about it and how she lived far longer than anyone thought she would with the help of the hospital. This charity event means everything to my agent, and yeah, it's the one night of the year I'll agree to behave.

"Best behavior."

He studies me for far too long, and I start to squirm. Cash was a racer back in the day. He was the one to beat. He was the idol we all grew up worshipping, and now he's my agent. I got lucky when his protégé—Michael Monroe, the cocky motherfucker who has more racing records than anyone else—decided to retire last year and Cash took me on as his new client.

Michael helps Cash manage his clients now, but I mostly deal with Cash. And although I love to give him a hard time, I'll always be in awe that Cash Phillips is my manager. Even though he annoys the shit out of me because he cares about me. *That* I'm not used to and can't say I like in the slightest.

I mean, who has time for that shit?

He's not a huge fan of the bad-boy persona my prior management set up, and he makes it known.

"No fights."

I hold my hand up in mock surrender. "I would never."

"I mean it. Harris will be there."

I snort a laugh at the thought of getting into a bona fide fight with Sebastian Harris. "He'll be on his leash."

"And so will you." He eyes me with cold seriousness Cash doesn't often show.

I give him a clipped nod, not wanting him to worry.

I'm an asshole of epic proportions, but I'm not a *ruin a charity event for a children's hospital* kind of asshole.

Nah. I'll be on my best behavior for Cash, despite that pretty boy being in

my presence once again.

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SEBASTIAN

Everyone is here tonight. No one can resist a children's charity, and why should we? It's a great cause, and one Cash Phillips has dedicated his life to. He's vocal about losing his first child at a really young age and how he wants to do everything he can to prevent that from happening to anyone else.

She had a rare heart disease and left this world far too soon. It tugs at all the heartstrings. I walk into the grand ballroom filled with elegantly dressed people, recognizing a lot of famous faces.

Not just the racing community either—which there are plenty, including Cash's brothers-in-law, Levi and Phillip Adamson. I notice Michael Monroe and his wife, Dani, hanging out with them. All of them are retired from racing now, enjoying their lives as agents and commentators but mostly just raising their kids.

I see Ryan Bailey—the now-retired professional baseball player with his rockstar husband, Grady Bell, and a woman I don't recognize, dressed in a dark red dress that sweeps the floor. There are plenty of other athletes, including famous football players, baseball players, and racers. Cash really called in the big guns for this one.

And then I see him.

Axel Lennon.

Damn it. I knew he'd be here, but I also knew that wouldn't stop me from coming when my agent told me about this event. Because I can't seem to say no.

Not to him.

His dark eyes meet mine from across the room in a silent agreement

we've made so many damn times. He's standing next to Cash, and *goddammit*, he looks good in a tuxedo. It shouldn't be allowed. His lean muscled body is enveloped in perfectly tailored, expensive black fabric, which hugs him in all the right places. His dark hair is styled to perfection to look like he just rolled out of bed and threw on his tux.

I make my rounds, being polite and socializing for as long as I need to before making my way to the lobby. I head to the elevator and up to a suite in the fancy hotel. The suite I made sure to book under a false name and left an extra key at the front desk for.

I strip out of my tuxedo jacket and walk over to the bar, grabbing an expensive bottle of whiskey and pouring it into a glass. I take a long, slow pull, just as I hear the lock click and the door open, then close.

Axel doesn't say anything as he makes his way across the room. He doesn't have to. We've done this dance so many times before.

I pour him a whiskey and hold out the glass, which he takes, tossing it back instantly. My eyes follow the motion of his throat, swallowing down the liquid with a sexy-as-fuck motion that sets my soul on fire.

Why? Why does it have to be him?

He's cocky, annoying, and careless—all the things I've always said—and yet, he's the one who makes my dick harder than anyone else. He's the one I can't stop thinking about during a dry spell when I'm alone on the road. When I finally seek relief in the shower or in my lonely hotel room, it's *his* face I see when I cry out with my release.

He shrugs out of his tuxedo jacket and hangs it on the back of a chair, silently assessing me with his eyes, dragging them slowly over my body that betrays me with a tremble.

Why him?

He places the glass on the bar, and without any word at all, his hand cups the back of my neck and pulls me in for a searing kiss, one I fight but don't pull away from. My mouth attacks his, our battle for dominance always present.

His body presses against mine, one hand on the back of my neck and the other on my hip, pulling me into him as I go for the buttons on his shirt, prying them apart carefully so they don't rip.

We both have a social commitment to attend when this is done, and I keep that in the back of my mind. He bites on my bottom lip, and I bite him back as I remove the shirt from his toned shoulders before it falls to the

ground.

He grunts and then removes my shirt, being more reckless as usual and popping a button when he does, but not caring and certainly not apologizing. His mouth trails down my neck to my collar bone, hovering the skin and making me hiss.

He moves back to my neck, nipping and biting. The fucker really doesn't care if he leaves a mark, and I hate that I tilt my head to the side to allow him better access.

I moan when he sucks a deep bruise into the skin of my neck as his hands work my pants open, pushing them and my briefs down my ass to the floor. I can't let him be completely in control though. I grab a condom and a packet of lube from my jacket before I grab both his shoulders, moving him back until he hits the wall.

He grunts and then steals my mouth with his own for another punishing kiss.

I try my best not to muss his hair, but his fingers rake through mine. "Careful," I remind him, but he only smiles wickedly against my lips.

I roll my eyes but then pull back, tearing the condom open with my teeth and stroking the length of my cock with my hand slowly, looking into those dark eyes of his. I roll the condom on, still staring at him, neither of us talking.

He steals the lube from me and pushes his pants down. After coating my sheathed cock with the liquid, he moves to quickly prep himself. It's a dance we've done so many times, and there's a part of me—one I try to ignore—that wishes it were *my* fingers inside him. That I was the one stretching him and teasing him. But we don't have a lot of time, and we both know it.

He must not be in the mood for a lot of prep because he tosses the packet and then pulls me in for another kiss that's more biting and feasting than anything else. It makes my cock jerk in anticipation before I spin him around, and his hands meet the wall.

My dick slides into him effortlessly, finding its home and bottoming out while I nip at the back of his shoulder, letting my teeth sink into his skin. We remain unmoving while we both adjust, breathing harshly. He surrounds me with his heat and squeezes around my cock when he grows impatient, then he pushes back against me.

I'm met with his gravelly plea that he tries to phrase as a command, "Move, Sebastian. Fucking move."

I grin because I hear his desperation. He doesn't beg. He doesn't ask for anything. Ever.

Except when he's with me.

I pull my hips back until I'm almost completely out of him and then thrust forward, nailing his prostate and reveling in the hoarse cry that leaves his throat. I watch his hands pushing against the wall, balled in fists, as he thrusts back.

We move like that, grunting and fucking like animals until he's crying out with his release, and my cock jerks inside him, cum filling the condom.

After a few breaths, I pull out and get rid of the condom, and he cleans up quickly before getting dressed.

I do the same.

But when he's in the bathroom, staring in the mirror at his own reflection, I see that look in his eyes.

The look that tells me he's not nearly as bulletproof as the media makes him out to be. The look that says he hates hiding part of himself as much as I do. But it only infuriates me as our eyes lock in the mirror's reflection when I stand behind him.

"You could have it all, you know?"

He grunts, turning on the faucet and washing his hands. "I *do* have it all."

He tries to give me the cocky Axel Lennon persona bullshit he uses for the camera. But I ignore it, placing both my hands flat on the counter, one on each side of him, and my groin against his ass, as I look at him in the mirror. "Cash would have your back, without a doubt. You could keep your image and be out without any issues, and still you hide."

"Fuck you, Sebastian. I could say the same to you."

"Cash isn't my agent. Mine would kill me. Told me he would, in fact."

He grimaces slightly at that before turning off the faucet and schooling his features back to impervious. "He can't say that."

"He does," I say because my agent couldn't give a flying fuck about me. And I'm locked in. He knows he owns me. And he's told me repeatedly this can't happen. That I'm not allowed to be me.

His back straightens, but he doesn't push me away. I wait for him to offer some sort of advice. To tell me it would be okay if I decided to say fuck it and just tell the world my truth. But this is Axel. And I'm an idiot. "So quit," he says, shooting a careless grin at me in the mirror, his red lips pulled up at the corners.

I roll my eyes at him, hating the disappointment I feel because it's never going to happen. It's every man for himself in the racing world. "You wish."

Something passes over his face, like maybe he wants to say more, but of course, he doesn't.

He just moves away from me, grabbing his jacket and heading to the bar to take another shot of whiskey. I grab my own jacket, making sure I'm presentable and don't bother risking another glance in his direction as I leave the suite to go back to the event.

When the fuck will I learn?

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AXEL

I ride down in the elevator alone, feeling the same way I always feel when I'm finished with Sebastian.

Alone. On a high. Angry.

Because I should have told him he can do whatever the fuck he wants. I should have told him to fire that worthless fucking agent of his, but I didn't. I took the easy way out, like I always do, because my life was nothing but hard until I finally made it.

And now, I don't want to go back to that shit.

He probably could though. He could quit and be himself. Free, as he says.

It might not change anything for him. He'll still be beautiful and the man everyone looks up to. Role model for little kids. The good guy.

No matter what I do, I'll be the bad one.

"Where the fuck have you been?" My eyes widen, startled as fuck to see Cash standing on the other side of the elevator doors and glaring at me like I've never seen before.

My body breaks out in a sweat as my heart threatens to explode. Did he see? Does he know? *Shit.* "What are you talking about?" I try to play it cool as I hop off the elevator, but it's clear Cash isn't buying it.

He takes my arm, and instead of leading me into the ballroom, we go out on the back patio. It's chilly tonight but not too bad, and Cash doesn't seem to notice anyway. He's seething. "Are you really this fucking stupid?"

I flinch because I think he knows. I think he has for a while. It's just not something we ever talk about. But I never thought he'd have a problem with me being into guys.

“You tell me,” I snap.

His eyes search mine, his anger so intense I feel it in my bones, and it makes me sick. I’ve known I was gay since I was a teenager. But in the foster care system, when you’re being passed around from home to home, when your own parents can’t get it together enough to keep you, you learn quickly that being yourself isn’t an option. That you have to adapt to the world. And when I started racing, I knew the audience. I knew I’d still have to adapt.

So I’ve hidden who I am. I’ve played the bad boy and distracted them. But the way Cash is looking at me right now—goddammit, I’m not as unbothered by it as I pretend to be.

“I think you’re really fucking stupid. Do you know how many people could have caught you coming out of the same hotel as Sebastian fucking Harris? Do you have any idea?”

“I didn’t take you for a homophobe, Cash,” I bite out bitterly and try to push past him, but he doesn’t let me pass.

“I don’t give a fuck about your sexual orientation, asshole.” My eyes snap up to his as I search for the lie. One I don’t see, but he’s definitely mad. That part I know without a doubt. “You want to come out right this second, you say the goddamn word. But you let me know. And don’t do it in a fucking scandal. And don’t out *him* at the same time.” He points behind him, and I know he’s talking about Sebastian.

Of course, we can’t have that. The evil Axel ruining the angelic Sebastian’s reputation. “I wouldn’t do that.”

His gaze softens for a moment, and he places a hand on my shoulder. “Listen to me. I don’t give a fuck who you sleep with. As far as I’m concerned, that’s no one’s business. But if you’re going to do it out in public with another celebrity, someone is going to break that story. Someone with absolutely no qualms about outing or exposing anyone. I need you to understand that.”

I think about my very brief conversation with Sebastian and recall the sadness in his eyes. *Would he come out if he could?*

I think I know the answer.

I shake my head at Cash. “I don’t want to come out. I’m not a fucking idiot.”

“Coming out isn’t the problem,” he says like he wants to make that clear. He looks into my eyes, projecting seriousness. “Being who you are isn’t a problem.”

“Bullshit,” I whisper, but even though I didn’t mean to, my voice comes out broken.

“Look at me.” I didn’t realize I’d looked away and drag my focus back to him. “I mean it. You say the damn word, and you can tell the world. You never want it to come out and you just want to race, then that’s what we’ll do. But you have to be smart. And something tells me that Sebastian doesn’t have the same options as you.”

He means because of Sebastian’s management, not his circumstance. I know that. But he’s crazy if he thinks my fanbase will be fine with this. I’m not naive. I know sports have had some men and women come out lately, and they’ve even been embraced. But there’s still been plenty of backlash.

And racing?

Most of our fans are in the good ole’ Bible Belt.

I can’t. And I know it.

“His manager is a prick,” is all I manage.

Cash grimaces, and I know it bothers him. For a moment, I wonder if he wishes he would’ve taken on Sebastian instead of me. He doesn’t take on a lot of clients, and he’s completely full, but he also has a soft spot for Sebastian. Just like his wife. Just like the fucking world.

What if they knew? Knew that Sebastian Harris, their golden boy, loves to fuck men just as much as he loves to be fucked by them. That he’s a goddamned animal in the sack. That he likes it rough. Loves to bite and manhandle. That his cock has left me walking funny many, many times after fucking me so hard.

They’d turn on him too.

An uncomfortable feeling runs through me at the thought of him being outed without it being his choice. Of someone snapping a shot of us coming out of the same hotel.

“No one saw us, did they?” Is that why he’s confronting me tonight?

“No.” I don’t feel relieved by his answer, and I don’t think he wants me to. “But they could have. You have to be careful unless you want to do this. But you need to be careful with him too.”

He says it as if there’s more there. I want to tell him Sebastian is just a convenient fuck. That it’s easier than NDAs and meeting strangers in the dark. That we have a mutual understanding.

But none of those excuses come out. Cash looks back toward the hotel. “Maybe I can help him.”

I force out an uncomfortable laugh. “You finally ditching me?”

He rolls his eyes and slings an arm around my shoulder, walking us back inside. “Fuck no. You know I love a good challenge.”

“Asshole.” I say it with no venom and a smile on my face.

Because as much as I hate it, I know Sebastian is right.

Cash will always have my back. And maybe I have more choices than I’m actually comfortable with.

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SEBASTIAN

“**W**here the hell have you been?” My agent, Kevin, is waiting for me in the ballroom, ready to tear me apart for daring to disappear during a social function.

“I’m here now.” I’m supposed to be polite and keep my voice down, looking happy. But I’m tired of it. So damn tired of all of it. I want to be here—I do. A lot of these people I consider friends, but answering to my jackass agent who I hate? I don’t want to be doing that.

He seems caught off guard by my harsh tone, but I don’t care. “You were with *him*,” he snarls with disgust, and it takes everything I have not to get in his face. To tell him I was deep inside Axel only moments ago. That it was the greatest feeling I’ve had in a long, long time. Since the last time I was inside Axel, or he was inside me.

And though I can barely stand Axel, it’s real with him. It’s the only damn time I can actually be myself. *Fucking Axel*. I feel him staring at me from across the room where he’s talking to Michael Monroe, Cash Phillips, and their wives. Laughing happily and freely while they drink champagne.

The secret doesn’t seem to bother him at all.

“Yes. You’re here now, but you smell like him . . .” Kevin’s eyes stay pinned on me, his anger contained but right there under the surface. “Your hair is messy.” It’s not, I made sure. But it doesn’t matter.

“Kevin!” We both turn to see Cash approaching us, a jovial expression on his face. “Sebastian. I’m so glad you made it tonight.”

Kevin relaxes his shoulders, pasting the slick smile on his face as he turns to greet Cash. Ever the kissass. “We wouldn’t miss this, Cash.” He holds his

hand out, and Cash shakes it before turning to me to do the same.

His handshake is firm, and his eyes are kind. "Hell of a race, kid."

I smile genuinely at that because having a legend commend you on racing is a dream come true. "Thank you."

"Yes. He's on a streak." Kevin pats my shoulder, boasting as usual about my talent and in some weird way trying to take credit for the win. "Which means we should probably get going soon so he can rest up."

Cash shakes his head at that, a big smile on his face. "It's not even ten o'clock. Please tell me he doesn't have a bedtime."

His eyes meet Kevin's, and I watch my agent squirm, keeping his professional persona, even though I know he hates being challenged by Cash. I decide to make it even worse. "I don't . . ." I nudge Kevin's side with my elbow, keeping it playful. "But the old man here is probably anxious to get to bed."

Kevin grimaces and his entire body is tense, but he doesn't say any of the things he wants to. Just grits his teeth as Cash chuckles.

"Well, you go on. But I'm stealing your guy here for a bit."

Cash wraps his arm around my shoulders, and Kevin's face turns purple, but he doesn't say a word. He gives a courteous nod and says his goodbyes before exiting. As he leaves, Cash releases me and mutters under his breath, "Prick."

"What?" I say with a surprised smile.

Cash turns to face me head-on. "Your agent is a prick. You know that though." I nod, even though it wasn't a question. Then he asks, "How much longer is your contract with him?"

I'm surprised by the question. "Two years." But I have to ask, "You have an opening in your client list or something?"

He grips his chin with his hand like he's thinking and shakes his head. "I really don't. I could maybe fit you in, but I have a better idea. One that won't get me murdered by my wife, who's already irritated with my busy schedule."

I laugh at that because Leslie will certainly cut him if he takes on more clients. I don't blame her either. They have kids and a life together most people dream about. She should get a part of him. "What idea?"

He grins. "I have a friend. A damn good sports agent." He lowers his voice, his eyes narrowing on mine. "One who can help you."

A hot feeling runs over me because I know what he's saying even though

he isn't saying it. Goddammit. I glance over at Axel, who isn't paying attention to us, and then back at Cash. "Did that asshole say something about me?"

Cash immediately shakes his head. "He wouldn't do that. No one has said anything. But if you want a change, I think I can help."

I look over at Axel, hating that I let my eyes roam for too long, then focus back on Cash, who to his credit doesn't call me on it. "I . . . I'm stuck for two more years."

"No. You aren't." He sounds so sure of himself. "You're never stuck. If you want me to set up a meeting, I will." He puts one hand on my shoulder and looks at me, saying things with his eyes he doesn't say out loud. "No one deserves to hide pieces of themselves. Trust me on this. Life is too short."

He looks toward the stage, where there's a big blown-up black-and-white picture of his daughter—the one he lost—and then back at me with a deep sigh.

"I promised I would do everything I can to make the world a better place. And I damn sure will. You want out from under that fucker's thumb, say the word."

I don't say anything.

I can't seem to. My throat is clogged with so many damn emotions. And I feel hope overcoming me. Because it's hard to relish the wins when it all feels fake.

I can't make the words come out, but I manage a nod that makes a bright smile appear on his face before he nods back at me in acknowledgment.

"Done."

Done.

SEBASTIAN

I stumble out of my bedroom at the sound of someone in my house and try to remember if I set the alarm last night when I got home. I haven't been back for a while and was grateful to sleep in my own damn bed.

Yay for local charities.

I'm still half asleep when I walk into the living room to find a petite woman, dressed in a black skirt, matching heels, and a white, silk blouse. Her face says don't fuck with me, and her body language is saying the same thing.

"Who are you?"

"Seriously?" She has her phone in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. "You're Sebastian fucking Harris, not some country bumpkin. You cannot leave your goddamn door unlocked."

Shit.

"It was unlocked?" I asked, stunned, but I had a lot on my mind last night when I got home.

"Yes." She makes herself at home, sitting gracefully on my couch with her ankles crossed and her back straight. "You what, just felt like being murdered last night?"

I sit down in my favorite chair and stare at the small intruder with bright red painted lips and all the attitude. "I didn't mean to leave it unlocked, and you still haven't answered my question."

"I'm Jenny. I'll be your new agent if you want. And you *will* start locking the damn door if you sign with me. You being murdered is a PR nightmare." My eyes widen at the cold statement, and she waves her hand, the one with

the phone in her grip. “I mean, sure, at first they’ll all be grieving for you, but then they’ll move on. And I’ll be down a client.”

She takes a sip of her coffee as I stare at her, my eyes wide. “Damn. That’s cold.”

A small smile forms as she lowers the paper cup. “I’m an agent. I’m paid to care about these things. About your brand. And I guess I’m going to have to add keeping you alive to the contract. At least making you lock your doors.”

I ignore that part, despite her being stuck on that fact. “You’re Cash’s friend.”

“That’s right.” She smiles again—deadly but somehow frank in the gesture. She feels real, even though she’s clearly tough as hell. “And I’m here to help.”

“I’m under contract with Kevin.”

Her lips purse as she waves that off quickly. “We can get you out of that, no problem, if you want it.”

I look into her eyes and see something there. Unsaid words. “Cash tell you anything else?”

“He told me you need a new agent. That yours is a prick, and I’d be a good fit.”

“Why’s that?”

She doesn’t waste time being coy. “Because my biggest client is a gay baseball player.”

“Ryan Bailey.”

She nods her head, and of course, now I realize where I’ve seen her before. But it’s not only the famous baseball player she represents. She also recently helped a professional golfer come out.

“So if I sign with you, people will just assume . . .” I don’t say the words. I don’t know why. I don’t think it’s actually a secret in this room.

“No one should assume a goddamn thing.” She places her cup on a coaster on my coffee table, her posture still perfect. “I just happen to have one spot open in my client portfolio, and you need a new agent.”

“And if I want to . . .” My throat goes dry. I clench my fists at my side, irritated I can’t seem to say it.

She eyes me cautiously. “Your personal life is your business. You don’t need to make a grand statement about any of it if you don’t want to. But if I’m your agent, I’m not going to place you in any box. I’m not going to make

you hold onto the sweet little good-boy image your current management has created for you. You can be whoever you are.”

The words open up the floodgates for me, my body soaring on a high as I look her in the eye and believe every single word she just said. “I’m gay.”

Her lips curl into a smile, and she gives me a quick nod. “And do you want to announce that?”

“I know I don’t want to hide it.”

She grabs her coffee and takes another long swig. “Okay. Do you want out of your current contract?”

“Yes,” I say instantly.

She stands up, coffee and phone in hand. “I’ll make the calls. We’ll get it done.”

She heads for the door, and I follow quickly behind her. “Just like that?”

She turns to face me. “You’re in good hands. Try not to worry about it.” She pinches my cheek. “Just keep looking pretty.” She winks at me, and I roll my eyes, already liking her.

“I think that’s harassment.”

She waves me off. “I’ll be in touch.” But she doesn’t move, and worry crosses her pretty features. “Look, Cash didn’t give me any details. It’s not his thing. But I’m pretty perceptive, and I did notice some glances here and there between you and a certain bad boy last night.”

My entire body goes tense. “No.”

She huffs loudly and shakes her head at me. “You deserve to live your life the way you want to. Celebrity or not. You don’t owe anyone that part of you. But if you do decide to make a statement, if you do want to live out and proud, you should probably talk to him.”

We’re still talking in code, and I hate it, but I also respect it. Axel isn’t out. I don’t think he’ll ever want to be. And if I want to, we’ll have to be even more careful. Or end it all together.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” With that she leaves, not another word said. I have a feeling Jenny is a person of few words, and I’m okay with it.

But the few words she did say left me knowing I have to talk to Axel.

AXEL

“F uuuck,” I groan as I slide into Sebastian’s tight body. It’s been weeks since we found a chance to get together, but when I found out he was in town early before our race tomorrow, I couldn’t resist.

I wish I fucking *could* resist, but I can’t.

“Less talking,” he bites out, thrusting backward, forcing my dick even further into him. He’s on his hands and knees on the hotel’s king-sized bed with me behind him, my hands grasping his hips.

I reach one hand to slide my fingers through his hair, gripping tight and yanking his head back, pulling him up to his knees as I slide into him again. My cock grazes his prostate with each pass and elicits filthy moans from his mouth. “I’m in charge tonight.”

“Fuck you,” he grits out, moving with me as I shove into him over and over, but he doesn’t move away from me. He’s begging for it. He needs this as badly as I do, and when I push him back down, using my hand in the middle of his spine, he arches back and moans loudly.

One hand braces his weight as the other moves to his dick, stroking furiously as we both near the edge, crashing over at the same time. He lets out a hoarse shout the same time my cock jerks inside him as I empty into the condom.

We’re both panting and sweaty as I collapse onto his back. His hand is trapped under him, but he doesn’t seem to mind the sticky mess and doesn’t push me off him.

It takes several minutes before I climb off and lie down next to him. He rolls out of the wet spot and onto his back. Neither of us move from our

spots, even though he should probably get going to his own hotel room.

And I should get room service to come change the sheets after he leaves.

But we don't move.

"I heard you got a new agent."

His head rolls to the side, taking me in. "Thanks to your agent, I did."

I can't stop the smile on my face from forming. Cash is a meddling motherfucker. And for reasons I can't explain, I'm happy he is. "Jenny is superior to Kevin by far. You're in good hands."

He remains lying there, his eyes shifting back up to the ceiling. "I am. She's good. She got me out of my contract quickly and set up an interview for me with Leslie next week."

"An interview for what?" We don't usually do special interviews, other than out on the track or if there's a scandal. My heart starts to race, thinking about him being caught up in a scandal because there's only one I can think of. And that would involve me and him at that charity event.

Fuck.

I watch him swallow tightly as he looks up at the ceiling, not at me. The worry only intensifies. *Shit*. Cash said no one saw us, and surely, he'd have been all over my ass if they had. "Say something."

He turns to look at me, nerves dancing in his eyes. "I'm going to talk about my shift in agents and the freedom that allows me."

I furrow my brow in confusion because that doesn't sound like a scandal. "O—kay."

"The freedom to tell the world who I am. That I'm not this sweet, good boy who will eventually settle down and marry a nice girl."

Reality dawns on me. "You're going to tell them you're gay."

He nods, but he doesn't verbalize his answer.

"And about you and me?"

He shakes his head, sitting up and sifting his fingers through his thick hair. "No. I'd never do that. I know you aren't ready for that."

Shit. Does he want that? For me to tell the world?

I stand up, not caring about my nudity and pace the room, thinking about my childhood. About my abusive shitty father and the names he called me my whole life. I was never good enough for him. He didn't want me. He wanted a *tough guy*, and then he fucking left when I was twelve. My mom died, and I was in foster care before I knew what the hell was happening.

Told to toughen up there too. Told I'd never amount to anything, and now

I'm a bigshot. I'm a famous racer with three houses, two of which I haven't even visited in the past year. But they're mine.

I have more cars than I can count. I have money in the bank and will never be that poor, weak boy again.

I'm the bad boy.

But I can't be the gay racer.

"You know our fanbase. You know this won't go over well."

Sebastian stands up and tugs on his jeans, seemingly uncaring about the drying jizz on his stomach. "I can't worry about that anymore. I can't care. I've played their games for five years, Axel. I'm done."

"So, you're just over your career?" I say a little too loudly as I walk closer to him, hating him for being so damn brave. For being what I'm not.

"I'm not done racing, but I'm done pretending to be someone I'm not."

"So *do* that," I say loudly again, and we meet, toe-to-toe. Him in his jeans and me naked, our chests puffing out furiously. "You don't have to *tell* them anything."

"Bullshit. I do." He points to his chest. "I can't do this anymore. Answering questions about when I'm going to get married. When I want to have kids."

"That's none of their goddamn business anyway." And it's not. Even though I know these are questions asked all the time. "You really think that the apple-pie-eating, church-on-Sunday crowd is going to be fine with this?"

"Why shouldn't they be?" he shouts, leaning in. "Huh? We aren't doing anything wrong."

"I know that. But they think it's . . ." I can't say the words I grew up with. It makes me sick to my stomach to think about it.

"I know. But I can't care. I'm still going to race."

"You think you can handle the shit they're going to throw at you?" I look into his eyes, wanting to beg him not to do it. Thinking about all the shit they'll say. All the things they could possibly do to him. The hate. I wanted him to have a new agent, just in case. But I didn't think it would move this fast.

"I can."

I shake my head, anger sliding through me. Irrational anger I know he doesn't deserve. "Leave me out of it."

He stands up a little straighter at that, his shoulders going back as if this was his silent question all along. And he just got his answer. "Fine."

He grabs his shirt and leaves after pulling it on, without looking back.
And I sit back on the edge of the bed.

The answer was the wrong one, but I'll never be as brave as Sebastian Harris. And it eats away at me.

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SEBASTIAN

“**S**hit!” My car slams into the wall just as Axel’s slams into mine. I’m pissed off. The race did not go to plan, and I was lagging in third most of the damn day, but I had it. I was right fucking there on the last lap, and then of fucking course, Axel got in my way.

I climb out of my car, pissed the hell off and seeing red, just as Axel comes barreling into me, his helmet ripped off. “You motherfucker. You couldn’t stand to see me win, so you wreck us both?”

“Oh, hell no.” I pull my helmet off and get right into his face. “That was all *you*. I had it. I was right there. *You* clipped my car.”

“Bullshit.” My ass hits the hood of my car as he bears down on me, looking nearly feral. Guys get into pissing matches all the time out here, but I’m usually waiting at the finish line while the assholes duke it out. But not today.

Last night did not go well.

The sex was good, like it always is with this prick with wild, rageful eyes. Usually is. But afterward, when I told him what I consider the best news I’ve had in a while, he had to do his best to talk me out of it. To make me feel like shit.

And it carried over to today.

I’m in a terrible mood. My head wasn’t in the race, and I blame him.

Axel fucking Lennon.

Why can’t he be the guy I know he is? Just once.

Maybe it’s all my fault though. It seems I’ve built him into someone he isn’t in my head. Maybe to condone starting this up with him. I don’t know.

He looks seconds away from throwing a punch, and goddammit, I want it. Maybe then, I can be finished with him. My mind will move on.

“You just couldn’t stand to see me win.” He’s glaring at me, his stance threatening, but I’m not afraid.

“Right. I wrecked us both just to keep you from winning. Why don’t you pull your head out of your ass? Maybe you weren’t paying attention.”

He flinches at that, and for a moment, I think I’m right. He has laser focus out on the track though. Always has, and I’m not naive enough to think he was thinking about anything other than racing today.

He’s not capable of it.

“Everyone okay?” We both turn our heads as Cash and Jenny approach with the crew that comes out when we wreck.

I nod at Cash, but Axel’s eyes remain on me until Jenny walks over to us, her heels clicking on the pavement as she leans in close to him. “Either hit him or back away. Because you look like you want to fuck him right now, and if you don’t want other people to pick up on *that*, I suggest you back up.”

That finally gains his attention. His eyes widen as he looks around at the crowd that’s so loud it nearly hurts my ears, although he looks like he just realized they were there. He steps back, pushing his hand through his hair as Jenny smiles at me, crossing over to stand at my side.

“You okay?”

I nod once, not thrilled my new agent just told him to hit me. But I suppose she was going for the shock factor. “I’m fine.”

“You’re supposed to stay in the car. Let them check it out,” Cash says to both Axel and me.

“We’re fine,” Axel grumbles.

Cash doesn’t argue with him, and we both walk away in different directions, heading to our respective trailers to get changed and lick our wounds.

The adrenaline starts to wear off, and I’m feeling the wreck, but luckily the copious amount of safety gear did its job.

Now if I could only get something to guard me from the wrecking ball that’s Axel Lennon.

AXEL

Holy fuck. What the hell was that?

I could have gotten us both killed. The truth is my mind wasn't on racing today. It should have been, but it wasn't. It was completely and totally on Sebastian.

On him announcing to the world he's gay.

On what they'll do to him if he does. If his career will be over. If he'll get threats. People think the world has changed, but there's still plenty of hatred. Though I shouldn't worry about him. He's a grown man.

He doesn't mean anything to me. He's just a guy I fuck on occasion. A pain in the ass.

Except he isn't.

"You cool down yet?" I glare at Cash as I take a seat in his office.

"I'm still pissed. I should have had that one."

He leans back in his leather chair and nods in agreement. "Yeah. You should have. You wanna tell me what that was all about?"

"Fucker wrecked me." Except Cash is a racer, through and through, and he knows exactly what happened out there.

He eyes me, waiting for me to correct myself, but I don't. He just shakes his head at me, remaining silent.

"I lost. It happens."

"You lost your fucking cool. Jenny wasn't wrong about you looking like you wanted to mount him right there on his car either."

"Doing the whole homophobe thing again, Cash?" I deflect because holy shit, that image is hot, crowd or not. I could go with either choice.

“You know about his interview.” It’s not a question. He knows I know. And of course, *he* knows. His wife is running the show.

“Where he ends his career? Yup. He told me.”

“Doesn’t have to be the end,” he says sternly, and I shake my head, trying to block out the memories of all the shit spewed at me growing up. All the adults preaching to me. The same kind of adults who’ll be watching his interview.

They’ll turn on him.

“You know as well as I do, it will.”

He studies me carefully. “And you’re worried about him because . . . ?”

I’m annoyed, sitting there like a petulant child and crossing my arms. “Just because.”

“You tell him yet?”

I drop my hands and sit up straight, narrowing my eyes at my agent. “What are you talking about? Tell him what?”

He smiles knowingly and shakes his head as he stands up from his desk, walking to sit on the edge, directly in front of me. “Him coming out doesn’t out you. Leslie will make damn sure it doesn’t, unless you want it to.”

“I don’t. And I think he’s being naive as fuck.”

“You should tell him, you know? Life is too fucking short not to. I can handle anything thrown at you by your fans, but this is between you and him.”

“What?” My eyes meet Cash’s. “You think I want him to be my boyfriend or something? Get married? Both of us race and then come home to our house? Just living the good life? That no one will say a word about it? Our fans will think we’re adorable. Right?”

He grins at that but then turns to look out the glass window of his office, a nostalgic look on his face. “The world hasn’t totally changed. It hasn’t caught up. But strong people—like you”—he turns to look back at me—“and like Sebastian, that’s what’ll help them get there. They live for Sunday races. They love the adrenaline, and who you’re sleeping with won’t matter at the end of the day. They aren’t going to stop watching the race, and eventually, they’ll see the two of you—hopefully, anyway—together and happy, and you’ll just be racers.”

“Gay racers,” I say bitterly.

He shakes his head firmly at me. “Racers.”

“I don’t love him. I can’t be in love with Sebastian fucking Harris.”

He grins again, with that easy, cocky smile as he hops off his desk. “Don’t waste any more time worrying about what the world thinks. You’re a kickass racer. Not today—but on most days.” His smile widens. “Show them that. But you’re so much more than that too.”

I stand from my chair, hating that I don’t hate the words coming from his mouth.

“I can’t love him the way he deserves.”

He places a reassuring hand on my shoulder and sighs. “Love doesn’t have any rules. It makes its own rules, depending on the people involved. And you’ve never done anything by the book.”

I crack a smile at that.

That’s for damn sure.

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SEBASTIAN

I shouldn't be this damn nervous. I'm never this nervous for an interview. I've done plenty. Publicity. Charity. It doesn't matter. I know my role, and I play it well.

But this is different, and dammit, Axel got into my head, whether I wanted him to or not.

There's a knock on my front door, and I have no idea who it could be. But if it's Jenny, I'm happy the door is locked so she couldn't let herself in and yell at me again.

I look through the peephole and see the last person I expected. Unlocking the door, I pull it open and see Axel standing there, ever the bad boy in ripped jeans, t-shirt and a black leather jacket.

"What are you doing here?"

His eyes slowly take me in and then land on my face. "That's what you're wearing to your coming-out party?"

I glance down at my black dress pants and button-down shirt, then glare at him. "I don't have time for your shit."

I walk away from the door but don't slam it in his face, and he steps inside, closing the door behind him. "I know. You have an interview."

"I do." I grab my wallet and my keys, putting them in my pockets. "So you should go because you're not talking me out of this."

Even though I think we both know he could, I don't want him to. I want this so damn badly, I can taste it. I'm tired of worrying about what anyone else will say. I don't care anymore. I just want to be me.

Free.

“You’re so goddamn stubborn.” I nearly laugh at that as I turn around to face him, but he doesn’t look pissed anymore. He seems almost amused.

“Why are you here?”

“You really piss me off, Harris.” He steps closer. I feel my breathing start to increase and my chest puffing up with air as he nears me.

“Feeling’s mutual, Lennon.”

His shoes hit mine, and I breathe in his sexy cologne as he levels his eyes on me. “You’re so much braver than me. Always have been.”

I just stand there, hypnotized by his eyes and unsure what to say to that. “Again, why are you here?”

His hand wraps around the back of my neck and grips hard but not enough to hurt. “I’m not ready to tell everyone about me.”

I nod my head, hating that it stings. I knew that already. “I’m not saying a word about you. I’d never do that.”

He pulls me closer to him, our foreheads touching as we breathe each other in and stand there silently until he fills the air between us with his words. “I want you though. Eventually, I want the world to know what you are.”

His words shock me, but I try my best not to show it. “What is that?” My voice shakes as my body trembles in anticipation of his answer and also, as it always does when he’s near me, with need.

“Mine,” he breathes so quietly, I barely hear it before his lips plaster against mine, and I let out a grunt of approval, kissing him back.

“And what does that make *you*?” I ask between kisses.

His hand rests over my thundering heart, and our foreheads meet again, both of us panting. “Yours.”

I grin at that, letting my fingers slide through his hair and kiss him hard. I don’t really know what this means. I didn’t see this coming.

Over the years, my heart was starting to look to me like a dumbass, falling for the bad boy of the racing world, but I never in a million years thought he was falling for me right back.

In the race between the bad boy and the pretty boy, I thought I’d eventually lose.

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.”

“I was scared to death for you that day. Not when we crashed, but before and after. And every minute since. I don’t want to watch them tear you apart, Sebastian.”

I nod knowingly at that. “I know.” And I did. I saw it in his eyes. “I can handle it though. I’m still me. I’m still going to win races, and they’re still going to watch.”

His thumb brushes over my bottom lip, swollen and puffy from his kiss. “I know. They may have made me into the bad guy, but you’re the badass, and you’re stronger than all of us.”

“This mean we have to start getting along out on the track?” I ask, still not backing away from him, despite being late for my interview.

“Hell no.” He kisses my lips hard and then steps back to give me room. “Go do your interview.”

I move closer to him, grabbing his collar and briefly kissing his mouth, breathing against his lips, “Thank you.”

“You didn’t need my help. Hold that head up high and tell the world who you are.”

And with that, all my confidence floods back into me because this is what I want to do. And I’m doing it on my terms.

AXEL

My heart races as I watch Leslie's crew get Sebastian ready for his interview. Jenny and Cash are by my side as we stand on the sidelines. I couldn't let him go into this today without seeing him first. Without telling him how brave he is.

Because he is.

Sebastian Harris is everything I've ever wanted to be.

"So that was quite a race the other day, Sebastian," Leslie starts, and I watch as Sebastian's face lights up with his shy smile. The one I know isn't fake. It's him. All him.

"Yeah, hmm . . ." He grips the back of his neck, his smile adorably crooked. "That wasn't exactly how I planned it."

Leslie laughs lightly at that, her eyes playful. "Yeah. I'm glad you and Axel were okay afterward. No harm done."

"Well not to us, anyway," Sebastian teases as he laughs and drops his hand back to his lap. "But the cars took a beating."

"That they did," Leslie jokes with him and tucks her hair behind her ear, growing more serious. "You've also recently switched agents. You want to talk about that?"

Sebastian nods his head, his shoulders straight. "I did, and it was the best decision I could have made."

"And why's that?"

I'm hanging onto every word, but I'm not the only one. Cash and Jenny haven't moved either, transfixed by the interview. "My new agent doesn't make me play a part. She doesn't expect me to fit into a box."

“And you’ve felt like you have to do that?”

Sebastian chuckles, but there isn’t a lot of humor in it. “My entire life. But I’m done with that.”

Leslie smiles, and it’s genuine. “That’s good.”

“It is.” He looks right into the camera. “I have the best record in racing this year, and next year, it’s going to be even better. I’m a damn good race-car driver and have always been.”

Leslie, the seasoned journalist she is, reads the cue and helps him along. “But you’re more than that.”

He nods. “I’m a son. I’m an uncle.” He swallows hard, looking into the camera, and I swear my heart tries to escape my chest as I watch, waiting and knowing he’s going to go through with it. A fierce, beautiful look of determination sweeps his features. “And a gay man.”

Leslie smiles at that, but she doesn’t go into much more. Instead, they talk about his future plans in racing and a charity he’s doing some work for. She doesn’t dwell on him being gay. It’s just part of the package.

And it’s a beautiful thing. When they wrap, Jenny pats my shoulder with her hand and beams in his direction, that proud mama-bear look aimed right at him. “He’s going to change a lot of things for a lot of people.”

“By being the face of gay racers.” I try to hold back my bitter tone, but it doesn’t bother her at all.

“Nope.” She moves to stand directly in front of me. “By being the badass racer he is, who also happens to be gay. By being out and proud—but still the man he’s always been.”

Acquiescing, I give her a slight nod. Then when Sebastian walks over to where we are, I do something stupid. Something I shouldn’t do if I want to remain in the closet, considering there are a hell of a lot of journalists around. But I grab him by the neck and pull him in for a deep kiss.

He stutters for a second, but then he kisses me back, a smile on his lips. “You know how many people know about us now?”

I’m breathing heavily when I pull my mouth from his, still holding onto him and let my forehead rest against his. “I’m not doing an interview. But fuck if I’m hiding what we have.”

“And what is that?”

“You’re a real pain in the ass,” I say, pulling him closer to me.

“I love you too.” I grin at that, kissing that smile off his damn face, unbothered by anyone who sees us.

I'm not going to do a big interview, but I *am* going to live my life. I don't want to hide away what we have. And I definitely want the world to know who's mine.

And Sebastian Harris is all mine for as long as he'll have me.

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SEBASTIAN

Three years later . . .

“So how does it feel to be the winner today?” I grin at Leslie, my smile wide because I just won the last race of the year. The big one.

“It feels damn good, Leslie.”

Mischief plays in her eyes now. “And beating your husband out on the track? That had to feel pretty good too.”

I laugh at that, shaking my head because Leslie hasn’t changed, but a lot of other things have. Of course, there was some bullshit to wade through after my interview three years ago. But mostly, all anyone cared about was me winning the season or not.

Which I did.

The next year, Axel took it. When pictures broke of us on vacation a month later, scantily clad and frolicking out on the beach, hand in hand, people went wild wanting the story.

And we didn’t give it to them.

But we didn’t hide it either. And a year ago, when he proposed to me—out on the track for the world to see—after I won the same race, I said yes instantly.

We were married over the winter and just went on with our lives. Winning races and talking shit. Going home together afterward and fucking each other’s brains out.

“I’m sure I’ll hear about that for a week or two. And you’ll see an even more determined Axel next year.”

Leslie groans at that, but it's playful. "He's going to be even more insufferable after this."

I nod in agreement with a laugh just as Axel, still in his racing jumpsuit, wraps a strong arm over my shoulder. "Oh, Leslie. You know you love me. Deep down, you know you've always been a secret Axel Lennon fan."

"You caught me," she deadpans, and we all laugh, finishing the interview before we leave the track.

She may not be an Axel fan, but I damn sure am.

In this epic race between the two of us, it turns out, we both win.

The End

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WET

RILEY NASH

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TATE

The sound of my name on the television jolts me awake.

A second later, I scramble to my feet and stumble through the pitch-dark den, tripping on end tables and almost breaking my ankle on the rubber ball my ex missed when he was packing up the dogs' things. I crash onto my knees in the bathroom and find the toilet by feel, fingers gripping the cold porcelain. My puke doesn't taste like anything, because my alcohol-to-food ratio has been downright irresponsible the last few days.

When my stomach stops cramping, I limp back to the couch and use the blue glow from the TV to find my phone in the cushions. Squinting in pain as I urgently try to turn down the screen brightness, I flick through my notifications. No messages, no texts. Just an email advertising a 50% off sale on some office chair I bought six years ago. The blackout curtains I hung up must be doing their job, because my phone tells me I slept until eleven A.M. without a speck of light invading my cave.

My body gives up, and I flop sideways with my face buried in the massive leather couch. *Why do couches have to have so many seats?* My ex and I picked this one out so we could both fit with four dogs. He took all the dogs when he left, but not the fucking couch, and now I feel pathetically small perched on one end.

"...the role on the relay team previously occupied by veteran swimmer Tate Vaughn..." When the elderly TV host says my name again, I free my face from the musty leather to stare at the screen, struggling to blink the haze out of my eyes. I recognize Eric Walsh, one of Seattle's local news hosts, sitting across from...

Oh, Christ. I'm hiding in a walk-out basement den in a rural house near Poulsbo, Washington, and somehow I'm still confronted by the one brash, smirking face I never want to see again. A digital banner reads *Dare Matthews, NCAA Champion Swimmer*, underneath everyone's cocky little all-American lifeguard wet dream, with his sun-bleached tousle of hair, unnaturally blue eyes, and mouth-watering tan.

"Your name is Darius, you pretentious twat," I mumble, feeling around unsuccessfully for a bottle of alcohol that isn't empty. "No one names their kid *Dare*. I wouldn't even name my dog *Dare*." If I still had a dog.

"How has it been, replacing someone with eight years' more experience than you on the relay team?" the host asks. I look away from the screen when it flashes a picture of my three teammates with their arms around Darius. As the four fastest members of our Seattle-based swim club, my friends and I did relays together for three years. I was always good at swimming, but I never loved it until I discovered relay racing, the intricate puzzle of synchronizing your bodies while trying to get more speed out of every transition. Watching myself get older and my times slow down, I silently decided to retire once I couldn't do relays anymore.

If my teammates had known, maybe they wouldn't have celebrated when a swimmer I've hated for years joined the club. Maybe they wouldn't have gone on about how nice it was to have fresh blood when his times pushed me off the relay team. Maybe when my ex left me the week after Darius joined, they would have texted or called to see why I dropped off the face of the earth.

Or maybe not. I've always been the forgettable one who doesn't break records. The chump who wins awards like *Best Team Player*, even when swimming isn't technically a team sport.

Vaguely, I realize Darius is still talking in his lazy, almost husky voice. "...Tate swam in second position, but since I'm so much faster I've moved to anchor the team in fourth."

"Fuck." Struggling upright, I grab the remote. My head finally clears enough to process the compression brace strapped around Darius' left shoulder, over his slightly see-through white tee. The host gestures toward it like he's reading my mind. "Since your shoulder inflammation means you can't compete for a while, is Tate going to swim the relays at the Seattle meet next month?"

"Wait, what?" I drop my phone and have to crawl on the floor to find it.

Tossing the remote aside, I dial Ross, my closest friend on the team.

“Hey, man.” He doesn’t ask how I am, where I am, or if I’m okay, even though my ex slathered the breakup all over social media. “What’s up?”

“I just saw Darius’ injury. Do you need me to step back in?” I shouldn’t have to ask; I haven’t officially retired yet, so the spot belongs to me by default if Darius is out. But I’m trying to be a supportive team player—fuck, there I go again.

My heart sinks when he hesitates, then sighs. “We have this whole training plan worked out with Dare, so it would be awkward to have to learn a new rhythm again. We asked Coach to let us drop the relay races and just do the individual events.”

“You...” I sag back against the couch, staring blankly at the TV. “What new rhythm? We had a rhythm, Ross. I’m sorry if it wasn’t set by some fucking hotshot twenty-three-year-old with the sloppiest form I’ve ever seen, but it worked for us.”

“You sound really bitter, man,” he snaps.

“Wow, can you not imagine why? To find out after three years together that you’d rather not swim at all than swim with me again?”

“He’s better than you. If you can’t get over it, then just retire.”

Hanging up, I toss my phone on the table and look around the dark, cavernous room. I’ve barely been upstairs in days. It’s not like there’s anyone around to tell me I need sunlight.

None of this is really Darius Matthews’ fault, I remind myself, but that’s the exact moment the prick makes eye contact with the camera and says, “If you bought a new sports car and it had to go to the shop, you wouldn’t drag your old, broken-down car to the raceway in the meantime, would you?” *There’s the asshole who always finds a way to cut me open without even knowing me.* He probably spent all week coming up with that line.

The host almost does a spit-take with his water and shoots the camera a nervous glance, trying to figure out if he should laugh or not. Then Darius’ flat, challenging stare is cut off by a sports car ad, of all things. When I switch off the TV, I’m dropped back into the complete darkness I’ve inhabited for days, like an unending dream.

I open the folder on my phone where I’ve screenshotted every social media interaction between Darius and me for the last three years, the war we’ve waged behind screens without ever meeting face-to-face. Three years ago, he broke some long-standing records at a collegiate competition,

including one of mine, and vague-tweeted something about *taking out the trash*. The blatant disrespect set me off, especially when combined with his insufferable handle—*@justdare2believe*—and the profile picture of him sticking out his tongue while a girl kisses him on each cheek. I spent an hour watching every video of him I could find, then responded with a breakdown of his sloppy form and lazy technique.

We've fought off-and-on ever since, trash talking, using passive-aggressive emojis, and taking cheap shots that get laughed about on the local sports news. When we ran out of things to say about each other's swimming, it got personal. He hasn't blatantly made a dig at my sexuality, and I haven't openly called him a man-whore, but we've both walked the line. And in those three years of fighting, while he graduated and went pro and I neared retirement, he slowly swallowed up my records, my friends, and my spot in the club. It doesn't matter who gets the last word, because he's already won. The last tweet I saved was posted a month ago, when I accepted a sportsmanship award at a local athletics fundraiser:

@justdare2believe: Congrats to @tvaughnswims. What a nice way to finally see the view from an awards podium.

He thinks he's a shark, prowling around an oblivious, gentle sea otter that he can just bite in half.

Maybe I am a forgettable, second-rate swimmer.

But I'm not gentle. Or decent, or innocent.

Opening a second folder, I flick through photo after photo of Darius Matthews. He's obsessed with curating his Instagram, so I have thousands to choose from. The thing that always gets me is how careless he is, all lazy grins and messy, golden hair. Like his actions have never had consequences. As I study his perfect features for the millionth time, my hand slips down to gently massage the front of my sweatpants.

He loves to post wet shirtless pics, first-thing-in-the-morning sultry faces, and so many women in bikinis, like there's a quota to fill. I skip them and go straight to my favorite. He's sitting on the edge of someone's backyard pool with his back to the camera, wearing nothing but a speedo that bares half his ass. Water gathers along his powerful shoulder blades, highlighted by an orange sunset glow. Someone must have just called his name, because he's twisted around to look back, eyes confused, stripped open for a second into

something vulnerable and unsure and searching.

I prop my phone against the leg of the coffee table and push my hand into my sweats, no underwear to get in the way. My breathing sounds ragged in the still, silent room, catching as my fingers circle my half-formed erection. It's easy to imagine making him kneel and beg to suck me in front of the whole party, bright eyes desperate with shame because the speedo does nothing to hide how turned on he is by the humiliation. I groan *fuck* softly and shudder, my vision going hazy. I've come to this picture before, but today breaks some kind of speed record.

Panting, I hold my cum-slicked fingers out toward my phone, like he can see them. I doubt he's tasted a man's cum before. He shoves his heterosexuality down the throats—no pun intended—of everyone who visits his social media. But I'd bet money he wants to try. Anyone who goes through a girlfriend a week clearly hasn't found what he's looking for.

Someone turns on a lawn mower outside and I jerk back to reality. Dazed, I walk more carefully to the bathroom and wash my hands until they only smell like *Tropical Sunset*, according to the soap bottle. My head throbs in protest when I turn on the overhead light and start chucking empty bottles and cans into a recycle bin. I haven't seen daylight for so long that the whole world looks unfamiliar as I climb the stairs and sit on the kitchen counter, downing glass after glass of water and studying the trees out the window.

I logged out of all my social media apps a few days ago to try and save my sanity, and now there's something humiliating in the way I have to try passwords over and over until they lock me out and make me laboriously reset everything. Ignoring the notifications in the corner, my eyes go straight to the new tweet at the top of my feed, sent just a few minutes ago:

*@justdare2believe: Thanks for all the tips over the years,
@tvaughnswims. I owe everything to your example of what not to do.*

It's followed by a smug kissing emoji. Slamming my phone down on the counter, I bury my face in my hands and groan.

Four Months Later

“Bye, Mister Tate.” Dripping water everywhere, the little boy winds up like a pitcher in the World Series, then smacks my palm so hard his feet nearly leave the concrete. All the kids in my level two swim class watch my face eagerly. When I just smile, unphased, they groan and slouch away to the locker rooms. They think I don’t know about their contest to see who can be the first person to make me flinch. I haven’t let on that I found the bag of candy they hid in the back of an unused locker, to be awarded to the winner. When I’m feeling weak after an hour in the weight room, I steal a fun-sized Snickers or two.

Stretching and toweling off, I finger some gel through my wet hair and pull on a Seattle Krakens hoodie. Laughter, voices, and splashing carry down the hallway from the rest of the Lang Aquatic Center. I’ve volunteered here since my retirement four months ago, donating my time to their packed schedule of outreach, education, and professional training. Between the classes full of unruly kids and Alek and Victor, the two eccentric ex-Olympic swimmers who run the place, it keeps me on my toes and fulfills me in ways my swimming career never did.

The kids scattered foam kickboards all over the deck, so I gather them up in a neat pile, setting aside the ones that have gotten cracked from too many head-smacking fights between the boys.

“Tate.” I don’t have to turn around to identify the laconic voice behind me.

“Yeah?” When I flex one of the damaged boards, it breaks in half in my hands and I sigh.

“Tate.”

“Hm?”

“Tate.”

I spin around irritably. “Can I help you, Victor?”

“Stop breaking shit and pay attention to me.” One of the greatest swimmers of our generation flops down cross-legged on the edge of the pool and strokes his fingers through the water, like he’ll die if his body isn’t connected to it at all times.

“Oh, sorry I’m busy teaching eighty percent of your classes for free. Are you going to help me clean up?”

“Sure.” Pushing his curls out of his eyes, he picks up a board, studies it distractedly, then drops it in the pool and watches it float away. “I need you to drive someone down to the charity swim meet this weekend in

Vancouver.”

I pause in confusion. “Why? I’m not a taxi service.”

Tipping his head back, he blinks at the skylights far above, streaked with spitting Seattle rain. “In a beautiful twist of irony, Alek was helping him rehab from an injury.” I flinch. Alek, the other owner of the facility, has been hobbling around on crutches since he tripped on the front steps a few days ago. “He wants someone to keep an eye on the kid, make sure he sticks to his reconditioning routine and takes care of himself. I’d go, but Alek says I’m not allowed to take anyone anywhere unsupervised. You have a sports medicine degree, right?”

I consider pretending I majored in textile art—any excuse to stay away from an event where I’ll undoubtedly see my former team. Instead, I just shrug and fumble for words.

“I’ll pay you. Name the price.”

“I don’t...”

He scrambles to his feet, all lanky and still damp from whatever pool he just left. “I’ll buy you new kickboards. Whatever state of the art fucking microchipped self-driving smart kickboards they make these days, all for you.”

Huffing, I roll my eyes. He knows I don’t have a life outside of my cat and my classes here. “Whatever.”

“Thanks.” He offers his hand. When I take it, he tightens his fingers around my palm. “To be clear, we just shook on this. The fate of nations hinges on the sanctity of handshakes, so no take-backs.”

Unease flares up in the back of my mind. “Why would I want to take it back?” But he’s already gone. I study my hand, then wipe it off on my shorts with the sinking feeling I just made a mistake. Once everything’s cleared away, I decide to hit the treadmills upstairs before lunch. I jam my bare feet into a loose pair of sneakers and shuffle down the hall, pausing outside the door to Pool 3. Last week, the staff forgot to put out the lane lines, and I wasted the first ten minutes of my afternoon class unspooling them. I should make sure everything’s ready this time.

When I shoulder open the heavy door, the faint sound of splashing drifts up to the vaulted ceiling. Hot, chlorinated air washes over my skin as I approach the pool, looking around for any sign of a teacher or coach. I’m alone except for the muscular body powering through the water, twisting into a turn, then coming back. He’s an aggressive swimmer, throwing water

everywhere instead of keeping his body streamlined. Something about it tugs at my memory.

The man comes up, gulping in breaths as he grips the side of the pool with one hand and pushes his goggles up with the other. “You can’t be in here, sir,” I call. “Open swim hours start at four. People are using this space for classes.”

Chuckling his goggles onto the deck, he peels off his swim cap and tries to lift himself out of the water. Halfway through the motion, something gives and he falls back with a splash. On his second try, he makes it to his feet and spreads his hands to indicate the empty room. “You’re right. I can’t see past all the people using this space right now. Oops, excuse me, sorry.” As he comes toward me, he pretends he’s bumping into people and shuffling through a crowd.

My world narrows to his arrogant drawl, the long, tan limbs, and the messy, summer-blond hair I’ve imagined wrapping painfully around my fingers. Darius Matthews and I recognize each other at the same time. His shockingly blue eyes widen, his cockiness fading for just a second. Water gathers along his strong jaw and trickles down his neck, between his sculpted pecs to the fine, pale hair around his belly button, then—

I force my gaze up to meet his as the disgusting, rotten mass of resentment, sadness, anger, and lust tears itself out of my chest and rises up into my throat until I can barely manage to say, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

DARIUS

“**S**ince I’m feeling generous, you can have three whole guesses.” I swing my goggles between us like a hypnotist with a pocket watch. Water drips down onto the toes of his ratty sneakers.

“*Why* are you here?” Tate changes the question, refusing to play along. I still can’t believe he’s here, in the flesh, after three years of watching him through a screen. I’m just average-sized at 5’10”, and damn does Tate Vaughn make me feel small and uncomfortably warm as the tall, broad-shouldered man eye-fucks me with an expression like he wants to run me over with a car.

“*Why* are *you* here? Last time I checked, you weren’t a swimmer anymore.”

His jaw tightens, and his gaze follows my arms as I cross them on my bare chest. I only moved to Seattle six months ago for this new swim club, so we haven’t gone to many of the same events. When our paths do cross, one of us is always in the pool. I’ve pieced him together from pictures—smiling a little awkwardly, always standing behind someone else, fading into the background. They didn’t prepare me for his sullen, dark green eyes or the smoldering intensity behind them.

He cocks an eyebrow. “For someone who claims they’re not threatened by me, you put a lot of effort into stalking me.”

I pat his arm, because it’s so much fun to wind him up, but my brain derails when I feel the hard muscles he’s packing under that hoodie. “You’re delusional if you imagine I’ve ever given you a second thought.” That’s a lie. I’ve spent more time finding ways to hurt him than on any of my real-life

relationships.

“I don’t believe you.” He says it so confidently, with that familiar know-it-all expression on his face, that I wonder if he’s talking from personal experience. If I’ve haunted him the way he haunts me. My entire world is made up of people who think they know what’s best for me, that I’m too defective and irresponsible to deserve a say in my own life. This man is the only one of them I can hurt. So I fucking will, and I’ll enjoy it, too.

“I’ll tell the team you said hi. Do you have a picture I can show them if they’ve forgotten who you are?”

The corner of his mouth tips up, but his eyes burn like ice. “Does it take effort to be this trashy all the time, or does it come naturally?”

I snort, ignoring the uneasiness crawling in my gut. He’s overwhelming in person—calm on the outside, but underneath it all a suffocating pressure that makes me start to believe every terrible thing he’s ever said about me. “It’s more fun than being bitter and lonely.”

Before either of us can find another insult to hurl, Alek’s voice drifts from the doorway. “Perfect timing.” When I glance over, Victor is holding the door open as Alek wrestles his crutches inside. I found this facility while looking for a quiet practice space to recover from my shoulder strain. After we talked a few times, Alek offered to help coach me through reconditioning my body. I’ve just about gotten over feeling intimidated by him, but Victor is another story.

Tate lets out an indignant sound of protest when he locks eyes with Victor. “Wait, is this... Is he... *Fuck* no.”

Victor’s bored expression doesn’t change as he holds up a flat palm and points to it. “We shook on it, my friend. I haven’t even washed my hand yet.”

I have no idea what’s going on, but I enjoy the sight of Tate’s shoulders collapsing. “You knew it was him all along.” He sounds as betrayed as if Darth Vader had just admitted to being his father.

Victor shrugs one shoulder. “I mean, obviously. You wouldn’t have said *yes* otherwise, and we don’t have anyone else.”

“Yes to what?” I look to Alek for answers. His dark, quiet eyes are always hard to read, but right now he looks worried about my reaction.

“Tate’s going to take you to Vancouver and help monitor your shoulder,” Victor explains cheerfully, like he’s the only person in the room having a good time. “And while you’re at it, ask him to help you with your dive off the block. Yours sucks, and he’s one of the best.”

It's my turn to make an offended sound. "I don't need a fucking babysitter."

Victor's smile turns a little dangerous. "Because your never-ending string of good decisions is how you ended up injured and stuck on the side practicing your kicks instead of, you know, actually swimming with your team."

Tate muffles a laugh. A bunch of hot-as-sin veterans in my sport making fun of me while pain leaks through my shoulder like poison is exactly what I need to make my shitty day better. Without a word, I walk over to the pool and flip into the water. My eyes burn without goggles, and it's fucking up my hair, but I swim along the bottom for a while so I can pretend I'm alone.

I should be in Vancouver right now, enjoying drinks with the team. They've been blowing up Instagram with pictures from some upscale waterfront gastropub. Ross told me they didn't have room in the team van for everyone, but I can see that half of them brought their girlfriends. It's that high school popularity bullshit all over again, and for the first time in my life I'm on the wrong side of it.

When I surface, only Tate's still there, standing at the edge of the pool and holding the book of warmups and notes Alek has been keeping the last few months. The other two men didn't even care enough to say goodbye. "I don't want to do this, Darius, but I shook Victor's hand, and I keep my word."

I prop my arm on the edge of the pool, staring at him as he runs a hand through his tidy, dark hair. "It's Dare. No one calls me Darius." No one I'm still on speaking terms with.

"I am never calling you Dare. It's ridiculous."

"Aww, do you not dare2believe?" I cackle at the look on his face, like he's going to puke. "My shoulder's fine, and I'll find my own way to the meet. I was only letting Alek come because I owe him."

"You lost your balance," he observes calmly, dragging my eyes to his face as I tread water.

"Huh?"

"When you got out of the pool. You fell and had to try again."

A chill settles at the base of my spine. If I'm forced to take more time off for physical therapy, my professional career will fall apart and I'll be lost, drifting aimlessly with nothing to show for myself. "I didn't."

He takes a step back and points to the ground in front of him, a gesture I

really shouldn't find hot. "Then let me look at you."

Silently cursing him with every name I can think of, I grip the wall and hesitate, trying to work out how to look normal. Finally, I push off on my good arm and twist, hopping my butt up onto the lip of the pool.

"Stay." I stiffen as he crouches down behind me, his breath stirring my hair. A hand wraps around the back of my neck—fuck, it's big—while the other smooths along my shoulder, demanding and intrusive, exploring the joint. "How does this feel?" He catches my elbow and slowly rotates my shoulder through its full range of motion. My eyes water as I grit my teeth, trying not to whimper as the pain surges into a relentless burning. If my shoulder isn't fucked now, it will be when he's done with it.

"Feels absolutely wonderful." I keep my voice light as I tug my arm free.

"Is the team's doctor keeping an eye on this?"

"Uh-huh," I lie, resisting the urge to squeeze my shoulder to try and relieve the pain. I told the doctor that I was seeing a private physical therapist so I could get him off my back and figure out how to fake it until I make it. "He said I was good to go."

Tate's still holding my neck firmly, like you'd scruff a puppy, his knee pressing into my back. "He did?"

"Dude." I throw him off and scramble to my feet. "Fuck off back to your basement and tweet me the rest of your questions."

"Do you want help with your dives?" I can hear in his voice how much he's enjoying this. He doesn't have to come up with insults anymore, because real life has given him all the material he needs.

"Hell no." I head for my duffel bag and start stuffing things inside. "They're a work of art compared to yours." When he doesn't answer, I glance over my shoulder. He's leaning casually against the wall, studying me with a smug little head tilt.

He doesn't speak until I pull open the door to the hall. "I'll pick you up Friday morning. We can spend Friday night near the meet location and drive back Saturday evening. Sound good?"

"Stop saying *we*. There is no *we*." I was already having nightmares about this weekend—my arm falling off in the middle of a race, drowning, the team laughing at me—and now Tate's going to be in all of them, just watching with that small smirk and those flat, mocking eyes.

TATE

I expected Darius to rock out of his apartment complex on Friday morning with an unnecessarily large bag and flaunting his team jacket. Instead, he skulks into the sunshine, flinching and pushing his aviators into place. His wrinkled black tee looks like he slept in it, and the canvas backpack dangling from his hand seems mostly empty.

Pausing to give my Jeep a judgmental once-over, he yanks open the passenger door and throws his bag carelessly into the back before slumping into his seat.

I'm a morning person through and through. "Rise and shine," I chirp, enjoying the way he curls up like a pill bug when it gets poked with a stick.

"Christ," he mumbles in a sleep-thick voice, flipping me off.

"I brought coffee." I can't see his expression behind the glasses, but he straightens up a little and stares at the two paper cups steaming in the cupholders, then at me. His light hair sticks out in every direction, and I'm pretty sure he's chewing mint gum in lieu of brushing his teeth. Nothing like the flawless, self-assured man in his photos. He silently puts his back to me and props his forehead against the window.

"Did you pack your shoulder brace?" I set my phone GPS for the three-hour drive to Vancouver, switch on NPR, and put the car into gear.

Stiffening, Darius glares over his shoulder at me. "Why would I need that?" I catch the faintest tremor underneath his question, and it scares me how good it feels to know that I've found a weak spot in all his perfect walls.

I hum thoughtfully. "I don't know, just a hunch I had. I can't imagine why."

He sits up and rests his hand on one of the hot coffee cups. “Do you want this poured in your lap, or are you going to leave me alone?”

I shrug with exaggerated innocence. “I didn’t say anything.”

Muttering something I can’t hear, he goes back to his original position against the window, wrapping his arms around himself. Darius doesn’t move a muscle for almost an hour, but something about the tension in his body tells me he’s still awake.

The smell of his sporty body wash slowly fills the car. It’s been six months since I’ve had another man in my passenger seat. On the day before he dumped me, my ex drove us home from the beach with his hand on my leg, watching the sun set. Maybe that should have been my sign that something was wrong—he hadn’t touched me like that for a long time. I thought it meant he wanted to give *us* another try, but in reality, he was saying goodbye.

I come back to the present when Darius reaches into the back seat and fetches a battered, spiral-bound notebook and pen. From the corner of my eye, I watch as he flips it open and pushes his sunglasses up into his hair. The impossibility of his aqua eyes always startles me, a color that can’t exist outside of a book of paint swatches.

Pursing his lips in concentration, he stretches out his long legs, rests his expensive-looking sneakers on the dashboard, and starts working on something I can’t see. Maybe he uses those brainstorming bubble charts to come up with new insults for me. When the book tips in my direction, I realize he’s sketching. Drawings of dogs and cats and human hands fill the rest of the page—from what I can see, they’re beautifully rendered. Feeling my gaze on him, he curls a lip at me and angles the book away before getting lost in his work again. Every once in a while, he reaches automatically for the cup of coffee, then pulls his hand back.

“You didn’t have to be here,” I comment the fiftieth time that he sighs and shoots me a dirty look.

He lowers the pen and rubs his eyes. “Huh?”

“If you didn’t want to sit in a car with me, you could have just used your own. Don’t take it out on me that you’re too lazy to drive.”

Fixing his eyes on the road ahead, he sets his jaw and stays silent.

“Are you too good to—”

“I can’t, okay?” he snaps.

“You can’t drive?”

“Say what I will about you, your verbal comprehension is excellent.”

When I shoot him a look, he rolls his head sideways and cocks an eyebrow at me, puffing out his cheeks sarcastically. Is it sad that this is the most I’ve talked to someone outside a swimming class for months? “Did no one bother to teach you?”

“Next.” Slapping the notebook shut, he throws it in the back.

“Why didn’t you ride with the team?”

“Next.”

“Do you not have any friends or family coming down to watch?”

“I do, actually. Here, I’ll prove it.” He pushes his sunglasses back down and pulls out his phone, holding it up with the camera toward his face. After a few seconds of ringing, a woman’s voice answers. “Dare?”

Darius smiles brightly, but I can’t tell if it reaches his eyes. “Hey, beautiful.”

“Do you want to come over?” she purrs seductively. “I can invite Stacey and Kendra too, like last time.”

Jesus. I splutter on my coffee, and Darius flicks his eyes to me with a small smile. “We can hang out tonight, when you get to Vancouver. Are you gonna leave soon?” When the woman doesn’t answer right away, I can see his expression go flat. “Really, Ali? I took you on a cruise and you can’t even be bothered to drive a couple of hours for me?”

She groans. “God, Dare, stop being so high maintenance. We’re not even in an actual relationship.”

“Fine.” Gritting his teeth, he glares out the window. “I’m done with this.”

“Not if I’m done with you first.”

Ali’s string of insults gets cut off as he ends the call and tosses his phone on the dashboard. He slides down low in his seat, hanging an arm over his eyes.

“The foursome is off, I take it?”

He lifts his arm enough to reveal one eye. “What, did you want to join in?”

“Did you want me to?” I counter, immediately wondering what the hell is wrong with me. He shifts in his seat and eyes me with an expression I can’t read.

“Just a heads up,” I add, trying to change the subject. “Adding more women to your sex doesn’t make you straighter.”

I hear him swallow. When he answers, his voice has frozen over. “What’s

that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. If you’re trying to prove something to yourself, it’s not going to work.”

Shaking his head, he leans his seat back and closes his eyes, poking at the stereo with his shoe until the radio changes to music. “I think you’re jealous.”

“You know I have no interest in sleeping with women.”

“I didn’t mean jealous of *me*.”

The way he drawls the words, stretched out in my car with his limbs everywhere and his shirt riding up his abs, almost makes me miss our exit. As we enter a maze of local streets to search for our hotel, I’m happy for the excuse to end the conversation.

Alek must have felt guilty, because he booked us in a four-star hotel near the event facility. A tiny part of me dreaded showing up to find ourselves sharing a room, but the receptionist hands me keys for two rooms on separate floors. Darius hangs back, looking bored and dragging his sneaker along the intricate pattern in the carpet until I toss him a key card. Since neither of us wants to take the stairs, he ends up awkwardly following me into the only elevator. We stand on opposite sides, the silence growing thicker until there isn’t any air left to breathe.

“See you in the morning?” I call as he gets out on the fourth floor, my need to organize taking over my desire to never speak to him again. “Say 9 o’clock by the front door?”

He doesn’t answer, but just before the doors slide shut his hand shoots through the gap and forces them apart again. Darius reaches around and bangs the *open door* button, then braces them with his good shoulder. He narrows his eyes at me, his lip curling slightly. “There’s nothing wrong with my dives.”

I blink, taking a second to remember the conversation earlier this week. It’s been eating at him the whole time? A chuckle slips out of me. “So that’s what you think?”

His nostrils flare, his stunning eyes darkening. “Fuck you. You’re trying to mess with my head.” The door butts his shoulder, but he just jams his weight against it.

I spread my hands. “Am I?”

“You don’t have anything better to do with your time than fuck with athletes who still have careers. That’s sad, Tate.” But we both know he slipped up, showed weakness, and now I have the advantage. He shifts,

agitated, as I cross the elevator and stop with our faces only inches apart. I rest a hand flat against his chest, fingers splayed across his powerful pecs, and his breathing hitches. “You’re going to practice tonight, right?” The hotel has a competition-style pool to accommodate guests from all the swimming events hosted down the street, and I noticed Darius ogling it as we walked past. “Film yourself diving and send it to me. Then we’ll talk.”

Eyes fixed on mine, he shakes his head slowly.

“If you’re too scared, you already know the answer.” I give him a slow, firm push back into the hall. “Now did you bother to think some other guest in this hotel might be waiting to go somewhere?” The words slip out, in a tone I haven’t used for a long time. Instead of snarking back as the doors slide shut, Darius just gawks until his bewildered eyes are cut off by my own reflection.

Darius

A rush of water wraps around me as I launch myself from the starting block, streamline my body, and pierce the surface as cleanly as possible. Halfway down the length of the pool, I slow down and tread water, panting. I’ve dived so many times in a row that I’m starting to forget how, like when you say a normal word over and over until it turns into nonsense.

My shoulder throbs, a dull ache laced through by harsher pain when I move wrong. On my second dive, I twisted it too hard and made everything worse. Ever since it started six months ago, the hurt has crept up on me like darkness, swallowing one piece of me at a time as I try to outrun it. I haven’t forced my body to full competition speed in a long time, and I’m scared of what might happen tomorrow.

I paddle over to the ladder to spare my shoulder any more strain. My phone is propped against my backpack, pointed at the end of the pool. I stop the recording, then drop onto the nearest plastic chair and wipe my nose on my shoulder as I flip through the footage, replaying each dive.

They’re not bad.

They’re not.

But are they good? I don’t know. People seemed annoyed when I asked

for help, like a pro should know better, so I tried to work it out on my own. Tipping my head back, I close my eyes and listen to the pool water slosh gently. I don't want to do any of this. But what I want doesn't matter. If I let people down, I might as well not exist.

But god does it sting, flipping through my video app and splitting up the footage, sending each one to Tate, imagining his face when they come through. Sure enough, a text pops up before I'm even finished. It's the same kissing emoji I added to the end of the last tweet I sent him. I'm not the only petty bitch here.

I haven't felt this out of control for a long time, exhausted and in pain, trapped with a smug asshole who would love nothing more than to kick me while I'm down. As I prep the last few clips, my eye catches on an earlier video in my reels, one I made for Ali while she was on vacation a few months ago. One I really should have deleted. Before I can stop myself, I throw it in with the others. Hope he chokes on his room service when he sees it, maybe even dies of a heart attack.

Part of me regrets it as soon as I hit send, but I can't take it back. I fidget in the uncomfortable plastic chair for a full twenty minutes, waiting for him to text or call. Something. Anything. But my phone screen stays blank. Eventually, I give up and head for my room, avoiding the elevator.

DARIUS

I didn't realize I dozed off sideways on the hotel bed until my phone vibrates next to my ear. My shoulder throbs as I gingerly sit up and squint at the screen. The sender of the text is a single shit emoji, because I'm incredibly mature. *Are you still up? I want to talk through your dives.*

My chest clenches as I read the message again, then check for any others. No word about my little bonus video. I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed.

He's never going to leave me alone otherwise, so I answer *Sure*.

He texts me his room number, nothing more. I can't be bothered with the snarl of laces on my sneakers, and this is a nice hotel, so I just walk out the door with no shoes. It isn't until I look at my reflection in the elevator that I realize I didn't fix my hair, deal with my puffy eyes, or put on anything nicer than a tank top and ratty shorts. I should be more careful, given that I might run into someone who recognizes me. But no one will, because *that* Dare is like a skin that goes over this one, and I'm just too fucking done with everything to put it on tonight. I lean against the wall and close my eyes until the door *pings* open.

When I knock at Tate's room, the door opens slightly under my fist, like he left it unlatched for me. "Hello?" I push it a little wider, craning my neck.

"Come on in."

For some reason, uneasiness prickles along the back of my neck as I slip inside and push the door shut behind me with a final-sounding *clunk*. Tate's room has a queen bed instead of a king, and a small couch to fill the extra space. He only turned a few lamps on, and I can just see his silhouette at the

desk, messing with his laptop. I clear my throat. "Let's get this over with."

"Do you want a drink or anything?"

"I want to spend as little time as possible with you."

He gestures toward the couch. "Alright then. Take a seat." His voice sounds different, calm and firm. I can't tell if it's uncomfortably warm in here or just my imagination. The air smells like his shampoo, and I can see his stuff scattered across the bed in a way that feels too intimate. Fidgeting, I drop onto the edge of the couch.

Without looking at me, he straightens up and taps play on a video on his laptop. "I quickly spliced together all the clips."

I squint at the footage of me poised on the block, my shoulder aching with the memory. Tate lets the first two dives play, then pauses it and watches me expectantly. "They look fine to me," I grumble. "Why are we even doing this? I'm faster than you."

"Because," he points at the screen, "you're a mess, and if you cleaned up you could be much faster. This bullshit isn't going to fly in relay races."

"What bullshit?" I snap.

"No two dives are the same. Your elbows are all over the place, your toes aren't pointed, and your angles suck. It's painfully obvious you don't practice your starts enough."

"Okay." I scramble to my feet. "I don't have to stay here and take this shit from you."

"Sit down." He sounds casual, but for some reason my ass hits the couch cushion faster than if he had shouted at me. Threads of panic and adrenaline trail through my chest. "Let's see the rest before you storm out."

Rolling my eyes, I cross my arms and wait. Tate stays standing next to the laptop with his back to me, watching in silence as my tiny figure dives eight more times. The fucked up thing is that he's right; now that he pointed it out, I can't unsee my inconsistent form. I've never had a coach that cared about me enough to correct me, and now the man I've obsessed over for years is watching me make a fool of myself. I can feel a strange, heavy throbbing low in my belly, something sick and sweet at the same time. Something like shame.

A soft groan yanks my eyes back to the laptop. My mouth goes dry as I take in the sight of my own dick, rigid and glistening, with my fist wrapped around it. The cell phone ads weren't kidding—all those extra camera lenses really do capture every tiny detail, from the way it gets darker near the tip to

the bead of precum on my slit.

When I glance at the back of Tate's head, he doesn't move or look away from the screen. He's completely relaxed, with his arms slung loosely across his broad chest.

The spot where my palms rest on my bare thighs starts to get sweaty. My ears are ringing a little, but not enough to drown out the sound of my ragged, whiny panting coming from the laptop speakers. I had no idea how pathetically needy I sound when I'm jerking off, not alpha at all.

This was supposed to be a quick and dirty sext for Ali, but I forgot how fucking *long* it took me to come, five excruciating minutes that feel like a thousand hours now in the thick silence of the hotel room. I look ridiculous, flushed and slutty and struggling because no matter what I imagined doing with Ali, it didn't work. In the end, I had to ignore the painful chafing and do my best to strangle an orgasm out of my sore shaft. When I finally come in the video, gasping in miserable relief, the knot of shame in my core breaks open and creeps through my whole body in a wave of aching, tingling heat that makes my toes curl into the carpet and my dick throb.

After the video ends, there's a long, heavy silence. Someone clomps down the hall, laughs, then slams the door to their room.

"You are your own worst enemy," Tate comments, shutting the laptop. "I can't tell if you're undisciplined or you just don't give a shit. Either way, that was a piss-poor performance."

I genuinely have no idea which one he's talking about, so I just keep my mouth shut as he turns around and looks at me—no, *looks me over*. He slides his hands into his pockets and tilts his head as he examines the thin tank top that exposes most of my chest, my parted thighs, my shaky hands gripping my knees. I can't read his dark eyes at all in the half-light.

"You're a healthy young man drowning in pussy, and that's what you have to offer them? I'm not surprised they didn't come down to Vancouver. Is there something wrong with you, or are they the problem?"

I start to protest, but a weird, half-finished sound comes out instead. I cough and try again. "There's no problem."

"Oh. I apologize." I twitch when he walks around the coffee table and sits down on it facing me, his knees bumping mine. "Since you included it with your training footage, I assumed that it was your best attempt. Something you were proud of." His voice has gone stern and low, something I've only heard in my wet dreams, and it's everything I always and never wanted. Heat starts

to collect between my legs, my cock mercilessly hardening against my shorts. Tate's going to figure out how sick I am any second now, because this tight scrap of nylon doesn't hide a damn thing.

I want to move, to sit up straight or at least close my fucking legs, but I can't make my muscles obey. The door is locked, no one here but him and me and this feeling of falling. "I can do a lot better," I whisper.

His brows furrow as he sits back. "So you were just wasting everyone's time."

No one has ever talked to me like this in my life. They shove me into their molds and then tell me I'm good enough, handsome and smart, and go back to ignoring me. "I'm sorry," I croak, fixing my eyes on the blatant shape of my erection.

"I didn't hear you."

Pulling in a shaky breath, I raise my voice. "I'm sorry for wasting your time. I can do better."

"If you want feedback, I need to see your best attempt." He watches me like I'm an object. My heart pounds as I reach for the waistband of my shorts, then give up, squeezing my hands into fists against my thighs.

"I can't," I plead hoarsely. Tate was right—sleeping with more women can't make me more straight. But it can keep me safe from myself. I've never touched a man, no matter how relentlessly the desire haunted me until I thought I'd go mad.

"Fine." Smoothing out his clothes, he stands up. "I guess you're satisfied with that mess, as long as you can still get laid. Though it sounds like you're fucking that up, too." He steps around me and heads for the door, like he's going to usher me out. He's so much bigger than me, and he smells amazing, like muscle and sweat and arousal.

"Wait." It comes out like a whimper. "I just need— I—"

Please don't make me do this.

Please make me do this.

If I have to go downstairs alone and jerk off in the shower, I'll never be able to look at myself again.

He pauses. "I can't help you unless you ask. Preferably with some of the manners you clearly weren't raised with."

Groaning, I shiver and grip the couch cushions, fighting back from the edge of losing control of my body. "Just get it over with."

After a moment's pause, he walks over to me, my heart rate exploding,

and laces his fingers in my hair to tip my head back. “You have two choices, Darius.” He emphasizes all three syllables the same, like he’s rubbing it in. “No more, no less. Do you know what they are?”

I’m not sure I’d know my own name if he hadn’t just said it. I shake my head blankly, struggling to hold his stare because I’m scared of what he’ll say if I crumble and look away.

“You do what you’re told, or you leave. Is that straightforward enough for you to understand?”

If his disgust feels this good, some part of me needs to know what he’ll do if I really try my best, if he’ll see me like no one ever does. My hands shake as I hook my thumbs in my shorts and tug them down around my thighs, my stiff, wet cock slipping free to feel the caress of the hotel air conditioning. Tate lets go of my hair and studies me, his gaze brushing along my length like a physical touch. I wish I knew if he felt impressed or scornful. I don’t even know which one would turn me on more. “I want to get off for you,” I murmur, not because it’s sexy but because my voice won’t go any louder.

He doesn’t praise me or scold me. He just sits down next to me on the couch, the cushions dipping under his weight, and rests his arm behind me along the back. Every part of him so close, but not quite pressing against me. Part of me wonders if he doesn’t want to touch me. “Focus and do better.”

I slide down a little, spreading my knees, and push my shirt up my abs. My cock’s already so sensitive that just wrapping my fingers around the base almost sets me off. A soft moan breaks in my chest as my thighs quiver. I’m not sure I’m even going to be able to handle the friction of stroking it.

“So far you’re going even slower than the first time,” Tate taunts quietly.

“Go fuck yourself,” I snarl in frustration, gritting my teeth as I drag my fist slowly up my length. I jerk off almost every day, but here I am fumbling around like I’ve never seen my own dick before. When he chuckles, so quiet and dark, I want to kill him or get on the floor and do anything he says. I speed up, my hand chafing a little as precum starts to bead on my head.

“Give me your hand.” When I ignore him, he grabs my wrist in a loose grip and pulls it closer. He spits, and at the feeling of his saliva slick in my palm, my whole body shivers like a needy bitch.

The corner of his mouth twitches up as he watches my face. “Did I break you already, brat?”

All my muscles clench, and it feels like my bones are melting. “Please,” I

stammer, not sure what I'm trying to say.

"Please what?" His voice has gone velvety and dangerous, nothing like the Tate that stands in the back of photos looking lost.

I glance down at his hand resting on his leg, so fucking close to my bare thigh. I don't know if it's the thought of a man's touch that breaks me, or the touch of someone who sees me as nothing but a piece of trash. Because if he already thinks I'm a failure, I can't let him down. Either way, I crumble and start begging. "Please touch me. Fuck, please. Do whatever you want to me."

"Uh-uh," he chides, half sharp, half gentle, his breath against my ear. "Don't tell me what to do. Cover your cock in my spit."

I can't hold in a pathetic sound as I stroke myself with his saliva until my whole aching shaft is glistening with it.

"See?" he murmurs. "If you ever listened, you'd learn something."

"God I hate you," I whimper.

"I know." Shifting his weight, he grabs one of my wrists in each hand and presses my palms into the leather couch on either side of my hips. My cock protests the loss of sensation. "Keep them there. Open your knees wider."

Closing my eyes and dropping my head back against the couch, I let my hips move like I'm fucking the air, even though it just makes everything worse. "Tate...help me. Make it stop, please." I need a man to touch my cock. I'm so close. I've already fallen, and now I need to break.

His nose presses under my ear, and even that drives me wild. "Open your eyes, Darius. Look at yourself."

I watch through bleary eyes as he brushes the backs of his fingers up the underside of my cock. It might as well be a cattle prod to my nuts, and when he does it again I can *feel* myself leaking. "I'm gonna come--"

"No, not yet," he demands softly, continuing to play with my length. "Show some discipline for once in your life, you little fucking disaster."

"I can't. I really can't." If I could turn off one of my senses, sight or hearing or sensation, maybe I could. But all three is too much.

"I know you can."

Before I'm even aware of it, one of my hands fumbles up to grab his arm that's propped against my shoulder. I feel muscle and the soft bristle of hair as my fingers dig desperately into his skin, looking for an anchor. For a moment he doesn't react. Then he leans down and lightly kisses the inside of my wrist while his other hand traces the shape of my balls. "All that swagger is a lie, isn't it? You're a slut for someone who tells you what to do."

“Uh-huh,” I pant. I’d say anything he wants at this point, because my head has gone empty, like there isn’t a thing in the world to worry about.

“Show me.”

“How?” My breath catches when he swipes his thumb over the messy head of my cock. When he holds it up to me, precum glistening on his skin, I freeze. The very last tatters of me try to cling to some kind of fucked-up dignity.

“Clean up your mess.” When I just stare, unable to move, his fingers stroke the hair at the back of my neck. His bones must be creaking with how tightly I’m holding his arm. “It’s not complicated, Darius. Two choices.”

I can feel something actually fracture inside me as I stick out my tongue and lick his finger, gasping at the sharp, unfamiliar taste of myself. But instead of pain, all I get is a flood of relief and an incredible high. Tate hums in approval as I drag his thumb into my mouth and wrap my tongue around it. When I stop sucking, he pushes deeper, gripping the back of my neck when he feels me panic. “Easy. Just breathe. It’s not even in your throat. A cock is so much bigger.”

Forcing myself to relax, I pull air through my nose until he finally slips out.

“When I give you something,” he says patiently, wiping his hand on my shirt before running his fingers along the inside of my thigh, “What do you say?”

I shake my head frantically, shutting my eyes again even though he told me not to. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” He sounds kind of disappointed, like I’m failing a test.

I can see lights exploding on the inside of my eyelids as my body tenses. “If I say it, I’ll come. I mean it.”

After a moment of silence, I feel a weight in my hair, like he’s resting his face in it. “Fuck. You’re so perfect.” Before I can even try to process that comment, he continues. “I’m going to let you come now. But if you can control yourself for just fifteen more seconds, I’ll post a public apology and say you were right about me the whole time.”

Hell yes. He’s always been too soft, too quick to underestimate me. “Deal,” I croak past my dry, cum-tasting tongue, my competitive side clearing my head a little. I feel his hand close around my cock, a few slow pulls, but that’s child’s play. “You—”

Something warm rubs my taint, then pushes between my ass cheeks,

where I've never touched myself before because I knew I'd love it and I couldn't stand to lose it again. My eyes jerk open. He doesn't even circle my hole once, maybe a quarter of the way, before my back arches painfully and I cry his name, cum splattering my chest, my shirt, even my chin. He keeps rubbing until all I have left is a few exhausted dribbles trailing down my shaft.

The air conditioning starts to raise goosebumps along my arms, even though it's not that cold. I lie back, staring blankly at the ceiling, and let go of his arm. The couch shifts as he stands up. "I'm not sure that was better, but I do see potential."

"Fuck off." My voice is fucked six ways from Sunday. All I can think about is getting his hands on me again. How I'd crawl if it meant he'd fuck me. How I might crawl anyway, because it felt so good. "I never want to see you again."

To my surprise, I hear the door click shut and when I look over, he's gone. He's probably off to kill time at the hotel bar until I get out of his room.

When I was in sixth grade, the teacher told us we'd be reading a novel about two boys who fall in love. My heart jumped into my throat, because I thought about girls a lot but I also thought about boys, and I didn't know what to do about it except hate myself. Maybe this book had answers, but we never got to read it. The parents, including mine, got the school board to throw it out and replace it with White Fang, because I guess animal abuse is better for a bunch of kids than seeing a gay character.

That's when I knew that I was broken and that none of the people in my life, not even my family, wanted me that way. So I taped myself together and figured that if I never touched a man, then I'd never fall apart.

Now I'm shattered in cum-soaked pieces across the floor. I only have a few hours to gather it all up, while also getting enough sleep for my first professional meet. But I can't make my body do anything besides shiver. My mind feels raw and flayed open, all the way down to those memories I try not to think about. Curling into a ball, I fall sideways on the couch and bury my face in my arm. My shoulder burns, and I dig my fingernails into it as hard as I can. I want to leave bruises, some sign to myself that this night happened. As long as I tell everyone they came from fucking a girl, they'll just laugh and say *nice, man*.

"Little disaster."

I jump, almost falling off the couch. Tate's standing between me and the

door, holding a bottle of water. I probably look unhinged as I sit up, pale and blinking back tears. “Go the fuck away,” I croak, because when I push he pushes harder, and I want him to annihilate me.

Instead of giving me the bottle, he uncaps it, takes the back of my head in his hand, and tips it into my mouth. I lift my hands to grab it, but somehow they end up on his hips instead, gripping fistfuls of his jeans. “That’s right,” he murmurs, voice low. I chug three-quarters of the bottle thirstily before I pull back. He doesn’t let go of me, and I’m too tired to do anything but rest my forehead against his hip and try to breathe. The hand that isn’t cupping the back of my neck slips under the collar of my ruined tank top and rubs slowly up and down my back in a calming way I always wished someone would do when I was tired, but no one ever has. “Tell me what you’re thinking right now.”

I open my mouth to say *nothing*, because all I have is a mix of panic and lust and exhaustion. Instead, I mumble, “I wanted to study art, but they thought it was too gay.”

His hand goes still, and I wish it wouldn’t. “What?” Before I can fumble for an answer, he clicks his tongue and traces a thumb along the marks I left on my shoulder. “Darius, don’t do this.”

Trying to get myself back under control, I push him. “Don’t tell me what to do,”

I can’t move him at all. He just catches my wrist loosely and holds it against his hoodie, his finger stroking my pulse. Why does he have to be so fucking soothing, to tear me open and then make it feel so perfect? And why the actual hell did he choose me?

“Let me help you get to bed. You need to be rested for tomorrow.” At the thought of someone tucking me in for the first time in ten years, of *maybe* lying down next to me and stroking my hair until I’m asleep, everything inside me collapses into burning fury. I shove him hard this time, and he stumbles back, almost falling over the coffee table. “Fuck off. I’m not your toy. I’m not a poseable doll for my parents to prop up in front of their friends, or my girlfriends to stick in their holes, or you to get off on some fucking power trip. Everyone uses me, and you know who’s still there when I wake up in the morning? None of you. So put your mind games all the way up your ass and never touch me again.”

Part of me hopes he’ll have an answer, more of those rough words that ruin me and fix me at the same time. But he does something so much worse—

he snaps out of it. His shoulders sag and he runs a hand down his face. “Shit,” he says hoarsely. “I’m sorry. I made a bad call.”

“Whatever.” I fumble with my boxers and shorts, struggling to my feet. Every part of me hurts, my shoulder most of all. Or maybe it’s coming from somewhere deeper, in the center of my chest. “Just leave me alone.”

He doesn’t do anything to stop me from stumbling out the door. At least it’s late enough, as I head back to my empty room, that there’s no one around to wonder about all the cum stains on my shirt.

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TATE

Rather than risk running into Darius at the continental breakfast, I head for my Jeep and drive around until I find a Walmart the size of a small European country. I waste almost forty minutes scouring the store for the exact protein bar and pre-packaged Danishes I always bought on the morning of a competition.

Athletes love rituals, or maybe we're just slaves to them. You spend hours every day perfecting your body, and you still have so little control of what happens when it's time to perform. For every winner, there are eight losers who worked just as hard. So you chase coincidences, the things you did before a win, in case they can bring you another. My team and I would get up at six and hunt through local stores until we found these exact Danishes. Then I'd go back to my hotel room and my partner would be awake. He'd laugh and pull the blankets over his head, pretend he couldn't get out of bed until I fucked him. Sometimes he wanted me to make him my slut, and other times we just made love.

Here I am, missing my first major event since my retirement, and I'm still chasing rituals I can't even complete because I don't have a team or a partner anymore. Just a squashed pastry in a plastic wrapper.

Maybe I should have expected it, but as I pass the breakfast aisle I hear familiar voices. The men I thought were my best friends are goofing around as they collect handfuls of peanut-butter flavored protein bars. My heart swells and pulls desperately toward the sound of their laughter, which was home to me for years. Like I could start over and ride with them to warmups, talking strategy for the day. My body still pulses to the rhythm we taught it,

even five months later. Just as I'm about to hurry away, I realize Darius isn't with them. Maybe he's still in his room, skipping breakfast, or maybe he's eating oatmeal alone in the corner of the dining area. Maybe I'm not the only person who's been left behind. But he didn't even have a chance to enjoy it first.

As I speed-walk toward the checkout, looking over my shoulder to make sure they didn't spot me, I have no idea whether I'm going to get in my car and drive straight back to Seattle or go and face Darius. What started out as a desire to fuck with his head turned into something far too complicated, and I don't think either of us has any interest in revisiting that mistake.

But when I get in my car and catch the faint remnant of Darius' scent, I turn back toward the hotel. I'm here for Alek, and Victor, and the boy who makes bad decisions, who insists on swimming with an injury. The one that fought me and tried to be good and orgasmed while clinging to me like a piece of driftwood in a flood. "Fuck you sideways," I grunt, looking at myself in the rearview mirror and pretending my face belongs to Victor.

By the time I go back to my room, change, and return to the lobby, Darius is waiting on an uncomfortable-looking bench by the door. He slouches against the backrest, staring blankly at the floor between his feet. When I clear my throat, his head jerks up and about fifty expressions flicker across his face before flattening into a halfhearted smirk. "You're late. Let's go."

"What did you eat for breakfast? How much sleep did you get?" As his de facto coach, I should have given him instructions instead of leaving him to fend for himself.

"Jesus. Eggs and seven hours." He gets up and stretches, revealing his blond happy trail and the hem of his swimming trunks under his loose shorts. Despite his gelled hair and freshly-shaven cheeks, something feels off about him. Before I can look closer, he shoves on his sunglasses and stalks toward the door, lugging his backpack. "Alek isn't paying you to talk to me, Tate."

"I'm not going to let him pay me. That's ridiculous."

He fumbles for a second, almost losing his grip on the heavy front door. It's gone so fast I wonder if I imagined it. "Then you're an even bigger loser than I thought."

The strained conversation dries up completely when we climb into the Jeep and start the eight-minute ride to the pool. He hugs his bag in his lap today, instead of throwing it in the back, and stares out the window. Weeks of endless drizzle gave way to a bright blue sky with cotton ball clouds that

have never heard of a rainstorm. All the trees and grass still sparkle with the memory of water that never quite dries.

The parking lot has started to fill up, so I pull into the back corner, under a sagging oak tree. Darius doesn't move, even when I switch the engine off. Just when I get sick of waiting and reach to pull the keys out of the ignition, he sucks in a deep breath. "I lied to you." Eyes still hidden by shades, he studies the landscaping.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't try to sleep. I watched *Brooklyn 99* reruns all night and drank energy drinks from the minibar until I puked. I didn't shower or eat this morning." When he finishes, he tips his chin up defiantly, still facing straight ahead.

I stare at him, taking in the tension in his shoulders, his fists clenched in his lap. He's so unfairly gorgeous, with a perfect jawline and beautiful muscle definition beneath his sun-bronzed skin.

Reaching across the center console, I hook a finger around his chin and turn his face toward mine. My fingers brush his cheek as I carefully pull off his sunglasses, revealing that electric blue beneath. Christ he looks exhausted, hurting and scared with dark smudges under his eyes. *You know who's still here when I wake up in the morning? None of you.*

"Do you enjoy making the worst possible decisions, or do you just not know any better?" I ask quietly. His breath catches, and relief floods his eyes. If I didn't already know I made a terrible mistake last night, I do now.

"What would you do if I told you it was on purpose, to spite you?" he enunciates, throwing each word at me like a challenge.

"I want you to feel good and perform well for your competition," I say carefully, reaching for the keys.

His jaw tightens. "Maybe I don't want to." And I can't tell if he's serious or just trying to get a reaction.

Turning in my seat to face him, I place two fingers against the pulse point in his neck. It's going a hundred miles an hour. "I don't think you're trying to spite me." When he starts to protest, I move my fingers to his mouth, pressing against his full lips. The touch makes his eyelids flutter. "Let me finish. I think you're trying to spite yourself, because you're falling apart as a swimmer and you're desperate for cock and you can't cope except to fuck everything up even more. Does that sound about right?"

He swallows, watching me intently, then ducks his chin and noses softly

at my fingers. “Hurt me again, Tate. Make me do something sick. I don’t wanna be the most fucked up thing here anymore.”

I almost do it. His face is in my hands, and I know he’ll do anything I say. Then reality crashes in, along with an ache in my chest. “Wait, stop. No more.”

He jerks back a little, breaking the physical connection, his eyes startled. “Huh?”

I rub at the beginnings of a headache throbbing at my temples. “This... thing. It’s really personal for me. You said you don’t want to be used; neither do I. I can’t dispense it like a vending machine just because some random person wants reassurance.”

“I—” I expect him to switch back to snark and spite, but his soft, pale eyebrows pull together in confusion. “I didn’t—” Working his jaw, he fixes his eyes on a rabbit sniffing around the edges of the landscaping. “Then why did you do this to me? Is it just some massive *fuck you*, to prove that I mean nothing to anyone?” His voice cracks. “If so, man, you win, because I don’t want to play anymore.”

When he grabs the door handle with one hand and the strap of his backpack with the other, I instinctively hit the lock button on my door like an actual serial killer. “Wait. That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry.”

“Then why did you do it?”

I have no idea. It all made some kind of sense, when my hands were on him in the dark, listening to him come apart. It felt right in a way nothing has for a long time. But I have to stop getting attached and giving pieces of myself away, or I’ll have nothing left. I don’t realize that I didn’t answer Darius until he lets out a tiny, broken sound, staring at his lap.

“You don’t even have an answer.” He swipes roughly at his eyes.

“Hey.”

I cup the side of his neck and pull his forehead to my shoulder, leaning awkwardly out of my seat. One of his hands slides across and splays against my thigh, his thumb brushing up under my button-down shirt to find the edge of my skin. Cradling him there, I push up the sleeve of his t-shirt to see faint bruising along his shoulder. He makes a sound when I press my lips to the hurt skin. His hand brushes all the way under my shirt now, exploring the topography of my side. I kiss along each inch of his soft, twitching shoulder, and I can hear the slightest edge of pain in his breathing.

Sitting up, I turn his face toward mine. We’re close enough that all I can

think about is whether his chapped lips would taste sharp like his cruelty or sweet like his surrender. “Darius, I don’t think you should swim today.”

He yanks away, face going blank. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Tell me about your shoulder.”

His body squares off, like he’s daring me to hit him. “No. Not unless you make me.”

“Darius...”

He holds up two fingers in my face, imitating my tone from last night. “You have two choices. You can make me, or you can fuck off.”

“No. I don’t accept those options. You know I’m right.”

Stubborn and distraught, he shakes his head. “*Make* me, Tate. Please.”

“No. That’s not how real life works.”

Grabbing the door again, he flips the lock and shoves it open. “Then what’s the fucking point of you being here?”

I stare after him as he stalks inside. It’s a good question, one I’ve been asked before. One I haven’t figured out the answer to, even after months of “working on myself” or whatever self-help buzzwords promise to help my life make sense.

Taking out my phone, I dial Alek.

“I have to have surgery on my foot,” he grouches instead of saying hello. “So you’d better be calling to make my day better.”

“Darius’ shoulder hasn’t healed. Can you call him and tell him not to swim? Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

There’s a startled silence. “But he got the green light to compete again.”

“From whom? Himself? You? A random teammate saying ‘seems okay to me’? Did he ever show you a letter from the team doctor, or any doctor at all?”

“Shit.” He sighs. “He won’t listen to me either. He knows another medical leave will fuck up his career.”

In spite of myself, I get out of the truck and cross the parking lot into the tall, oak foyer of the facility, echoing with splashing and voices. “Do you think I can talk to Coach?” I’d rather not face my old team right now, but I’d do it for him. I can’t believe the fool is going to put his career in jeopardy over a fucking charity meet, not even a qualifier for some other competition.

“Tate.” When I don’t respond, Alek repeats my name, louder. “He’s a twenty-three-year-old professional swimmer. You can’t barge into the locker room like a mom demanding to speak to her kid’s teacher.”

“Does he have family? Do you know if they’re here?”

“I don’t think he’s on speaking terms with his family.”

“Then what do I do?”

“What happened to wanting to kill this guy?”

Resigning myself to feeling helpless, I awkwardly climb up the metal bleachers to perch on the end of a bench. “One, it’s none of your business. And two, I’m not so much of an asshole as to want to see a guy’s career ruined just because we argued on Twitter a few times.”

“That makes you better than most of the internet.”

I can’t even crack a smile. “Not the time, Alek. Sorry about your foot.” Hanging up, I stuff my phone in my pocket and lean forward, elbows on my knees, trying to spot Darius among the guys around the pool.

I don’t know his body well enough yet, so I can’t identify him until he’s lined up next to Ross and the others for the relay. Even though I know he’s a great swimmer, he looks lost and inexperienced standing next to the vets. Now that fragility makes me ragingly protective in addition to turning me on. *It’s just 100m. Plenty of athletes have done worse things to an injury and gotten away with it.*

Ross is our fastest starter, so he takes off when the *beep* sounds and finishes his leg in the front of the pack. I used to swim second, reliably holding our position even if I couldn’t gain ground. This time I don’t pay attention to the second or third legs because I’m watching Darius grimace in pain when he stretches, then climb onto the starting block. The race has stayed tight, and all the responsibility for a win rests on his lean, worn-out back.

There’s something in his dive that cracks my chest open, the slightest hint in the angle of his elbows that he listened to me after all, that he tried to do better. When he breaks the water, I can tell it’s already over. He swims with everything he has, but his shoulder must have given up as soon as it tasted the intensity of a competition. He pretty much crawls to the far end of the pool, passed by every other team, then makes most of the return journey alone after everyone else hits the wall. I can hear some people mumbling in confusion, but I’m already on my feet, awkwardly wedging my way between spectators and struggling not to trip.

Darius grabs the wall and tries to climb out, but his shoulder collapses and he drops back into the water like a stone, pressing his forehead against the wall. Ross and a lifeguard kneel next to the pool and grab his armpits,

lifting him onto the deck. He pulls away from them and bends over to gasp for breath. When the medic overseeing the event comes over to ask him questions and puts a hand on his back, he shakes her off and walks toward the locker rooms.

Our coach makes it to Darius around the same time as me. The intense brunette blinks at me in confusion. “Where did you come from, Tate?”

I offer an awkward half shrug, half wave. “The bleachers.” As if that answers her question.

Frowning at me, she leads Darius toward a bench in the back hallway, away from scrutiny. “Talk to me, boss. What’s hurting?”

“Uh...” He’s shivering, dripping wet, as he flinches. “I’m not sure.”

“He should probably go get a scan at the ER,” the medic volunteers. “Can someone take him?”

Coach hesitates. “I need to stay... Dare, do you have any family or friends here today?”

There’s something so helpless in the look he gives her, before he quickly tries to cover it with a shrug that makes him suck in a shaky breath and close his eyes against the pain.

“I’ve got him,” I speak up. He didn’t even realize I was here, and his eyes widen when he sees me, torn between guilt and hope.

“Thanks, Tate.” Coach squeezes my elbow. “Call me with an update, Darius. We’ll be sending you good thoughts.” Her upbeat voice hides what she’s not saying—his body might never be the same, turning him into one of those swimmers trapped in a permanent cycle of injuries that never quite heal.

She hurries away, leaving us in silence. Darius doesn’t look up from the green tile floor, his muscles rigid and his head hanging. “Let’s go.” I hold out a hand to help him up, but he ducks past it and pushes through the changing rooms. As I catch up, he’s trying to pull on a navy blue UC Berkeley hoodie. When it hurts too much, he just stands there staring at it crumpled in his hands.

“Let me.” He startles when I pull it away, like he forgot I was there. “Arm up.” His body’s still dripping water, but I pull it over his head anyway, guiding his right arm through the sleeve. The other one stays underneath, hugged to his body. I rest my forehead in his damp hair for a moment, gripping the soft hoodie in both hands, consumed with the urge to wrap him up in my arms. He keeps his eyes down, refusing to move or look at me.

When I let go, he turns quickly and grabs his bag without a word. As I follow him down a back hall and into the humid, quiet parking lot, I search on my phone for the nearest emergency room.

I've considered and rejected about fifty conversation starters by the time we climb into the car, but I needn't have bothered. Darius cranks a modern hits radio station well past a comfortable volume, then props his head back and closes his eyes. Every once in a while, water drips from his hair down onto his nose or along his cheekbone, but he doesn't wipe it away. In that moment, as I put the car into gear, I want absolutely everything. To help and hurt, to own and hold, or maybe to never see him again because he's doing dangerous things to me. But I don't think it matters what I want.

The hospital is only a few minutes away. When he feels me turn into the lot, Darius opens his eyes, blinking a little in the bright sun. His voice sounds flat and defeated. "Just drop me off at the door and I'll check myself in. They'll probably do a scan, then I can find a ride home."

"I'm not going to just take off and abandon you," I growl more irritably than I intended as I pull into the drop-off space. "Jesus, Darius."

He presses his lips together and widens his eyes at me impatiently. "Don't throw a fit, dude. I'm a big boy; I can handle it."

"I'll go pick up the bags at the hotel, then come back."

Grunting with effort, he slides to the ground and slams the door behind him. I watch him wander inside alone, a sour taste flooding my mouth.

It takes me an hour to sort everything out at the hotel, pack the rest of our things, call Alek to help me calm down, and return to the hospital. I don't see Darius anywhere when I enter the hushed waiting room, weaving between miserable-looking people to reach the front desk. "Did Darius Matthews check in?" I ask the young male receptionist, suddenly scared that the answer might be *no*. The man taps on his computer, then eyes me. "Are you a close relative?"

I could have said a lot of things, ranging from the truth to a safe lie like *cousin* or *coach*, but instead I blurt "his boyfriend," then try not to look too much like I'm kicking myself. To my surprise, it works. As I follow his directions through a set of double doors to the holding area, I can't seem to purge that word from my brain. I trail awkwardly down a row of curtained-off rooms, trying to ignore the alarming noises coming from behind them, until I find the number the receptionist gave me.

I'm flustered enough that I raise a hand to knock on the curtain, because

that's how cool I am. Then I freeze up, staring at the wrinkled baby blue cloth. It's happening again. I'm getting attached to someone who doesn't need me. And if he says he doesn't want me here—not just giving me attitude but really meaning it—it will hurt in a way that I'm not sure I have enough strength to process. I should just wait in the lobby.

The curtain twitches aside, and Darius looks me up and down, taking in my raised fist with the slightest twitch at the corner of his mouth. “I could see your shoes in the gap at the bottom,” he explains, deadpan voice gravelly and exhausted. But his eyes are still bright and stunning, edged with distress.

“Oh.”

Ignoring my one syllable non-answer, he goes back to the bed and sits on the edge. His shoes and hoodie are folded on a chair against the wall, and he's wearing socks and a ridiculous open-at-the-back gown that flashes a sliver of his ass at me. “Someone stuck their head in just now and told me my boyfriend was coming.” He says it in an expressionless, careful tone, fiddling with the remote control attached to the bed.

“Sorry,” I repeat nonsensically. “They asked, and I panicked.”

Shrugging his good shoulder, he swings his legs onto the bed and lies back, eyes half closing in exhaustion. “They did a CT scan, so I'm just waiting to see how bad it is. And if you try to lecture me, I'll call security and tell them you're a murderous stalker ex.”

“I'm not going to lecture you.” Grabbing a free chair, I drag it next to the bed and sit down. It's much too small for me, plastic edges digging into the backs of my thighs. “There's no point anyway,” I add. “You're a lost cause who enjoys being wrong.”

His eyes flick open and he looks at me properly for the first time since our argument in the car this morning, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Is that so?”

The silence feels more comfortable now as we wait, browsing our phones without bothering to say anything else. The primal parts of me feel calmer when he's nearby. Darius jumps a little when a nurse sticks her head around the curtain. “We have the results of your scans back, Darius, so if you could wait a little longer we'll have a doctor in to go over them with you.”

“Sure,” he murmurs as she disappears. He stares after her, body rigid. “She didn't look like it was good news, did she?”

“There's no way to tell,” I reassure him, but deep down I agree. Trying not to be overbearing, I turn my attention back to my phone. I assume he does

the same, but a couple of minutes later I hear a quiet snuffle. When I glance up, he's staring at his lap, blinking rapidly. His lower lip quivers, and he bites it hard, but he can't hold back another tiny, choked sob. I'm not even sure he likes swimming; I don't really know anything about him besides how deeply unhappy he seems with his life. But I do know that having something taken away hurts a hell of a lot more than giving it up yourself.

His strong, tan hand rests on the bed sheet next to his hip. I reach over and slip my fingers between his, my cool palm against his warm one. Immediately his grip tightens, fingers folding through mine, squeezing tight enough to hurt. He doesn't let go again or loosen his grip, even when the doctor comes in and gives our joined hands a curious look.

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DARIUS

“Alright, young man,” the doctor announces kind of severely, like a disappointed grandpa. I hate the *young man*, especially in front of Tate, but the guy’s like sixty so I guess he has the right to call me whatever he wants. “You have multiple partial tears in your rotator cuff. They’ve been developing for a while, and trying to swim full-bore today made them much worse. You’re going to need physical therapy and a lot of time off from competitive swimming. Make an appointment as soon as you get back to Seattle, alright? If you keep pushing, you’ll be looking at surgery.”

I expected that; my shoulder hurts too much to be something small. But the reality of it punches me in the gut. I really fucked up, and I can’t take it back now. And if I don’t know who Darius is without Dare, I don’t know how I’m supposed to figure out where to go next. Tate fidgets, and I realize I’m crushing his fingers. Holding a big, rugged hand that kind of envelops mine is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. It’s this, not the mind-bending orgasm, that I’m going to miss if I go back to only dating girls.

When I realize I’m just gawking at the doctor, I snap out of it and nod, mumbling enough words to show that I understand. On his way out, he tells us where to go in the building to get a new shoulder brace and some pain meds. “Not the good stuff,” I joke, studying the prescription he handed me before leaving. Tate gives me such a stern look it flips my stomach inside out. He’s just as uptight as I always expected him to be based on his social media, but the thing I never realized until this weekend is how hot he looks while he’s doing it.

I’m so fucking tired, so I drop my head back against the bed for one last

moment of rest before I drag myself back to reality and a life that's unraveling faster than I can keep up.

"Hey," Tate rumbles softly, shifting his grip. "I'm really sorry. But I know you can beat this." I feel his lips press against my fingers, then his warm cheek resting on the back of my hand. It makes my chest tighten and expand at the same time—like the warmth of having someone to tuck you in at night mixed with the pain of watching them leave and shut the door. I don't want him to stop, so I keep still and watch him from the corner of my eye.

After a long moment, he catches himself and blushes a little, getting to his feet and pushing the chair briskly against the wall. He picks up my clothes and drops them on the edge of the bed without meeting my eyes. "I'll wait outside while you change." And he leaves before I can point out that I need help with my shirt. I don't get what his problem is, since I'm the one who's supposed to be freaking out about touching a man. But as I struggle miserably to dress without causing myself more pain, I think back to the boyfriend that he used to feature on his social media, how happy they looked together. How after he left the picture, Tate never posted about anything but swimming again.

After a full five minutes of fighting the extra-large hoodie onto my body, I push the curtain aside and find Tate leaning against the wall, tapping away on his phone. "Are you gossiping with coach, tattling to Alek, or preparing to roast me online?"

I'm joking, but his brows furrow as he looks up. The guy almost looks unhappier than I feel, though that's going to change when I get back to my silent, dark apartment later today and lock myself in forever. "I was telling the pet sitter I'm headed back early, so they don't need to feed the cat."

"You have a cat?"

He pulls up a photo of an ornery-looking black cat with yellow eyes and shows it to me. "I'm a dog person, but I was too busy to take care of one by myself. I found this guy in a cardboard box a couple of blocks from the swimming center. His name is Victor Jr."

I cough out a laugh. "Does that mean he's a diva and an asshole?"

"That's rich, coming from you." He grins, but it looks strained. When he takes the phone back, his fingers brush mine and I wish there was a way I could hold his hand again on the way to the pharmacy. I deal with it by sticking my hands in my jean pockets. I don't want to put on the ugly, awkward wrap covered in itchy Velcro, but it stabilizes my shoulder until I

can almost use the arm without pain if I'm careful.

I'm not going to have a reason to see Tate again after this, unless I make an excuse about wanting to pet his cat, so I try to stay awake on the drive home. There are all these urges building up in my head, the kind I've only felt in one or two relationships—talking about everything, finding out his favorite food and his opinion on my favorite movies, playing my motivation playlist and seeing if we like the same songs.

None of it matters, because I'm so wrecked that I fall asleep before we even get out of the city limits. I always feel nervous falling asleep around the girls I have over, as if I'm going to babble all my secrets, but he already knows most of them. So I drop into the dark and every time I come up for breath in a rush of pain and confusion, he's there. One time he catches my eyes when I crack them open to check the time. "You okay, little disaster?"

That ridiculous name feels so good, but regret crosses his eyes a second later. He shakes his head and turns back to the road. "Sorry."

I don't have many ways of expressing myself besides drawing, and I can't exactly sketch him a picture, so I shove my hand between the empty coffee cups from the way down, and fist a handful of his t-shirt. The last thing I feel is his fingers cupping mine, his thumb sliding up and down my wrist. I don't wake up again until we arrive.

Something squeezing my good shoulder drags me into a disorienting world of rain running down the windscreen and a burning pain whenever I move too much. Sitting up and sniffing, rubbing my eyes, I stare at the facade of my apartment building. "Oh." I fail to bite back a massive yawn and shiver. "We're here."

"Yeah." He fiddles with a worn spot on his steering wheel. "Can you carry everything?"

"Sure." Awkwardly stuffing the last few things into my backpack, I hang it from my shoulder. "Thanks for the ride."

He huffs a laugh, not looking up. "I feel like that's an understatement."

"I'm sorry for all the shit I said," I offer awkwardly, opening the door and pulling a face at the rain. "I'm bored of social media, so you're safe for now."

His lips twist into a halfhearted smirk. "What a relief." He takes a deep breath. "Are you going to stay in Seattle, if you can't keep your place on the team?"

"I'm not sure," I say honestly. "If I can't make a living here, I'll have to find something else."

He looks up quickly. “I was thinking, and I just wanted to say...If you want to be with a woman, then you do you. But if you want to date a man, or at least try it, you shouldn’t be ashamed. You only have one life, and you should live it for your own happiness, not the prejudices of a bunch of assholes.” I gawk at him. Apparently, we’re done pretending I’m not a confused, closeted bisexual. But I’ve never heard someone put it into words before, like it’s not only real, but worthy. Before I can answer, he sighs and bounces his palm against his forehead. “Sorry. I’m really pushy. Everyone hates it. I, uh, I hope you have a good recovery and, you know, see you around maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I take a step back, cold raindrops dripping down my neck, and wave. It’s easier not to look back as I cross the lot and climb the stairs to my place on the third floor. I fumble my keys out of my pocket, focused on getting to my bed where I can shut everything out for a night, and probably the next day and the day after that. Coach texted me, but I didn’t answer her yet because now that Tate’s gone, I can go back to living like an irresponsible train wreck if that’s what I want. Maybe I should get Ali over here, and as many of her friends as she can fit in her car. Tell them to bring alcohol. “Fuck.” The keys hit the concrete landing, and I stare at them between my shoes.

Then I drop my bag on the mat and thunder back down the stairs. I fully expect him to be gone, but the Jeep’s still idling in the middle of the road. Relief fills me first, then panic, because that means I need to have something to say by the time I reach the car. I trip on the curb just as he looks up, incredibly suave of me, and stumble to a stop with my good hand catching myself on the Jeep’s forest green body.

I squint up through the drizzle as Tate rolls down the window, looking worried. “Did you forget something?”

“No.” I hoped he’d read my mind, but he just stares at me blankly. “Fuck, I just, uh.” I look down at the toe I smashed against the curb. “Ow.”

His tight expression relaxes just a little, his hazy green eyes bright under his tousle of dark hair. He has stubble coming in all along his jaw like he forgot to shave this morning. “You look so good online, but you’re really a hazard to society.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

I can see it all on his face for a second. Wanting to believe me, but trying to convince himself he misunderstood somehow.

Reaching through the window, I grab the back of his neck and pull his mouth toward mine. But I didn't think this through, because I panic and freeze with my lips a breath away from his, our foreheads touching. I'm not sure I have it in me to make it that final inch, to let myself be the thing I've always feared, no matter how much I want it. I'm just stuck there, panting like I sprinted a mile, surrounded by the smell of his hair. My brain has reverted to some animal state, so all that comes out of me is a frustrated, confused whimper.

The sound seems to bring Tate back to life. A second later, he's got the back of my head cradled in his huge hand. "Come on," he breathes in that low, sexy voice. "This is yours. I won't do it for you."

Fuck him, always making things hard. "Do you want me to?" I ask, in maybe the most pathetic, insecure line of all time.

"What do you think?"

"I think everyone wants to be kissed by Dare Matthews."

Right when he starts to protest, I grab the window for balance and lean up to brush my lips against his. He keeps his hold on the back of my head, his other hand pushing under the collar of my hoodie as he shows me how to take it, parting my mouth, filling me with his tongue. He tastes warm and sweet and strong and I've just been ruined, robbed of the ability to settle for anything less than this.

When I've held my breath for way longer than even a swimmer should be capable of, my exhausted legs start to buckle and I have to break the kiss to catch myself. Before I can even think, Tate's out of the Jeep. I assume he's going to attack my mouth some more, which is alright except that I'm starting to feel a little overwhelmed and teary. Instead, he just picks me up casually by the thighs and rests me against the side of the car, pulling my face into his neck as I wrap all my limbs around him. His other hand slides under my top, to rub my back again in that magic way he has. When I feel steadier, I lift my head and try kissing him again, soft and slow this time with no tongue, just to test if I really can. Now that I'm pressed against him, I feel how his body reacts, a shiver all through his muscles, and it blows my mind that I did that.

When I feel him try to put me down, I just tighten my grip and growl into his warm neck.

"Darius," he warns, using his fingers in my hair to try and lift my head. I shake him off and mash my face harder into his skin until my nose is

squashed too flat to breathe.

“I want you to stay,” I beg, my muffled protest impossible to understand.

He sighs heavily and kisses my jaw, which is the first time he’s kissed me instead of the other way around, and my dick firms up against his body. “I can’t carry you up three flights of stairs.”

“You totally can,” I mutter, lifting my face enough to bite his clavicle. If someone saw me now, I’d lose any reputation I ever had as a playboy.

“I don’t want to. And I can’t park the Jeep this way.”

My head pops up. Our noses are basically touching, his eyes a blurry smear of green-gold that I can’t see clearly unless I cross my eyes. “You’re staying?”

I can feel him chuckle. “If I’d known one kiss would turn you from a raging brat into a desperate little attention-whore, I would have tried it sooner.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” I drop my feet to the asphalt before he can feel how hard I’m getting and step back, a little dizzy.

The rain soaks my hair as I stand with my hands in my pockets, heart pounding in my throat as I watch him park the car in a guest spot. I’m feeling as skittish as a virgin at the end of a first date as he grabs his duffel and walks toward me. I skip backward as he approaches, keeping my distance, and his eyes heat up at the gesture.

It hits me how tired I am as I climb the stairs for the second time, and I’m practically crawling on all fours by the time I get to the top. Tate eyes the bag I threw on the landing and picks it up as I unlock the door. Gloom fills the chilly room even after I turn on the light. Rain cascades down the windows until there is no view, just a gray blur. As I feel the deep sadness settling in, an arm wraps around my middle and pulls me back against something warm and strong. “Why am I not surprised?” Tate grumbles behind me.

“What?”

He props his chin on my head and his hand strays up my chest, coming to rest just below the base of my neck. “You get three guesses and two don’t count.”

I scan the sparse furniture—just a couch, a TV, and a bed in the other room. All my kitchen utensils and gadgets sit scattered across the counter, because opening cupboards is a waste of time, and I get depressed when I see how empty they look. My laundry lives in stacks in the living room. A video game console trails cords across the floor, and all the sneakers scattered

around don't have pairs. "I'm guessing your ass has some problem with how I keep my house."

"It's awful."

"So what?" I pull away and turn around to face him. "I bet yours is equally depressing but a little tidier, just to prove that you're better than the rest of us."

His lips twitch as he shrugs slowly, eyes scanning me up and down. "Maybe so."

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TATE

Darius is so worn out his dark circles look like black eyes and his tawny skin seems pale. But before I can say anything else he scrambles forward, his weight pushing me back against the door, and climbs me as best he can with three limbs.

Even if I can't see him again I will never, never forget having his first kiss, his fear and wonder and the delicate but desperate way he tasted my lips like he was waiting to be struck down by lightning from the sky, but wanted me enough to do it anyway. I guess we're done being delicate, because he's currently doing his best to lick my tonsils, whimpering into my mouth as our tongues wrestle and thrust against each other. He tastes wilder than any man I've ever kissed, like all the meaningless hookups and years spent living a lie haven't tamed him.

When he starts fumbling with the zipper of my jeans. I push him back and wrap a hand around his wrist, holding him still. His eyes flick up to mine, eager to see what I'll demand next. I've created a monster. Cupping his neck in my hands, I kiss him over and over as I walk him backwards down the hall, past a modest bathroom, to his bedroom. The bed frame doesn't even have a headboard, just a mattress on metal legs and a mess of unmade sheets. The few pieces of furniture in the house are all good quality, like he can afford nice things but doesn't have a reason to care. I know the feeling well.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice plastic boxes of art supplies in the corner, with some kind of travel easel folded up on top. Rumpled sketchbooks of the same brand as the one in his backpack are stacked all over the dresser.

“Let me see you, for god’s sake.” Darius drags my attention back when he whines like a frustrated kitten and stuffs his hands up my t-shirt, raking his fingers desperately along my skin. I can feel his nails leaving marks, his hot body squirming against mine, his tongue in the hollow of my throat. He took a flying leap off the cliff, and now he’s frantic for someone to hold his hand as he falls, to keep him from hitting the ground. No, not someone. Me.

I startle a soft yelp out of him when I push him, his knees hitting the edge of the mattress and dropping him on his back with me on top. At the sensation of our half-hard cocks pressed together through layers of denim, he chokes out “*fuck*” and tries to thrust his hips against my weight. “Easy.” I press my forehead to his, feeling the out-of-control thundering of his heart against my chest. “Slow down.”

“No. I. Don’t. Want. To,” he grits out in time to his unsuccessful attempts to hump me. I have to drop my face into his shoulder to hide how it makes me laugh. As I trail my nose along his neck, I realize I can’t remember the last time I felt relaxed enough to really laugh in the presence of another person.

“Jesus,” Darius complains. “If I had called Ali at least I would have gotten off sometime this century.”

When I come up sharply on my elbows and catch his chin in my fingers, regret dawns in his eyes. I just smile. “You’re not smart enough to make good choices, but at least you have the sense to know when you should be scared.”

He lies still, barely breathing, as I get up on my knees and unbutton his jeans, tugging them down, then tossing them into the laundry hamper that only has clothes around it instead of inside. Next, I unstrap his brace and carefully strip off his hoodie. His cock looks unbelievable in a pair of soft, gray briefs that cling to everything. One of his hands slides up to touch himself, but when he catches my eye he quickly presses it back against the bed.

“If you’re going to behave like an animal,” I comment calmly, sitting on the edge and tracing my fingers along his perfect thighs, “you shouldn’t be allowed on the furniture until you learn to fucking control yourself.”

His eyes widen and his whole body shudders. Christ, I’ve never seen a cock go hard as fast as his, straining against his briefs. He sits up uncertainly, the faint blush on his cheeks contradicting the defiant set of his jaw, then hesitates.

“Do I need to explain myself more clearly? Or would you like to try and convince me I shouldn’t put you in your place?”

“No,” he whispers. “Shit.” Scooting toward me, he grabs a fistful of my tee and buries his face in my neck for a second, pulling in a deep, shaky breath. Then he lets go and slides onto his knees on the carpet. This isn’t the first time I’ve pictured Darius Matthews kneeling for me, flushed, gazing up at me with wide, turquoise eyes glazed with lust and shame. No fantasy could compare to the real thing, rock hard and practically drooling on the floor in front of me.

“Better. Now, it’s been an incredibly long day, and I think we should take a shower. Is that alright with you?” He keeps his lips pressed together and nods. “You’re hopeless, but you do handle correction well. That’s something.” A soft groan breaks in his chest.

I feel the faintest twinge of nerves as I stand up. I’m about to push him much harder, to see how deep he’ll go. Keeping my body relaxed, I head for the bathroom in the hall. At the rustle of Darius climbing to his feet, I turn around. “Hey. Do you think you deserve to walk right now?” When I point at the floor between us, he looks puzzled for a second. Then his face goes slack, stunned eyes fixed on me.

“Tate…” he rasps softly. But everything about him, his voice, his posture, his breathing, is dripping with arousal.

I prop my shoulder against the door frame and watch him. “Look at yourself.”

When he glances down and sees the slick stain of precum darkening the front of his briefs, he whimpers.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but it looks like horny little sluts love to crawl.”

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” he whispers. His eyes look hazy—either he’s feeling the high of surrendering or he’s panicking and drifting away. I cross the room and tip his face up toward me.

“Listen carefully; I’m adding to the rules. If you’re done, you say *I’m done* and everything stops. And that’s okay. But unless you’re done, the only other choices are to do what you’re told or pitch a fit and find out how much worse things can get.”

He blinks, then swallows and nods. I pause to give him a minute to back out. But he just fixes his wild eyes on me with breathtaking intensity and something defiant that will bend to me but never break, because he’s been

holding himself together against the world his whole life.

Backing away, I duck into the bathroom, flick on the light, and start the water in his narrow shower stall warming up. When I come back to the doorway, the little terror has snuck off his briefs. He kneels in the overcast bedroom completely bare, with his long, needy cock straining up. As I drink him in, a tiny smile curls the corner of his mouth, as shy as it is teasing. At least he's learned enough not to try stroking himself.

"Come over here before the water gets cold."

He inhales slowly, blows it out, then drops to all fours and crawls across the carpet toward me, careful not to put too much weight on his shoulder. It's a good thing he's looking at the floor, because the sight does such indescribable things to me that I can't keep my expression neutral.

When he reaches me, he wordlessly buries his face in my thigh and clings to my calf hard enough to hurt. Prying his hands away gently, I crouch in front of him and take his face in my hands. He's never been more stunning than now, overwhelmed and fragile. "There's nothing wrong with you. Say it." Panicking a little, he tries to tug away, but I just hold him more firmly. "Say it."

He makes a pained sound as his eyes search mine, pleading for help. "There's nothing— Um, there's..." His voice breaks. "Damn it."

"Look at you." I pull him against me, my hands caressing the muscles of his bare back. "You are a perfect disaster." He wraps his arms around my waist and makes a strangled kind of sob-laugh into my neck. I want to say that I won't let him go until he believes it, and not even then. Instead, I plaster him against the bathroom cabinets with a deep, ferocious kiss. One of my hands grips the base of his throat, and the other wraps around his cock until he whines and bucks into my fist.

"The water's going to get cold," I murmur against his jaw. He gives a petulant little growl as I pull away, but when I stand up and strip off my t-shirt and jeans he goes silent and watches with starved fascination. My cock starts hardening as soon as I free it from its denim prison, and by the time I step under the hot water it's thick and throbbing at every sensation. Glancing over my shoulder, I gesture for him to stand up. "Come on. You must be filthy after the mess of a day you've had."

To my shock, Darius Matthews ducks his head and crawls to my feet, shivering with happiness when I reach down and brush fingers through his hair. Water cascades down every sexy contour of his body and catches in his

eyelashes as he kneels and tips his head back to examine every inch of me.

“What are you thinking right now?” My voice comes out a little hoarser than I intended.

“You’re so much more fucking gorgeous than any guy I ever imagined,” he announces. There’s no edge or joke or anything else in his voice, just raw honesty, and for some reason I can feel my throat tightening. “Can I touch you?”

I nod, not trusting myself to answer. Electricity gathers under my skin as he reaches for me, surging and sparking when his palms flatten against my thighs. Damp eyebrows furrowed in concentration, he slides upward to my hips, then back to cup my ass. An obscene moan slips out of his mouth as he kneads my cheeks firmly. Then his warm tongue is raking along my skin, completely frying my nervous system as he laps at my hip and then further in, closer and closer to the small patch of pubic hair I leave trimmed around my cock.

Completely lost in his work, Darius doesn’t stop or hesitate for a second, even though he has no idea what he’s doing. He angles his head, exposing his beautiful neck, and starts dragging his tongue along my balls until he’s pushed me to the edge of control. When I make a strangled sound and grab his hair, he just goes even harder, groaning and licking messily up and around the base of my shaft. His mouth glistens with spit and precum and shower water as he works me over, his fingers digging into my ass and pulling me closer. It feels sacred in a way I can’t even grasp, like he’s finally claiming something he was never allowed to want.

With both hands cupped around the shaft to guide it, he reaches the head and just shoves me straight in his mouth without a moment’s thought. It’s tight and uncomfortable and full of teeth and so passionate that I almost come on his tongue. He only takes a quarter of my length before he realizes this isn’t as easy as it looks and freezes up, mouth stretched around me and eyes lifting anxiously to mine. But he doesn’t pull off.

“This is a good look for you.” I stroke my fingers under his chin, then down along his throat to tap his Adam’s apple. “Someday you’re going to take a cock all the way down here. I’ll be able to feel it just like this.” Drool gathers in the corners of his mouth as he chokes out a needy sound. “Just stay like that for a minute, alright? Get used to it.”

To pass the time, I take a proper look around his shower. It’s only barely big enough for two, but at least it’s not a tub. On little nooks in the wall, he

has a bar of generic drug store soap, a straight razor, and a few bottles. I start laughing. “What’s this? The three bath and body care essentials: body wash, shampoo, and an industrial-sized bottle of...” I squint at it. “*Ultra* long-lasting lubricant. Do you rush through your threesomes and then come back here and jerk off to the thought of a man spreading your legs so you can finish properly?” He struggles and gags at that, clawing at my ass, and I tease my fingers along the back of his neck. “Next time, you can jerk off to what those girls would think seeing you on all fours with a cock down your throat.”

His eyes roll back and the vibrations of his groan ripple along my shaft. Finally, I pull out and rest my rock-hard cock along his cheek. “Feel that? What you’ve done to me?”

“*Please*,” he croaks. His own dick is a flushed, straining mess. “I’ll do anything.”

“What, is there something you want me to do with this?” I rub my erection slowly against his cheek. “Describe it for me.”

Scrabbling a little on the wet floor, he climbs to his feet, catches my face in both his hands, and goes up on his toes to take a breathless kiss. I can taste faint traces of myself on his tongue as he opens for me. When he breaks away, he begs in a wrecked voice, “Fuck my ass, Tate. Please fuck me.”

Grabbing his waist, I turn him to the tile wall and trail my hand possessively down his spine. When my fingers brush the top of his crack, he twitches and ruts at the empty air, his perfect ass muscles flexing. I plant leisurely kisses on the back of his neck as I push two fingers lower, to tease against his hole. He gives a helpless, fractured cry and tries to climb the wall, but I chase it with a gentle pressure.

“Have you been saving this for me? Every time you trashed me online, did you fantasize about me using your tight little virgin ass as my cum dumpster?”

Darius *sobs* and comes all over the wall, body jerking against mine. Then he goes boneless and I wrap my arms around his chest to keep him from melting onto the floor. “Shh, brat,” I murmur in his hair. “You’re good. Breathe.”

“No,” he growls, arching his back to press my thick cock into the cleft of his ass. “You’re such a fucking pain. I told you what I wanted and you’re not doing it.”

“Oh, I see,” I remark drily, pushing him against the wall. “I thought you

wanted me to make you feel good, but you just want me to use you like a hole even though you've finished."

He nods so impatiently that I have to bite the back of his neck to keep from laughing again. Not because he's funny, but because he fills my chest with so much warmth that bits of happiness keep spilling out the edges.

"I'm not sure about your tone, but you've made me so hard I don't have a choice."

Pressed obediently to the wall, he waits while I stick my head out of the shower and dig through my jeans for a condom. I trail the wrapper along his ass before stopping to open it and roll it on. "I'm not doing this again until I can cum inside you and see your face as it drips out." Part of me panics that I've gone too far. Even as I coat my fingers in lube, I'm not sure if this is anything more to him than a one-time thing to blow off steam before we say goodbye. And fuck if it's not too late for me, because that thought already hurts like hell.

I work gently at his hole until he starts to open for me with a shuddering whine. Between his noises and the thought of him jerking off in here to all kinds of fantasies, some of which I suspect had to do with me, my cock is threatening to let loose before I even get inside. I might be rushing his prep a little, adding another finger, but he's so incredibly relaxed from coming that he lets me right into the hot grip of his channel while he just rests his forehead against the wall and makes soft, sated whimpering sounds.

"Feel that?" I press my fingers all the way in and spread them slowly, then hold. "You're open all the way for me." After pumping them a couple of times, I pull out to quickly dump a handful of lube on my cock.

"Tate..." he breathes, choking off when I hook a hand under his right leg and lift it, partly to open him up and partly to help keep him from collapsing.

"I'm right here." Once I've pressed my head against his hole, I lick water off his shoulder until he relaxes. Carefully, I work deeper into his heat, listening to his breathing and feeling him twitch as I fill him for the first time in his life, all the way to the base. "Do you know how good you feel?" When I slip a hand around his hip to check, I find his cock hard again. I squeeze my fingers around it relentlessly, making him squirm. "That's how tight you are. And now I'm going to show you what you're good for."

I start careful, deep enough to bump my hips against his ass with each stroke, then speed up until my head is spinning and my whole body aches to the rhythm of him. If I could, I'd make this moment last for hours, weeks, as

long as I could keep him. But it's hopeless. His perfectly toned, tan body dripping with water, his broken gasps, and just the simple, sweet smell of him, of Darius. Combined with the iron clench of his ass around me, I come before I can even set a pace. I grab the wall and drop my face into his shoulder, blinded for a moment by the devastating shocks of an orgasm that's been building for days, ever since he first sauntered toward me at the swimming center.

As soon as I can, I lower his leg and turn him around. When I look down at my sticky palm, I realize he came a second time in my hand as I fucked him. The man is smiling, a faint version of that cocky, lopsided grin that breaks hearts. He looks peaceful, like he's not fighting for once. When I kiss him, he sneaks his tongue in my mouth and trails his fingers all over me. But he's trembling so much he can barely support his own weight.

"Oh, fucking stop it," he croaks when I bend and scoop up his rock-solid body, but he wraps his arms around my neck and curls into my chest as I stagger through the bathroom and set him on the edge of the bed.

"Wait there." Grabbing a blue towel with palm trees on it that he left on the bathroom floor, I dry off his hair and body gently, then see to my own. "You with me?" I brush my thumbs under his exhausted eyes.

He nods, then clears his throat, his voice getting stronger. "Thank you."

I raise an eyebrow, and his lips twitch. "You do learn, don't you?"

"Maybe." When he shivers, I grab the edge of his crumpled duvet and lift it up.

"Lie down. No arguing," I add when he starts to pull a face.

Once he's stretched out on his back, still breathing hard, I crawl in to lie on my side next to him, smoothing a comforting hand across his torso and sliding the other under his head. Something sharp jabs me, and when I fish under his pillow, I pull out another one of the sketchbooks he has stashed everywhere. I don't mean to snoop, but it's already folded open to a page covered in beautiful, cascading sketches of male bodies in complicated poses.

When he sees what I'm holding, Darius snatches the book so quickly it almost tears, clutching it to his chest. He stares up at me with his eyebrows furrowed, chewing the inside of his lip. "Sorry," I murmur, brushing fingers through his hair. "I didn't mean to pry. Go to sleep." Curling close enough to feel his body heat, I close my eyes.

"Tate." He clears his throat uneasily. When I open my eyes, he's watching me. "Do you remember what I said the other night in your room?"

I remember everything about it with perfect clarity. “About wanting to study art? I wasn’t sure I heard you right.”

He nods. “I wanted to go into art, but my family forced me toward swimming and business studies. They wouldn’t help pay for school otherwise. Because doodling animals is cute when you’re little, but once you’re a man, I guess it ‘turns you gay’. And they’ve always been secretly afraid of that.” Tipping his head back, he groans quietly. “I don’t know what to do, Tate. I feel like there’s nothing left inside me but the shit I did to make them happy, and now I’ve lost that too.”

I chuckle in spite of myself. “Believe me, you’ve got more than enough personality inside of you. Maybe too much. And you’ve got time. I could help you—” Cutting myself off, I roll onto my back and look out the window in the hope that he didn’t catch the last part. I don’t know why I can’t learn, after all this time, that just because someone puts up with me doesn’t mean that they want me actively involved in their life.

Darius studies my face, his expression impossible to read. Taking a deep breath, he picks up the sketchpad and flips back to the first page. “I started this book last month.” He smooths long fingers over the smudgy ink rendering of the inside of a coffee shop. “There’s a place down the street I like to draw in when it’s raining. But I need to find somewhere new, because I have every fucking detail of this place memorized.”

He flips slowly through the rest of his complicated, whimsical sketches, explaining what he was trying to learn and pointing out his mistakes in between huge yawns while I stroke his hair and gape in awe at his talent. If I had seen even one of these drawings back when we hated each other, I would have questioned all my assumptions about him.

“You spill a lot of food,” I observe drily when we come across the seventh stain on the pages.

“Do you not enjoy eating?” he snarks sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

“I enjoy keeping my food in my bowl and not all over the table.”

“You must get awfully hungry.” He lets me steal the notebook and set it on the far side of the mattress, then props his head against my chest and closes his eyes. “We should get up and watch a movie or something,” he mumbles, trying to stir, but I hold him still.

“Just sleep, wild thing. You need to start healing.”

“I...fuck.” He rolls over so his back is to me and buries his face in the pillow. “I spend so much time in here, just sleeping to make everything stop.

I don't want to. Please, Tate."

Instead of arguing, I nestle him against my front, taking care not to jostle his shoulder. "Count backwards from a hundred for me, then we'll get up."

"I'm not four, Tate. I know what you're up to." But I can hear the slightest smile in his husky voice.

"Sorry for assuming you know any numbers higher than ten."

That surprises a laugh out of him, warm and indignant. "I know ninety-nine, and ninety-eight, even ninety-seven..."

I close my eyes and relax my head on the pillow, my nose in his hair and his soft skin moving a little under my hands. I grin to myself when he does the sixties twice without realizing it, pauses, then jumps all the way back to eighty-seven, voice so slurred I can barely understand it. Just before he drops off, he hooks one foot back around my leg, spreading his toes against my calf like he's trying to make sure I'll never leave.

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DARIUS

No one's there when I wake up.

Well shit.

I haven't even gotten my eyes open properly and there are fucking tears trying to come out. I felt so warm when I fell asleep, I thought maybe this would be the time it was different. But now I'm naked in a chilly bed, staring at a shadowy ceiling in the silence. Maybe I dreamed it all.

Rolling onto my face, hissing at the ache in my shoulder that woke me up in the first place, I resolve to see how long I can stay here without moving. Days? But unfortunately I have to pee first.

Stumbling and grabbing the wall to stay steady, I limp to the bedroom door and shove it open on my way to the toilet.

Weird—I never shut my bedroom door.

The living room glows softly with yellow lamplight, even though I didn't turn them on. A freshly-showered man with dark hair and moody eyes turns and props his chin on the back of the couch. His sexy mouth twists into a grin. "Hey, brat. You're up."

I won't let the tears out, so they make a huge, tight ball in my throat. I have to clear my throat to get my voice around them. Even so, it wobbles a little. "Fucker. You're supposed to clean my whole house while I'm sleeping. That's what they do in the books."

His eyebrow arches in a way that makes my knees weak. "Thanks for reminding me that I'll be watching you clean your house later. On your knees with a toothbrush if I don't like how you're doing it."

I snort, which hurts when I'm trying so hard not to bawl with happiness.

“You’re hilarious.”

“And you think I’m kidding.”

I have to look away to hide the heat in my face. “It smells good in here.”

“I got takeout. Hope you like ramen.”

“Fuck yes.” I’m suddenly ravenous. Forgetting I’m still naked, I climb over the back of the couch and curl up against him, grabbing a Styrofoam container and a pair of chopsticks from the table. That’s when I notice Tate’s ramen has a plastic spoon. I clack my chopsticks at him. “Can you not use these, know-it-all?”

He grabs mine with a grumpy sound and tries to maneuver them in his big hand. My chest breaks open into a full on, rib-aching laugh at the way he’s flopping them around and dropping everything he tries to pick up, splashing broth onto his arm. “We’ll work on that.”

At those words he glances over at me with a question in his eyes, like he’s wondering if he understood me right. Daring to hope. I just lean over and press my nose into his jaw. “And if I don’t like how you’re doing it, you’ll have to get on the floor like a dog and use them to count pieces of floor lint.”

He lowers the chopsticks, staring at me. “*What?*”

“That’s how you sound, you know.”

After a moment of silence, he dissolves into coughing giggles, holding his soup away from his body so he doesn’t spill. “Do you ever, like, pick words and put them in a meaningful order before you blurt them out? You’re gonna make a dog use chopsticks?”

“He’d be better at them than you are.”

“Excuse you.” He puts down his ramen, then steals mine away before pulling me over to straddle his lap, palming my bare ass. “I’m still hung up on what exactly floor lint is and why you have so much of it.”

I make sure he can’t kiss me by kissing him first, wrapping my hands around his head and trying every kind of kiss I’ve ever daydreamed about, seeing which ones work best in real life while he just strokes me all over like I’m everything good.

I still don’t know what’s going to happen next. We’re a mystery to each other in every way—routines, life stories, what flavor of coffee creamer he likes best. If it’s not vanilla cupcake, we’re over. But I know him in the way I know my secrets and scars, the dark corners and long, silent days. When I close my eyes, I can’t imagine anything else but this, not even deep down

where I kept the dreams I haven't gotten to explore yet.
And when I open my eyes, he's still there.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Riley Nash, based in the rainy PNW, writes emotional M/M romance about boys who face the darkness and never give up on each other. Fueled by cute dogs, those weird Coke with Coffee drinks, and projecting his personal issues onto handsome men who find happiness.

You can read more about Victor and Alek in my *Water, Air, Earth, Fire* series, available in ebook and audio!

My upcoming book, *Bad Dogs*, is available for preorder. Releasing March 8, this is the first in a series about a group of outcasts looking for love, family, and a place to belong through kink.

Visit <https://linktr.ee/RileyNashBooks>
to find my books, follow my social media, and sign up for my newsletter!

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HATEFUL LOVE

T. ASHLEIGH

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is written with some 'slang' and broken dialect to authenticate and give a well-rounded representation of the characters. It has some dark themes/references and is recommended for readers aged eighteen and older.

Thank you so much for grabbing the Anti-Valentine Anthology! I hope you enjoy Hateful Love.

Trigger Warning:

This book contains the following themes:

- Underage drinking
- Underage drug mentions
- Gang affiliations
- Bullying
- Distribution of drugs

Spotify:

[Spotify – Hateful Love](#)

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SILAS

A nother fuckin' day in hell.

I drive my old clunker into the school parking lot, circling round and finding a spot near the back to park my car. The first bell has already rung and I have about three minutes before the next one sounds. I turn off the ignition and step out of the car, not bothering to lock it before shoving my key in my worn, washed-out black jeans. It's not like anybody's gonna mess with my shit. They know better.

I snag the cig I had resting behind my ear and pull out my lucky Zippo, lighting up before leaning back against my car as I wait for the next bell to ring. Yeah, I should probably be in a bigger hurry, but what the fuck are these people gonna do? Fail me? *Nah*. They're ready for me to be out of here, just as much as I'm ready to be gone. Not like I'll ever really be able to leave this shit town; I've got too many people relying on me now.

Crossing my ankles, the old scuffed up Doc Martin's squeak as they rub together. They're my older brother, Ryker's, but he has no use for them now that he's locked up. He's done one too many petty crimes and is going to be put away for a long while this time. Broke my mama's heart, but my old man's happy to see a familiar face at Lancaster Penitentiary.

Shaking my head, I try not to think about Liza or June Bug, his wife and daughter, who are now sharing a bed in my old room back at the trailer park. When Ryker got arrested and convicted, it forced Liza to move out of their apartment and into the rundown two bedroom trailer with Mama and me. She works full time as a waitress at Kelly's Diner, but was struggling without Ryker's wages from Whaley's Mechanics, aka—The Shop—so Mama

offered to help her out for a while. I didn't mind giving up my room. Hell, the busted-up couch is more comfortable than that old spring mattress, anyway. I just wish things were different.

I open and close the lid on my lighter, letting the repetitive clicking sound soothe me as I suck on the cig. Ryker was the smart one. He could have been so much more had he been born to a different family, one on the other side of the tracks. He got all the brains, yet circumstances, being a product of our environment and his overall lack of impulse control, landed him where he is today.

The sky is overcast, and I wonder briefly if it's going to rain today. My leather jacket sticks to me from the muggy September heat, but I won't take it off. No. Not with the King of Aces skull patch proudly displayed on the back for all to see. It may be my pop's jacket, but it's my future.

The bell chimes in the background and I sigh, tossing my butt to the ground and stomping it out with my boot. I reach up, dragging a hand through my messy black locks, trying to bring order to the ever-growing chaos. My mama says I have the prettiest hair she's ever seen. Too bad it's always slightly sweat-slicked, or grimy with grease from The Shop, making me look even more like my old man. I also have his brown eyes, and full lips that rarely smile.

Shoving my lighter back in my pocket, I begin my trek across the parking lot. I don't even know why I bother with school. I always tell Mama I could bring in more money if I spent more time at The Shop, working, instead of these eight hours wasted at school. But she won't hear it. She insists I need to get a proper education, even though I already know what my future looks like.

Last year I skipped school to pick up some hours at The Shop for bills, and when my mama found out she drove straight to The Shop and dragged me out of there by my ear. Yeah, she's all of five and a half feet tall and that's counting her five-inch biker boots, but she's fierce. I have no doubt, if given the opportunity, she could still tan my hide. Mama hopes I'll get out of here one day and make something of myself, but how could I leave her? Especially now.

I'm close to the front when a pickup truck comes flying by, almost running me over. I stop dead and turn to the offender, clenching my teeth when I realize it's Blaine Yates. The entitled prick doesn't even snag a regular parking spot near the back either, just claims a lined-out spot near the

front. He hops out, flinging his black Under Armour backpack over his shoulder and makes his way to the school. He walks past, not even bothering to acknowledge me. Too busy texting away on his cell phone.

I fuckin' hate him.

Everything about him pisses me off, from his golden blond hair and blue-gray eyes all the way down to how he carries himself. Hate his cocky-as-fuck smiles and golden boy persona. Fake personified. He's a clone, carbon-copy wannabe like every other jock out there, from his Nike T's to his matching Nike Max's. Let's not forget about the varsity letterman jacket with the sleeve of sewn-on patches, showing off all his achievements. I can't help but roll my eyes.

"Hey, douchebag. Why don't you watch where the fuck you're goin'?" You 'bout ran me over when you drove in," I call out and I revel in the way his back stiffens at my words, though he doesn't slow his pace.

He just throws me an unamused look over his shoulder and says, "My bad, thought you were a grease stain on the concrete. You just blend in so well with the trash." He turns away as if he didn't even speak to begin with.

I squeeze my fists together tightly. The urge to run up behind him and knock his ass out is strong, but I don't. I've already got enough marks on my record as it is. If I get kicked out, my mama would have my ass. So despite the fact that I really want to knock his perfect fucking front teeth out of his skull, I refrain. Just march my happy ass up the stone steps and open the door to Brookshire High.

The halls are dead, since class has already started, and I walk up the single flight of stairs and head down the hall to my science class at the back of the school. I pull open the door, the old rusted metal creaking loudly, drawing the attention of the entire class and Mrs. Rocker. Her face is morphed in frustration and I can tell she wants to say something, but she won't. She just waves me toward my seat in the back.

Mrs. Rocker is one of the teachers who acts all God-like, but has a secret fetish for fucking King of Ace members in the back of seedy clubs on the wrong side of town. Oh, let's not forget, her husband has no idea. I haven't shared this information with anyone, and I won't; it's not my place to judge her or spread her dirty laundry. But I'm not gonna lie, I enjoy the way her fear lets me get away with anything. I smirk, giving her a two-finger salute, and head to my desk.

Bunky and Raid are already seated and I fist bump them when I pass by,

settling in my seat at the long black lab table. My lab partner, Dave, is a really smart kid from the grade below. He does most of the work, but I try. He's actually taught me some shit, believe it or not.

Class is short, considering I was fifteen minutes late, and it's not long before the bell rings again and we're up and out of our seats. Bunky and Raid live in the trailer park with me. Their pops are also in the Aces, so we've all been close since we were kids. We head out of the class and walk leisurely down the hall. We don't have second period together, but we all have math, which makes it easy enough considering all math classrooms are in the same area.

"I'm so damn tired. Didn't sleep for shit last night," Bunky says on a yawn, dragging a hand down his face as if to wake himself up.

It's only then I really notice the dark circles under his eyes. "Were you tryin' to get that old Harley up and runnin'?" Ever since he found that thing a few weeks back, he's done nothing but work on it.

He shakes his head, stifling another yawn, before leaning in and dropping his voice slightly so only we can hear. "Pop was out on a run again last night. Needed an extra set of hands."

I nod, understanding what he means. I haven't had to do runs, considering Pop and Ryker were always there to do it. "How late were you out til'?"

"Four. I barely got two hours before the alarm went off." He yawns again despite his efforts to hold it back.

"Damn, I'm surprised you even came to school," Raid adds, just as we reach the start of the math hall.

"On truancy... I gotta drop out, or bring my ass to school. The last thing the gang needs is the truancy officer sniffin' around." Bunky has a point. Everyone already knows about the Aces but that doesn't mean we want to bring unwanted attention to our home.

"True true." Raid gives a head nod, signaling toward his class's open door. "I'll catch up with you both at lunch." We nod our goodbyes and continue down the hall until I dip into my classroom, leaving Bunky to go down to his.

My seat is tucked in the back near the window, and I head back toward it. I don't get far, having to stop at the gaggle of cheerleaders blocking the aisle. Brainless pom-pom squad. "Scuse me," I say, causing all four girls to look at me. They don't move, though. Just go back to talking like I didn't speak. I try to reign in my growing aggravation and trek forward, squeezing by them. I

hear multiple gasps of protest when I knock into them as I go by. “Well, if you'da moved, then I wouldn't be hittin' ya, now would I?” I say, glancing over my shoulder to see Pom-pom One scowl.

“Prick,” she spits out, and I toss her a wink, continuing on to my desk.

“Don't even worry about him, Maybelline. Trash like him isn't worth it.” This comes from Pom-pom Two.

Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before. Trailer trash, gutter rat, dirtbag, dumpster rag, just to name a few, but it's never bothered me. At least I know where I came from and don't try to be something I'm not, unlike half the upper class in this town.

I settle down in my seat, catching the queen bee's scowl before she plops down roughly in her own seat. It does nothing but make me laugh at her attempt to intimidate me. I've seen a lot of shit in my life, pom-pom, and you don't hold a candle to it. Hell, some of the shit I've seen is what her nightmares are made of.

The teacher begins, and it's not long before I'm doodling away on the corner of my desk with a pencil I borrowed from the guy in front of me, completely lost in thought and counting down the minutes until the school day is over.

BLAINE

“Good run out there, Blaine.” The words accompany a hand tap to my back.

“Nice job. We’re going to go all the way this year if you keep throwing like that.” A few people smack against my shoulder pads.

“Did you see his form? Kid’s going places.” Whispered words wrapping around me, smothering me like a coiling snake.

“I know his father must be proud.” My coach's voice meets my ears as I pass and I try like hell to catch my breath. Unsure if it’s the adrenaline, panic, or constant eyes on me that has me feeling so fucking exposed.

My pulse pounds in my head and my body feels heavy with every step I take to the refreshment table. A few more teammates give me pats and compliments when I pass by them, but it makes me cringe internally. I don’t say anything, but it’s not because I don’t want to. It’s because I don’t know what to say. A lot of times people mistake my quietness for dickishness, when actually I’m just awkward and uncomfortable with all the praise.

My hand shakes slightly when I hold the paper cup under the orange cooler nozzle, watching the yellow Gatorade pour with fascination. Needing to focus on something other than scrutiny from the people all around me.

I’m drowning.

I’m suffocating.

I’m dying a little more inside every damn day.

I toss back the cup of liquid, closing my eyes when the flavor coats my taste buds. It’s been years; and yet, I still hate the feeling of being under a microscope. It’s like having a hundred little spiders crawling all over my

skin. Making my hackles rise and my throat tighten.

Being Brookshire High's starting quarterback brings me enough attention as it is, then add in that I'm Mayor Yates' son. Boom—alert the media. I can't so much as sneeze without someone knowing about it. Yeah, okay, so maybe that's a bit overdramatic, but damn, it sure feels that way sometimes.

"You good?" Landon, my best friend and teammate, asks when he sidles up next to me.

I give a one-shouldered shrug, no point in lying. Landon is the only person who truly knows the real me buried beneath the facade. The only one who knows how much I hate this shit. Hate being the center of attention. Hate how everyone gravitates toward me, not because they like me, but because they think in doing so they'll get popular by association. I push the thought away, turning to look at Landon better. "As good as can be expected."

His face holds sympathy, and he knocks his shoulder with mine, offering me what little comfort he can. "Won't be long. Only a few more months."

Yeah, and I'm more than ready. Nine months until graduation and I can get the hell out of here. My father has no idea, but I'm not going to LSU to play college ball. If all the cards play right, I should get my acceptance letter to USC and the full ride academic scholarship to go with it. That's another stigma that I hate. Athletes can't be smart. Well, I fucking am. Top of my class, but that goes completely unnoticed because I play ball and I *hate* it.

"Months that'll move so slow I can practically see the seconds ticking by," I mutter, wracking a hand through my sweat-slicked hair.

"You'd be surprised. Who knows? Maybe something interesting will happen this year to take your mind off things." I know he's trying to help, but it doesn't work. Not when freedom is so damn close and yet so far away.

"Are you predicting the future? Did you see that in your magic crystal ball?" I fire back, cocking a brow as I look him over.

He snorts, giving me a shove. "Asshole."

I shove him back, which turns into a full on shoving and dodging match. After the fifth hard push that almost has me laid out on the grass, I hold my hands up in surrender. "Fine. Fine. I give. Fucking linebackers," I mutter, rubbing the now sore spot below my ribs.

"You should have known better. I'm a hell of a lot stronger than you."

I grab another cup and fill it with Gatorade. "Yeah. That's true." I turn back to Landon, a wicked smile playing on my lips. "But I run faster." Then I toss the icy contents from the cup at him and sprint across the grass to the

locker room. As I run, I can hear his loud curse before the sound of his pounding feet starts behind me.

I click the button to open my garage and fight to suppress a yawn, pulling my truck into the driveway. I don't see either of my parents' cars in the garage and sigh in relief. That's the only good thing about my dad being who he is—he's almost never home.

I slip my keys from the ignition, grab my stuff, and head inside, stopping in the kitchen to grab a slice of leftover pizza straight from the box, stuffing half into my mouth immediately. *So damn good.* I don't care what anyone says, cold pizza is the best. Taking another piece and a Coke from the fridge, I head up to my room to get started on my homework. Luckily I don't have much, so it doesn't take me long to knock it out.

My phone vibrates on the desk just as I'm finishing up.

LANDON:

Wanna go to Kelly's Diner with me for a burger?

I glance to check the time, noting it's just past seven, and groan. We didn't get done with practice til almost five and I'm wiped from the day.

LANDON:

Come on. Don't be a grandpa. I know you're looking at the clock trying to come up with a way to let me down easy. It ain't happening, bro.

Snorting, I jab a reply.

ME:

Who's all going?

LANDON:

Just a few guys from the team.

The assholes from the team, he means. I really hope that jackass Kent isn't there.

I sag, letting my head fall forward on my shoulders as I stare down at my phone screen for a solid minute before finally typing a response.

ME:

Fine. But you're buying. And I want a milkshake too.

LANDON:

Wow, this is what I get for being your friend?

ME:

Best Friend. And yep. Not my fault you didn't read the friendship clause.

LANDON:

What is this clause you speak of? I demand a refund.

ME:

Sorry, no refunds will be accepted at this time. It's in the fine print.

LANDON:

I'm starting to think I got a really shit deal.

ME:

Bet you wished you'd never approached me the first day of middle school now, huh?

LANDON:

Wouldn't be the first time.

I laugh, shaking my head in amusement.

ME:

Prick.

LANDON:

Love you, too. Meet you there in twenty.

ME:

Yeah yeah.

I stand, stuffing my phone in my pocket and stretch my arms over my head, unable to stop the yawn from tearing past my lips. Maybe I should stop for a Red Bull on the way.

I grab my keys and pull on a ball cap before heading out the door and down to my car, making a quick stop at the gas station before heading to Kelly's. It's a little hole in the wall diner on the edge of town, but they have the best milkshakes around. Landon and I go there at least once a week, sometimes more during the summer.

I pull into a spot, down my Red Bull, then hop out of my truck, spotting Landon and a group of players through the window. I head inside, unsurprised when my name rings out like catcalls from the guys and I fist bump each of them when I pass.

“Thanks for finally joining us. Thought you’d backed out.”

I wave Landon off, looking at the menu board for the daily specials. “I told you I was coming. Whatcha getting?” I scan the menu; nothing really catching my attention. I’m not too hungry since I ate that pizza earlier.

“Fish filet sandwich and some fries. You?”

“I’m not really hungry. Probably just going to get some onion rings and a shake.”

“You eat already?”

“Leftover pizza.”

He nods, just as Liza comes over to take our order. We all know Liza from school. She was two grades above us, but dropped out when she got pregnant during my freshman year. She became really popular after that and not the good kind either.

“Hey, sexy.” Kent leers at her, and settles down in his seat. Damn, I hoped he wouldn’t be here.

I can’t stand him. He’s an egotistical, self-centered jackass. He barely gets time on the field because he plays like shit, but swears he’s God’s gift to the game. I give Liza points though. She doesn’t stoop to his level. Just pulls out a pad and pen, completely ignoring his comment and carries on. “What can I get you?”

“Your number, for starters,” he says.

Yeah, not happening.

Even if he wasn’t such a tool, Liza is married to Ryker Richards. I don’t know much about that Richards brother, other than the rumors; and from what I’ve heard, he’s a crazy fucker. He may be in jail now, but that won’t stop him from coming after Kent once he’s out.

“Not on the menu,” she mutters, turning away from him and looking at me.

I open my mouth to speak but am cut off by Kent once more. “Well, then tell me. What’s on the menu?” He reaches out as if to touch her, but she slides to the side, avoiding his advance.

My jaw clenches, and my fists tighten under the table. Enough of this shit. “Kent, enough. Order so we can get on with it. Liza’s working.”

She gives me a thankful look while Kent mutters something under his breath before ordering. The rest of the guys follow suit. Once Liza's gone, everyone starts chatting again and I turn to Landon. "I really can't stand that guy."

"I know. Me either. He'll get what's coming to him." He looks at Kent again, a look of disgust on his face, before he shakes his head and looks back at me. "You ready for the game on Friday?"

I shrug, leaning back heavily in my seat as I stare at him. "Yeah, it'll be the same as every year."

"It's our senior year." He leans in slightly, dropping his voice so only I can hear. "The last bit of football you'll ever play. That's got to hit different. I know it does for me."

"For normal people, I bet it does. But I just don't care." And I mean that. I couldn't give a fuck less about football. The only reason I've ever done it was because of my dad.

"Here you go," Liza says, handing me my chocolate malt.

"Thanks." I take the glass while grabbing a spoon, scoop some up and stuff it in my mouth. These shakes are the best in the summertime. I love how they take forever to melt, keeping you cool for a while.

I'm about to take another mouthful when the sound of glass shattering snaps my attention up, just in time to see Kent's hand move from Liza's ass to catching her flying hand. "Now, now. No need to get violent, beautiful. I was just testing the merchandise," he spits out, a nasty smile lingering on his lips.

I stand up, bracing my hands on the table, about to intervene, when a deep voice meets my ears.

"I'd let her go if I was you."

My gaze snaps to where Silas Richards is standing, flanked by his thug friends and my irritation rises from his mere presence. I don't know *why*, but this guy gets under my skin more than anyone else ever has. Well, except maybe Kent.

"Did you not hear me, dickhead? I said. Let. Her. The. Fuck. Go!"

Kent drops her arm, raising his hands in surrender. "We were just talking. Nothing to get worked up over," he says, turning to look at us over his shoulder. "Right, guys?"

The fuck now? I think not.

Before I can protest, Silas follows his gaze, taking in the table of guys

before landing on me. His brow furrows, and lip juts out in a snarl. “I shouldn’t be surprised you’d be behind this shit.”

My shoulders tense as my teeth clench and I already know a brawl is coming.

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SILAS

“The engine is shot. Not gonna be worth fixin’. It’d be cheaper to buy a new one,” I tell the guy who’s currently leaning against the counter of The Shop, sliding the invoice over for him to sign.

He looks down at it with distaste before pushing it back toward me with a finger. “Where’s Whaley? No offense kid, but I’d rather have the opinion of someone less wet behind the ears.”

He gives me a cocky smirk, and I suppress the urge to tell him to fuck off. I’ve been running around Whaley’s shop since I was little and I’d bet my left nut I knew way more about cars than this designer suit wearing, perfectly styled, soft-handed man.

“This invoice came from Whaley himself. He had to step out for a bit, and asked me to go over the costs with you and see what route you wanted to take.” I push the invoice to him once more, unsurprised when the smirk falls from his lips.

He plucks his glasses from his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as if this is the most inconvenient thing he’s ever run into. “How much later before he’s back?”

I shrug, folding my arms over my chest. “Dunno. He’s handling some... business.” I emphasize the word, hoping he’ll get a clue, thankful when I see his spine snap straight. Clearly Whaley’s reputation precedes him.

“Right,” he mutters, singing a whole different tune now. Pulling out his platinum card and scribbling a signature down on the invoice quickly. “How long before it’s ready?”

I enter his information in the system before handing the card back over to

him. "I'm gonna go ahead and order the parts Whaley has listed. It'll take about a week to get 'em in. Once they're here, he'll start workin' on it immediately. So, I'd guess about two weeks."

"Can you get the parts quicker?"

"I can, but it'll cost ya."

He waves me off, the gold of his watch glinting in the light. "That's fine. The cost doesn't matter."

Must be nice. "I'll make a note for Whaley, then."

He raps his knuckles on the counter, fixing his glasses and heading to the door. "Thanks kid," he calls back, the bell chiming overhead when he exits. I follow behind him, flip the "open" sign to "closed" and lock the door.

"Not a fucking kid," I growl out on my way back to the computer. Taking the invoice, I look it over and put a rush order on the parts needed before filing it away.

I work at the shop practically every day. Cleaning, making phone calls, basic oil changes, ordering, and any other random things Whaley may need me to do. Despite how terrified most people are of him, his is the only mechanic shop in three counties so he gets a lot of business. I make a few phone calls, letting customers know their cars are ready to be picked up tomorrow before heading to the back to clean up. There's not much of a mess, considering the other guys mostly cleaned up their stations already. Leaving me to sweep and take out the trash.

Once done, I pull out a cig and head to where Raid and Bunky are trying and failing to work on the Harley they found at the junkyard.

"No luck, huh?" I ask, flipping an old five-gallon bucket upside down just outside the garage door and plopping down on it.

Bunky scoffs, wiping his forearm across his face, pushing his fallen hair away. "Fuck no. Whaley keeps givin' me pointers, but he's mostly lettin' me do it on my own."

"Hey, I'm tryin' to help," Raid adds, stealing my cig for a drag before handing it back to me.

Bunky eyes him, unamused. "If you say so."

"Fucker," he mutters, turning to look at me. "I'm starvin'. Wanna go get something to eat? I'll buy."

I stand, tossing my butt to the ground, stomping it out. "Yeah, I'm game. Whaley told me I was good to go after I closed up."

Bunky stands, grabbing a towel and wiping off his oil-slicked hands.

“When’s he gonna be back?”

“Dunno. He didn’t say.”

He nods, throwing the towel down. “So, food?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

Kelly’s is packed when we arrive, unsurprising considering this is the town’s best hangout spot. I personally hate this place, but they have the cheapest food that still tastes good. We head inside, snagging an empty booth in the far corner.

“What are you getting?” Bunky asks, looking at the daily specials board on the wall.

“Probably just a burger and fries.” It’s the cheapest meal combo you can get.

“Yeah, me too,” Raid says, just as Liza, my sister-in-law, reaches us.

“Didn’t think I’d see you tonight,” she says, setting down three waters in front of us.

“Hadn’t planned on it. Was a last-minute thing.” I look her over, taking in her messy bun, sunken cheeks, and tired eyes. “When you gettin’ off?”

“Not ‘til close. Your mama is watching June, so I swapped with another server to make some extra money.”

I nod, biting my lip as I take her in. “You eaten?”

She rolls her eyes, thumping me on the head with her order pad. “Yeah, Dad. I’m good. Now, gimme your order. I gotta get back to work,” she snarks, grabbing the pen from her apron and scribbling our order down once we tell her. “Alright. I’ll get it in. Shouldn’t be too long.”

As we watch her go, a tinge of remorse hits me. *I feel bad for her.*

“She looks tired,” Raid says, pulling my attention back to him. I watch as he peels the paper from his straw before sticking it in his cup. “She seems alright though, despite the circumstances.”

“Yeah,” I say, grabbing my own straw and tearing off the wrapper slowly, trying to keep my hands busy. I don’t like talking about my brother. It makes me sad, but so fucking mad at the same time. I hate him for his carelessness. He should be here taking care of his family, instead he’s rotting away behind bars.

“I think I’m gonna paint the Harley black and silver. May add some fire stickers too once she’s done,” Bunky throws in, and I’m thankful for his ability to read the room.

I nod. “You got a name for her yet?”

“Not yet. Figured I’d know by the time she was done.”

Raid snorts. “Well, you got a while to figure it out, then.”

Bunky’s face goes from irritated to indifferent before he finally just shrugs. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Whaley told me he wasn’t helpin’ much with this one. If that’s the case, it’ll take me years to finish. I thought I was good at rebuilding, hell I’ve been doing this with Whaley for as long as I can remember... but doing it with someone is very different from going solo.”

“He wouldn’t have you doin’ it if he didn’t think you could. Just keep that in mind,” I tell him honestly. Despite Whaley’s rep, he’s not an awful guy... As long as you don’t end up on his bad side.

“Well, I guess time will tell.”

A few minutes later, Liza comes over to drop off our plates. “Need anything else?”

I shake my head. Even if I needed something I wouldn’t ask, I’d feel bad making her run around for me. “Nah, we’re good.”

“Cool. I’ll check back in a bit. Enjoy guys.”

I grab the mayo packet, flicking it twice before adding it to my burger. There’s a mustard bottle on the table and I pour a generous amount on my plate, dipping a fry in the heap before shoving it in my mouth.

“That’s gross,” Bunky says around a mouthful of burger.

“I could say the same thing about that,” I retort, pointing to his plate. “Ketchup is disgusting.” I don’t like tomatoes in any form. I don’t give a fuck how healthy they are. They are nasty and mushy. Who the hell wants to eat a mushy vegetable?

“Said no one ever,” he tosses back, lathering a fry in ketchup and shoving it in his mouth to prove a point.

“That’s a load of—”

The sound of glass shattering has us all jerking in the direction of the disruption. I see Liza, looking flustered as she tries to pull away from Kent, a football player that goes to our school. How the hell had I not noticed them all arrive?

I’m up and out of my seat and across the diner before I’ve even had a

chance to think it over.

“I’d let her go if I was you,” I snarl once I reach them.

Kent’s lip lifts on one side as he looks at me, like he thinks this is some kind of joke.

“Did you not hear me, dickhead? I said. Let. Her. The. Fuck. Go!” I punch out each word slowly, wanting him to see how serious I am. I will knock his lights out right here and not give a single fuck who sees.

Kent drops her arm, raising his hands in surrender. “We were just talking. Nothing to get worked up over,” he says, gesturing over his shoulder to the table filled with guys from our school. “Right, guys?”

My gaze scans the players, and my aggravation rises with every pair of eyes I meet, until I land on none other than Blaine Yates. My fists clench at my sides and I can feel my fingernails biting into my skin. Of course this prick is behind it all. This asshole thinks he can do anything he wants to anyone he wants, with no consequences.

“I shouldn’t be surprised you’d be behind this shit,” I spit out, taking a small step in his direction.

“I didn’t do anything,” he fires back, standing to his full height and crossing his arms over his chest as he looks at me. Face settling to cool indifference. Honestly, I think that pisses me off the most. The fact that he never fucking breaks. I want him to fight back. Want him to get mad. Want to see the perfect guy he claims to be unleashed and lose control...

But he doesn’t. He never fucking does.

“Not what your friend here was saying. You get off on messin’ with girls while they’re tryin’ to work, huh?”

“You’re talking out of your ass. That’s not what happened.” There’s a slight edge to his voice now, but his demeanor doesn’t change and that only fuels me.

I take another step, prepared to jump across the table and snatch his ass up if I need to. “I think you need to be taught a lesson on manners. Clearly your mama didn’t teach you any,” I spit out, taking another step—legs hitting the table, stopping my forward movement.

“That’s not what happened.” His face pinches slightly as he thinks over his next move. “You got a lot of nerve talking about my mom. Maybe I should get started on yours?”

Okay. I had it coming. I know I did. But it doesn’t matter. The red-hot fury lights up every nerve in my body, and I need to expel it. I growl, lunging

forward to grab him, but am stopped by Bunky and Raid as they grab me and pull me back. I'm spitting fire and ready to attack, so keyed up it takes me a moment to realize Liza is standing in front of me, finger jabbing into my chest as she talks.

"He didn't do anything. Calm down, Silas. You can't do this here. Gonna get yourself in trouble." She tries to say it quietly, but her voice carries around the now deathly silent diner. It's then I look up and realize we've attracted the attention of everyone in the place. Even all the employees have stopped working, not wanting to miss out on the drama unfolding.

"That's right, Silas. Wouldn't want me to call my dad, the sheriff, would you?" This comes from Kent.

"Go ahead and call him. I'll press charges on you for touching my ass," Liza says, and I see red.

I look at Liza, fury taking over again. "The fuck did you say?" I look at Kent. "You touched her?" I don't even think, just fly forward before anyone has a chance to grab me and connect my fist with his nose. The sound of bone crunching rings out loud around us and the adrenaline coursing through me causes my blood to sing.

YES!

I only get the one hit in before I'm being dragged off him, but the damage is already done. Kent is bleeding profusely, shirt collar covered in crimson. Raid and Bunky are dragging me toward the exit, and I let them. Watching as Blaine grabs a stack of napkins and presses them to Kent's nose. He looks at me, face pinched, but I just flip him off.

"Keep your fucking hands to yourself next time, asshole," I yell, just before the diner's door closes. I tear my arms away from Bunky and Raid once I'm outside and pace the length of the building before walking to my car. I reach into the glove box, grabbing an unopened pack of cigs and slapping it against my palm to pack them. My knuckles burn from the movement, but I don't care. I can hardly think straight right now.

Liza ain't my girl, but she's my brother's. Which automatically means I have to look out for her while he's locked up. I'll be damned if anyone fucks with her on my watch.

I remove the plastic and foil from the cigarette pack, pulling out a cig and lighting up, eyes falling shut when the smoke fills my lungs. Yeah, this is fucking heaven. I open my eyes, then hold the pack out to Bunky and Raid, who both take one, too. I'm thankful that neither of them speak, just settle on

either side of me.

We stay like that, leaning against the car as I wait for Liza to come out and tell me the sheriff's on his way. That's the only reason I didn't leave. I have no doubt the little pussy called his daddy to come handle me.

A few minutes later Liza comes walking out, a bag dangling between her fingers. I eye it, taking another pull from my cig. "Sorry," I mutter, flicking the ash away and waiting for a scolding.

"You shouldn't have done that."

I shrug. "He shouldn't have put his hands where they don't belong."

She releases a long sigh, shaking her head. "No, he shouldn't have, but I was handling it." She holds the bag out for me to take and I do, eyeing her curiously. "I bagged up your food. Take it and get out of here. Blaine's gonna take Kent to the hospital, and I threatened the fuck outta Kent, so he ain't gonna tell his dad. But you need to be careful. You can't just go around hitting people. It'll get you in a heap of trouble. I know it ain't a big deal to you, but think about your mama, alright?"

Fuck, I hate that she's right. I toss my butt to the ground, mashing it out with my boot before nodding. "Thanks for this." I motion toward the bag, then pull out my wallet and hand her two twenties. It's more money than our bill would've been, but I feel bad for causing a scene at her job.

She takes it, giving me a small smile. "It's fine. Now go."

She turns to head back to the door, but stops to look at me once more. "Hey, Silas?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks." Then she goes back inside. I get in my car, Bunky and Raid following suit just in time to see Blaine walking out with a torn up looking Kent. By the way Kent is leaning into Blaine, you'd think I broke his leg instead of his nose.

I see the little bitch is going to milk it for all it's worth. I watch as Blaine walks him to his truck and gets him inside before he goes to his driver's side door. He looks up when he rounds his truck and hesitates for a second as our eyes meet. His jaw is clenched, and he looks about five seconds away from coming undone before he blinks and the expression is gone. *Damn it!* I want to see him lose his shit, for once.

He grabs the door handle, gets inside, before reversing out of his spot and driving away.

"You good?" Bunky asks from beside me.

It's only then I realize I was lost in thought and I clear my throat, giving my head a small shake. "Yeah. I'm good. Let's get out of here."

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BLAINE

I dropped Kent off at his house after spending three hours with him in the emergency room. It's really late now, and I'm irritated I'm not already in bed. Stupid Kent. I swear to God. I should have just let someone else take him to the hospital, but I didn't want him to lie about what happened. Knowing him and the bullshit always falling from his mouth, I have no doubt he'd have tried to lie.

If the fucker hadn't been so high on the pain meds they gave him, I'd have ripped into his ass more than I did on the way to the hospital. Dumbass is lucky his nose isn't broken; I thought for sure it would be from the way Silas clocked him. Coach would have had a field day with that. Especially with the season only just starting.

Silas.

I grip the steering wheel, teeth clenching at the thought of him. He's such a fucking jackass. I mean, really. I had nothing to do with what happened tonight; yet he immediately jumped down my throat, throwing around all these accusations.

It's like that with everything, too. All I have to do is walk by him and he has a problem. Has since the moment we met freshman year when I accidentally tripped him up in the cafeteria. *And it really was an accident.* I still remember the way he looked up at me. How his big brown eyes held mine. Like a vortex sucking me in and never wanting to let me go. It was like all the air was sucked out of the room... I'd never experienced anything like that before. I was so lost in a trance that it took me a moment to come back to reality.

After the haze cleared, I was immediately on him, reaching out to help him up. He wasn't having that, though. Just shoved me away and stood, getting in my face and threatening to 'fuck me up' if I so much as touched him again. I was so shocked by his outburst that I couldn't even speak. Just sat there slack-jawed, unsure of how to proceed.

I finally just told him it was an accident, but he wasn't hearing me. Of course, it didn't help that my friends were there laughing at the situation. Like it had all been some kind of joke. I tried to get them to shut up, but they weren't listening. He ended up shoving me and storming away... I should have taken the hint then. But I didn't. I felt so bad about what happened and wanted to fix it. So much so that a few days later when I spotted Silas in the hall I approached him, wanting to apologize for real. Thinking maybe after a few days of him cooling off, it'd all be fine. *Nope*. He was livid.

After a few back-and-forth retorts, I realized there was no way of talking to him and decided I'd leave him alone. Except Silas took it to the next level, attempting to bully me every chance he got until I had no choice but to defend myself. I can deal with a lot of stuff, but I'm not gonna let someone treat me like shit for no reason.

And here we are, three years later.

I'm not a confrontational person, never have been. Hell, never really could be because of who my dad is. But for some reason, Silas brings out the worst in me. It's like this raw fury is buried so deep inside, but is ready to unleash the second he's near me. It makes no fucking sense. And the worst part about it is that he knows he's getting to me... No matter how much I try to hide it, he's under my skin and I'm coming close to acting impulsively and beating the hell out of him. God, my dad would just love that. His prize-winning pony acting out; what would the people think?

I pull into my garage and hop out of my truck to head inside the house. My parents are home now, but the lights are all dim; no doubt they're already in bed. Yawning, I take the stairs two at a time to get to my room.

I place my phone on the nightstand, pull off my shirt and shorts, then fall face first on my bed in nothing but my boxers. Even though I should take a shower, I don't have the energy after the day I've had. I'll do it in the morning. So instead, I lean up to grab my phone and set my alarm for six before connecting the charger and putting it back down.

I yawn again, wiggling around, managing to get the blanket up and over me. My mind circles around to Silas once more. Fuck, why? Go away! I

swear he's inescapable.

I shake my head, nuzzling into my pillow before passing out cold.

My alarm goes off way too soon and I wish like hell I could take a sick day. I'd stay in bed and sleep all day if I could. I get up and head to the shower, knowing that's the only way I'll be able to wake up properly.

Once done, I dress and grab my stuff, heading downstairs to get some breakfast. My parents are already there, sitting at the table. My dad, glasses on, holding up the daily paper as he sips his coffee. Next to him, my mom is scrolling through her phone, no doubt catching up on local gossip, while pretending to eat the bagel she has sitting in front of her.

"Morning," I call out, going to the fridge and grabbing a Vitamin Water.

"Morning, honey," Mom says, not even glancing up.

"How's practice going?" This comes from my dad, as he folds his newspaper, setting it to the side so he can look at me.

"It's good." I take a big swig of my drink, recapping it and grabbing a banana from the bowl on the counter.

I can feel the weight of his stare as I busy myself with the peel. Taking a big bite, I wait for his firing questions. Most mornings are like this. Always the same probing questions. "Are you ready for Friday?" I chew and swallow, giving him a nod.

"Yeah. It'll be good."

He eyes me like he doesn't quite believe me. "You only have two more days before you play Linton High. They have a good team this year, from what I've heard."

Linton High has been our rival since the beginning of time. There's always so much back and forth and build up for this game. It makes me edgy. Especially because if we lose, I know it'll be all my fault. Well, maybe not to everyone else, but definitely to my dad. He'll be lecturing me for days about all the things I should have done differently. On all the things *he* would have done differently.

I plaster on a smile, going for confidence. "We got this. It's all going to be good." Luckily, my phone chooses that moment to go off and I make a show of getting it out and checking it. "Sorry, Dad. We'll talk about this

later. I gotta run or I'll be late." I eat the rest of my banana, throwing out the peel.

He nods, grabbing his paper once more. "Alright."

"Bye, honey," my mom calls, again not even looking at me and it takes everything in me to not roll my eyes.

I swear they're on total ends of the spectrum where I'm concerned. My dad cares too much about the wrong things, and my mom cares too little about everything. I really wish I could relate to my parents more, that we had some common ground. Instead, I just feel like an intruder in my own family.

And the thing is, I can't find it in me to really care. How fucked up does that make me? Most people strive for acceptance from their families and yet here I am, ready to get the hell out of dodge and never look back. If it wasn't for the inevitable fight I knew was coming, I would have told my dad to fuck off long ago. I just don't have it in me.

Call it defeated. Call it fear. Either way, I'm not willing to deal with any more bullshit than I already have to.

The ride to school is uneventful and I take a few moments to listen to the radio before finally getting out of my car and heading inside. The halls are crowded and I nod my head to several people, smacking a few palms, and knocking knuckles with teammates when I pass. I'm thankful that Maybelline isn't at her locker. Which, of course, would be next to mine. The universe is out to get me, I swear.

I swirl the lock, entering the combination and tugging open my locker, swapping out a few books when a voice meets my ears.

"What time did you end up getting home last night?"

I slam my locker door, turning to look at Landon, where he leans against the row of metal. "After eleven. The ER was packed." I can hear the aggravation in my voice.

"That's shit. I'm surprised you even stayed. I'd have just dropped his ass off."

"The only reason I didn't leave was because I didn't want Kent to lie about what happened. I can't stand Silas, but Kent had that punch coming."

He nods in agreement. "Well, how did he explain the nose, then?"

I laugh, folding my arms over my chest as I lean against the cool metal. "He said he walked into a door. How fucking cliché is that? No one believed him, of course. But it's not like he was going to tell the truth and admit he grabbed Liza's ass."

“I swear, that guy is such a piece of work. He’s lucky Ryker wasn’t the one to see it.” And with the mention of Ryker, my thoughts go to Silas and my teeth clench involuntarily.

God, get the fuck out of my head already!

It’s like no matter how hard I try to escape him, the fucker is always there, taunting me. I squeeze my fists, rolling my head on my shoulders while trying to push him out of my thoughts. I refuse to let him get to me. He’s not worth the energy.

The first bell rings and Landon and I begin the walk to class.

“So, bonfire, Friday after the game. The abandoned lot. You in?”

I turn to Landon, nodding my head, although I already dread it. “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Alright. It’ll be a good way to celebrate after we win the game.”

“The fuck?” I mutter, giving him a playful shove. “Now we’re going to lose. You just jinxed it.”

He chuckles, looking at me with amusement. “That’s not how that works.”

“Hello, game superstitions are real. Ask any professional athlete.”

He grabs his book bag straps, a cocky smirk playing on his lips. “I thought you didn’t care about any of that stuff.”

“I don’t. I’m just sayi—” I’m cut off by the feel of a hard shoulder slamming into mine. It’s so hard and unexpected it knocks me off balance and has me stumbling into Landon.

I turn quickly, ready to see the offender, only to catch eyes with a retreating Silas, face looking a bit too smug for my liking. *This son of a bitch.* Our eyes hold for a beat, the fury rolling off of me in waves and something inside me comes close to snapping completely. I make a step toward him, ready to unleash all the pent-up bullshit from the last several years of dealing with him, but am stopped by Landon’s firm hold on my arm.

“Nope. You’re not doing it. You fight now, you can’t play Friday. That’s the last thing any of us needs. And you don’t want your dad and coach on your ass, either.”

Fuck, he’s right. I can’t do this. Especially not here with a hall full of people watching us. I glance around, realizing we have gained quite a bit of attention, and I internally wince at my momentary lack of self-control. Yeah, this could have been bad had Landon not been here.

This isn’t good. Not at all.

I tear my gaze away from Silas', looking back at Landon before hastily continuing down the hall. "One of these days."

"Yes, and I'll help you. But not today. You have too much going on right now to fall into his bag of bullshit."

I can't help it. I laugh. "Bag of bullshit?"

"I thought it was self-explanatory." He huffs out a chuckle. "That guy is a disaster waiting to happen. And not the 'oh, I'm going to get you benched' kind either. He has self-destruction written all over him. Like a catastrophic hurricane preparing to destroy everything in its way."

Wow, that was... deep. And honestly has my mind reeling and my perspective of Silas changing slightly. "You really think he's got that much shit going on?"

Landon taps his temple. "The mind is a very powerful thing. And with the type of life he's grown up in and all the shit he's probably been exposed to?" He shrugs. "I'd be more surprised if he wasn't completely fucked up. You know?"

Uh, that's true. But I honestly don't even wanna think about that. No way in hell is Landon going to make me feel bad for Silas fucking Richards.

"When the hell did you get so insightful?" I say, a hint of sarcasm in my tone.

"Are you making fun of me?" he asks, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"A bit."

"Hey, whatever. Mark my words. I'm telling you. That guy is going to ruin lives. Hopefully we'll be long gone by the time that happens."

I peer over my shoulder once more, stupidly, because of course Silas is no longer visible with the swarm of other students. "Yeah," I mutter, turning back once more. "Long gone."

But for the first time, the thought of being gone doesn't completely sit well with me, and I'm not really sure why.

SILAS

The music thrums through the old car speakers in the lot as all my friends and family dance and party in the field at the back of the trailer park. It's only Wednesday, but that doesn't matter. We don't need an excuse to party. At least that's what my pop always said.

I wish I could be like everyone else and find fun in things like this. But I don't. I've never been able to. This whole thing just isn't my scene. I'm bored. So fucking bored and ready to go back to my trailer and pass out on the couch.

I rest against the rusted-out, run-down car in the lot, flicking my Zippo absentmindedly as I think about the day. *Think about Blaine*. He was so mad when I knocked him in the hall today. Was close to snapping, and I was ready. I love a good fight, get off on it, and something about the idea of fighting with Blaine... I can't describe it. I just want it so badly.

I was practically screaming for him to do something—beckoning him to me with my mind. Had his friend not intervened, I have no doubt he would have finally lost it. All the icy cool indifference he's built up, I'm slowly chiseling away and have almost broken through. And fuck, I already know it's going to be beautiful to see. To watch him let go.

I want to feel the jab of his fist as he splits my lip with a punch. Wanna bleed from his assault, only to turn around and hit him back just as hard. I don't know if I wanna bleed for him as much as I want him to bleed for me, but I do know whatever happens between us is going to be explosive.

“Whatcha thinkin' bout?”

I blink a few times, realizing I was so lost in my head I didn't even hear

my mama join me. I turn, giving her a small smile. “Not much. Just zoned out. You havin’ a good time?”

She smiles back, her slightly alcohol-glazed eyes meeting mine. “Yeah. Nice to have some downtime every now and then.”

She deserves to have a good night since she spends so much of her time trying to take care of everyone on her own. I love my mama. She has her problems, don’t get me wrong, but she never lets her own shit get in the way of taking care of her kids. Sure, we don’t have much, but money and trivial things aren’t all you need in life. She taught me at a young age to be thankful for what you have and to not get upset with the things you don’t. I live by that.

I wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in tight. The scent of her coconut shampoo drifts to my nose and I feel the sense of calm settle over me. She is the only one who’s ever been able to settle me when I’m at my worst. To put out the burning flame that’s about to spread.

“I’m glad you’re havin’ a good time,” I mutter against her hair.

“What about you?”

I shrug, tone neutral. “I’m good.”

She looks up at me, face pinched like she doesn’t believe me. “You know you can talk to me.”

I *do* know that... but there really isn’t anything to say. Nothing that she doesn’t already know, anyway. So I press a kiss to her forehead, giving her a bit of reassurance. “I promise.”

“Good.” She pulls away from me, a shit-eating grin plastered across her lips. She grabs my hand, pulling me with her in the direction of the make-shift dance floor in the middle of the lot, and I immediately know what she’s concocting in her head.

“Oh, Mama. No—”

“Come on, Si. Dance with me. You never dance with me anymore.” She pouts, and just like that, all the fight leaves me. I can’t say no to her. Especially when she looks at me like that. We used to do this all the time when I was little. She’s definitely a free spirit, dances to the beat of her own drum. I can remember many nights that Ryker and I would stay up late having mini dance parties in the living room while we listened to her favorite Lynyrd Skynyrd songs.

I sigh, resigned, and willingly follow her the rest of the way. I don’t know the name of the rock song that’s playing. It’s not something I’ve heard before,

but that doesn't matter. The beat is catchy and I grab her hand, giving her a little spin and pulling her back to me. The sound of her loud laugh meets my ears, and it causes me to smile.

Damn, I can't even remember the last time I smiled. It feels foreign on my lips, but I don't let it drop. I embrace it. Taking these few moments and engraving them into my mind, holding on to this bit of happiness.

Because honestly... who knows when I'll feel like this again.

The sound of my phone blaring pulls me from sleep and I groan, reaching out to snag it off the charger, sliding right, without even bothering to see who it is first. "What?" I bark out, voice husky from sleep.

"Rise and shine," Raid calls through the line.

I rub my eyes, trying to clear the blurry bit of sleep that's settled. "What time is it?"

"Just past six. Now lemme in. I'm outside your place." He hangs up and I groan, getting up from the couch and stumbling my way to the door. I flip the lock, pushing it open and waving him inside. Then I head to the fridge to grab a can of soda, opening it and taking a sip. Our trailer is a little bigger than a camper and Raid sits at the two person table in the corner.

"Want one?" I ask, gesturing to the can in my hand.

"Sure."

I pull another out, passing it to him. Rubbing my bare stomach, I glance down at my boxer clad body, realizing I should probably get dressed. We need to leave for school soon. "Be right back. Ima go change."

He cracks the top, taking a sip before nodding his head. "All good."

I head down the hall to my bedroom. Liza and June are still sleeping, so I quietly head to the closet and snag a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and then socks from the drawer before exiting. I should really move some of my clothes out of here, but lack of space means lack of options on where to store my stuff.

The bathroom is just across the hall and I step inside, flipping the light switch. The room is instantly bathed in the fluorescent glow of light and I blink rapidly, trying to adjust to the brightness. I dress, brush my teeth, and wet my hair, trying to tame the messy locks, before finally just saying fuck it and going back to the kitchen.

Snagging my jacket off the chair, I slide it on, then tug on my boots. I grab my keys, wallet and phone, stuff them in my back pocket before going to the cabinet and pulling out a Pop-Tart for each of us. “Ready?”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.”

Grabbing my drink, I head out of the trailer and down the steps to my car. The sky is an array of pinks and purples, and I inhale deeply, taking in the fresh morning air. I love this time of day, when there’s not many people up yet. It’s about the only time my life ever really feels peaceful. I take a few more seconds to enjoy the quiet before opening my car door and getting inside. I put the drink in the cupholder, dropping my Pop-Tart in the console and tugging a cig from the pack, lighting up. “Bunky already gone?” I ask Raid, pulling out onto the road. Raid usually rides with Bunky because he doesn’t have his own car, but Bunky had shit to do before school today, so I told Raid he could ride with me.

“Yeah, picking up that stuff from Whaley. Got some new merch in.”

That’s the part of the business I don’t know much about. And I’m kinda glad honestly. I know my brother got caught more than once because he was careless most of the time. But I just have no interest in being on that side of the gang. I’d rather just stay at the shop. Not because I’m scared, but because I want to keep my hands clean.

I nod, taking another hit. “Tried it?”

He shakes his head, grabbing my cig and taking a drag himself. “Nah, I don’t get down with the white.”

“Since when?”

“Since that time at Chester Bay when I thought my heart was gonna explode. Remember? It was racin’ like crazy. Then I thought those fuckers from inside were after us.” I glance at him in time to see him shake his head. “Never again.”

I chuckle, memories of that night running through my mind. “I forgot about that. You were so fucked up.”

“Oh yeah, the worst trip I’ve ever had. And so fuckin’ sick, puking, dizzy. Let’s not forget about the three-day long headache after, too.”

My mouth drops in surprise. “Jesus, I didn’t know about all that.”

“Yeah, it was complete shit. I dunno if I got a bad batch or what, but I refuse to go through that again.” Raid takes another pull on the smoke, passing it back to me.

“Don’t blame you.” I don’t fuck with any of that shit, either. The most I

do is toke on a blunt now and then. I don't like my inhibitions down. That leaves you vulnerable and at other people's mercy, and I'm not for that. Hell, I don't even drink. Too much shit can happen if you let go too much. Trust me, I know that from experience. "Not my jam either."

We sit in silence for a few seconds before I press the radio dial and the sounds of "Fleabag" by YUNGBLUD pour through the speakers. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, humming with the chorus as I continue the drive to hell.

School passes in a haze, like most things, and before long, the last bell rings and I'm heading to the back of the school to meet Bunky.

He's in the middle of a sale when I approach and I just lean against the brick building. I wait for him as he swaps product for cash with a couple guys. One of them is eyeing me over Bunky's shoulder and I cock a brow, amused when he shifts uncomfortably, before glancing all around nervously. Clearly, he's never done this before. The guy slaps a wad of cash in Bunky's hand, grabbing the bag quickly and hastily walks away with his buddy in tow.

"I love fresh meat," he says, tucking the money away.

"Overcharge?"

He shakes his head slowly. "Nah, just love the fear they give off. It's intoxicating." That's Bunky though. Ever the adrenaline junky. He likes to push limits and fly by the seat of his pants.

"Because that doesn't sound fuckin' batshit or anything."

"I have been known to be a little wild." His lips bust into a toothy smile and I have to admit the expression alone looks manic as fuck. "Anyway, you can always tell the newbies. They look like skittish little mice."

"That's true. Unaware that they're drawing more attention to themselves by actin' that way."

"Exactly." He snorts, pulling out his phone and tapping away on it before shoving it away. "Raid is going to meet us by the cars. You ready?"

I nod, standing fully. "Yeah, I gotta get to work, anyway."

"I'll be there later."

"Workin' on the bike?"

"Yup. I know it's going to take me forever, but I like workin' on it. It

calms me down, helps keep me grounded, and it gives me somethin' to look forward to. Ya' know?"

I nod, because I do know. It's fucking pathetic, really. Two eighteen-year-olds on the verge of living, yet have no means to get there. Hell, the only thing I really have is the shop. And fucking with Blaine every chance I get... and fuck, even Blaine is only temporary. He'll be gone off to college soon and I'll be here.

"So the nervous one mentioned a party on Friday. Wanna go?" Bunky says, pulling me back to the here and now.

God, not another party. I *never* wanna go to a party. I eye him skeptically, dread filling me. "Party where?"

"The abandoned lot."

I'm already shaking my head no before he even finishes speaking. "No, thanks. That's the rich-prick party place. I'm good."

"Come on. It'll be a good way for me to sell all this product quick. Plus, it could be fun. Girls love a bad boy, deep down. Especially when they've had a few drinks."

He waggles his eyebrows suggestively and I feel the heat of dread starting in my stomach. I don't like parties or crowds. I deal with that shit enough as it is. My free time, the limited amount I have, is my decompressing time.

"As good as that sounds..." I trail off, pulling my keys from my pocket as we hit the student parking lot.

"Don't be a downer. Plus, you need to get laid."

"Fuck, shut up already." I toss him a glare before looking around to make sure no one heard him.

"Who's being a downer?" Raid asks when he sidles up next to us.

"Talk some sense into Silas. Make him see reason."

I shoot another glare at Bunky over my shoulder, picking up my pace to get to my car faster. "Don't waste your breath. My answer won't change. I ain't goin'."

Raid eyes us both with confusion. "Goin' where?"

"A party on Friday at the old abandoned lot." Bunky fills him in. "I also think he needs some pussy. Will make him feel better."

Raid mutters his agreements, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "Oh, come on, it'll be fun. And Bunky's right. How long's it been for you, anyway?"

I think it over, not slowing my pace, and it dawns on me how long it really has been. Six months? And that wasn't even full-on sex. It was just a

blowie in the back of a club by some older woman looking for a guy to take home. I don't tell them any of that, though. Not wanting to give them the satisfaction of knowing they got to me.

Hooking up just isn't really my thing. Sure, I've done it a few times, but I just want something... different. Something real? *Someone* real. God, that sounds so stupid, I almost roll my eyes. "I'm goin'. Whaley's waitin' on me. I'll see you guys later." I turn to give them a two-finger salute and almost snort at the way Bunky is rolling his hips in the air.

"We're not done talkin' about this. You need to work on some hip thrusts."

Raid jumps in too and soon enough they're both doing some weird hip gyrating right in the fucking parking lot, not at all caring about the onlookers.

"Why am I friends with you guys again?" I call out, pulling open my car and hopping inside, successfully cutting off Bunky and Raid's protests, and finally settle in the much appreciated silence.

No way in hell am I going to that party.

BLAINE

The loud buzzer cuts through the air and the crowd goes wild.

“We won!” Landon yells, and we all swarm each other, victory cheers ringing out all around us. It was a good game. It was a *close* game, but we pulled it off.

I tug off my helmet, the warm night breeze ruffling my sweat-slicked hair and I bask in how good it feels. While still being eager to get the rest of this suffocating gear off.

“I told you we’d win,” he says, slapping my shoulder pads and pulling me in for a bro hug.

“You did. Thankfully, you didn’t give us any bad juju with all your preemptive planning,” I say, stepping back out of his hold.

He rolls his eyes, waving me off. “I told you that shit wasn’t real.”

“But it is. It’s real as fuck. You just got lucky it didn’t bite you in the ass.”

“It’s only real if you believe in it.”

Well, he’s got me there. “Maybe.”

A group of players grab the jug of Gatorade, dumping it over our coach, and I smile, actually enjoying the excitement that’s flooding around me for once.

“I’m ready for some drinks,” Landon says, pulling my attention back to him and just like that, the happiness I was feeling vanishes.

Yeah, about that... “Uh, I think I’m going—”

“Don’t even try it. You aren’t backing out now.”

I look up to the sky, annoyed that he knows me this well. “Fine. But I’m

not staying long. I don't even like half the people going." The only reason I'm not giving him a hard no is because I don't want to go home to my parents just yet. We may have won that game, but I know my dad and he'll be wanting to talk about all the things I did wrong, and how we could have done better. I'm good on all that.

He snorts, eyeing me with amusement. "Let's be real, B. You only like one person going... and that's me."

"I'm not even sure if I like you right now, to be honest."

"You. Are. Going." He punches out each word loudly, already walking toward the locker room.

I sigh, doing a small circle on the field, eyes drilling into the ground. One of these days I'm going to be able to do what I want, when I want, without a single care for what anyone thinks... and I can't fucking wait for that.

"Just a Coke," I tell Landon, bypassing the keg and pulling out a can from the cooler.

He looks stricken. Like I've literally offended him with my declaration. "You're kidding? You at least need one celebratory drink."

"Nah, I'm good. I don't want to drink anything. Not feeling it tonight." Tonight, last night, tomorrow... every night. Hell, I never wanna do this shit.

He just shrugs. "I wish you'd relax and unwind more. I know you got a lot of shit inside that head of yours. But you can still try to enjoy this year."

"See, that's the problem. I can't enjoy doing things I don't love. I'd much rather be home."

His face looks too serious, and maybe a little sullen. "You really don't like any of this? Like, full truth. I always think you're silently brooding, which is why I always try to push you to come... but if you really don't like it, I'll back off."

God, now I feel bad that I've made him feel bad. Why can't I just be an asshole who doesn't give a fuck about what others think or feel? I release a long sigh, shaking my head. Lying like hell, but wanting to make him feel better, at least. "I guess it's not that bad."

The crestfallen look changes to knowing and I immediately regret my decision to save face. "I knew it! Ugh, always the drama queen." He locks his

arm around my neck, giving me a little squeeze.

Uh, if only you knew what happens in my head.

I push against him, trying to break his hold. “Yeah, whatever,” I say once I manage to get free. “I can still leave, asshole.”

“You love me.”

“Aw. Isn’t that sweet?”

The voice causes all the hair on my body to stand on end. You have got to be kidding me. I turn around, gaze clashing with Silas’.

Why the fuck is he even here?

“What are you doing here?” I ask, unamused.

A cocky grin breaks out across his face as he holds my stare. “I was invited.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Landon mutters, taking a swig from his cup.

“What was that?” Bunky questions, eyebrow cocked as he stares at Landon.

“I said I find it hard to believe anyone would have invited you guys here,” Landon says, not missing a beat.

Bunky steps toward Landon, but Silas raises a hand, successfully stopping his forward movement. “None of that. We got shit to do. Can’t have your ass in trouble tonight, now can we?” Silas says, before glancing back at me. “Have fun tonight.” As he turns to leave, the smirk he gives me is anything but genuine.

Such a prick.

“This is another reason I can’t stand coming to these parties.” I shoot Landon a glare.

He holds his hand up in surrender. “Don’t be mad at me. I didn’t know they’d be here. Besides, it’s not my fault Silas has it out for you.”

“He’s just a dick.”

“You need to stop letting him get to you.”

“Easier said than done,” I mutter, but my voice gets lost when a rush of people surrounds us. Then it’s all just an act after that.

Random conversations, forced smiles.

I’m so over it.

I feel like I could sneak off now and Landon wouldn’t even notice; he’s too wrapped up in Maybelline. *Gross.* I don’t know how he deals with that. Maybelline only wants a football player to go with her cheerleader status. Like a queen and king power couple to rule the school. I’ve spent years

dodging her every advance, so much so she barely tries anymore. But she has a thing for Landon, and I know it's only because he gives her the attention she wants.

"I'm going to take a piss," I say, clapping him on the back.

He nods and I make my way to the tree line. There's a path just past the tree break that I can take to get back to my car. It's really dark out, so I pull out my phone, clicking on the flashlight so I can see where I'm going.

The further I get from the music and people, the quieter it gets and I relish in it. This is what I like. Calm, peaceful silence. Just being. I glance up, catching a bit of stars just past the treetops, and inhale and exhale slowly. Trying to soak up what I can in this short bit of time.

I continue my retreat through a small clearing, turn off my flashlight, and shove my phone away. The break through the top of the trees lets the stars and moon cast enough light so I can see.

While I walk, I get lost in my head. Thoughts of graduation, the summer, the next year—all the plans for my future flashing before my eyes. So close yet so far out of reach at the same time.

The sound of a twig snapping behind me pulls me from my thoughts and I spin around quickly, spotting Silas a few feet away. Despite being heavily shadowed, I'd know that face anywhere. Day, night... Hell, if I was blind, I'd be able to pick Silas out in a crowd. He's so fucking embedded in my brain it's impossible to escape him, no matter how hard I try.

I groan, head falling back on my shoulder. Why the fuck is he here again? "Are you following me?" I bite out, frustration obvious in my tone.

"Hardly," he says, releasing a chuckle as if he finds my question amusing. "I was already out here. Saw you walkin' by..."

And he decided to stop and talk to me because? "Yeah right. You were just sitting out here alone in the woods while all your friends are back there at the party? I don't believe that at all."

He takes a drag from his cig, the bright cherry casting a glow against his features as he looks me over thoughtfully. "Well, is that not what you were doin'?"

"I was leaving actually, not that it's your business." Okay, I sound like a fucking girl. Get a grip, Blaine.

"Well, go on then."

I blink, confused. "Go on, what?"

"Leave." His voice comes out like a bark. Like a rabid dog about to

attack, and I flinch at the swift change in his attitude.

At a loss, I shake my head and start walking off, only to stop and go back. I don't know what I'm doing. I just know I'm standing toe to toe with Silas a second later, spittle flying past my lips as I growl out. "The fuck is your problem with me?"

He releases a bit of smoke, blowing directly in my face, and I grit my teeth, ready to deck him. "I don't like cocky, self-centered assholes who think their shit don't stink. You walk around like you're better than everyone else. Well, guess what? Just because your daddy has money and runs the county don't make you better, just makes you privileged."

I'm so taken aback by his statement that it takes a moment to even respond. Because. What. The. Actual. Fuck?! That couldn't be further from the truth. I take a step back, hands coming to lace behind my head as I glare at him. "That's bullshit. You don't know a thing about me. You've made up all these ideas in your crazy-ass head."

"A spade's a spade," he says with so much conviction, yet I see the flicker in his gaze. Like he's doubting his assessment, maybe?

Well, two can play this game. "Yeah. So what about you, then?"

He tosses his butt to the ground, stomping it out with his clunky boot. "What about me?"

"You wear a chip on your shoulder the size of a planet, treating everyone else like dirt to make you feel better about yourself. You act all tough, but you're not." His eyes blaze, but I don't stop. I push. "What you are is pathetic."

His jaw clenches, and he narrows his gaze as he takes a small step toward me. "Shut up!"

Oh, he's mad. *Yeah*. Can dish it out, but can't take it? "You're weak!"

"Shut your fucking mouth!"

"You only put on a front because you don't want people to see the real you. The broken bit of human that lays buried beneath the facade." At this point, I have no idea if I'm talking about me or him. I can't explain it, but I feel the shift in the moment. With the anger swarming us, and the frustrations high, it's like for the first time ever, our differences aren't so different after all.

"You're wrong!" He crowds my space, backing me against a tree and the bark snags my shirt, biting into my back, but I don't care. This is too important. It's big. That I know for sure, I can just *feel* it.

He's staring at me. Eyes wild, teeth clenched and I wonder for the briefest moment if I've gone too far. If he's actually going to grow some balls and fucking hit me. My heart is pounding as I look into his eyes, my fists clenched at my sides as he glares at me.

"What are you gonna do, Silas? Hit me? You finally going to be a man and—"

He slaps his hand down over my mouth, mashing me further into the tree somehow. The other hand fisting the front of my shirt while he closes the distance between us. The full length of his body lining up against mine perfectly. I reach up, gripping his forearms out of reflex, ready to break his hold on me...

Only, I don't.

I don't push him off of me. I don't make a move. Hell, I don't even think I'm breathing. I'm just sitting here, hanging on by a fucking thread while I wait for him to make the next move. The emotion between us blazing like a burning inferno.

SILAS

His eyes are hard and full of fury, and something inside of me preens at finally getting a reaction out of him. *Yes, fuckin' fight me. Fuckin' do something!* I scream in my head, hoping my eyes convey the same emotion.

But he does nothing! Fucking pussy.

I drop my hand from his mouth and shake my head, stepping away. I'm not doing this. He's not even worth it. I pull out my pack of cigs and head in the direction of my friends, ready to bail and get the fuck out of here. Bunky better have made some money, at least.

I stop, digging around in my pocket for a lighter only to be slammed into from behind, causing me to drop my pack of smokes to the ground. "What the fuck?" I yell out, feet stumbling over fallen tree limbs. I'm flipped around, back slammed roughly against a tree, the air knocked from my lungs in the process.

My eyes widen as I stare at Blaine. Completely fucking shocked. Did he just... manhandle me? I glower at him. Waiting for him to make a fucking move, and I can see his eyes pinging back and forth between mine as his brain tries to process his next step. He rears back and I tense, fully expecting the feel of his flying fist, so I'm even more stunned when he releases an almost silent curse before slamming his lips to mine.

What in the actual fuck?

I'm stunned for half a second before I shove him back harshly. He stumbles over his feet, but manages to catch himself before he topples over. I reach up, swiping my sleeve across my lips as I glare at him. "Did you just fuckin' kiss me?" I growl, advancing on him once more.

It's like a game of cat and mouse, only I don't know who the mouse in the situation is anymore.

He looks nervous, stunned, and a little terrified as he backs away from me. He doesn't get far though, running into another tree. *All these fucking trees.* He goes to move around it, but I'm faster, reaching up and grabbing his throat, slamming him back against the bark. He releases a little groan at the impact and the sound makes my dick jump.

Wait, what?

The reaction only pisses me off more. I get in his face, teeth clenched hard, and bite out, "The fuck was that?"

His eyes are wide as he looks at me with fear, and something I can't decipher, dancing in them. Warm puffs of his breaths brush against my own lips as he tries to come up with what to say. "I-I don't..." he trails off, clearly at a loss himself.

I can feel the thudding of his heart underneath my fingers and the way his Adam's apple bobs under my palm with every swallow. I'm raging. Like a bull ready to charge and take out its target. His huge blue eyes are so lost, to the point they suck me into Wonderland with him. Down the motherfucking rabbit hole we go.

That's the only explanation I have for what I do next.

I lean forward, smashing our lips together. He releases a startled gasp and I take full advantage of it, shoving my tongue into his mouth. His hands come up, gripping my sides, and he shoves his own tongue against mine, fighting for dominance as he tries to take over the kiss.

I give back to him just as good, flicking my tongue and nipping at his bottom lip. He groans, using his body weight and flipping me so my back is now against the tree. His hand releases my shirt, only to come up and fist the back of my hair.

He rolls his hips, grinding his rock-hard dick against mine. Oh, my fuck... What is happening? And why the fuck does it feel like this? I grind back, loving the way he moans into my mouth. *Yeah, he loves this.* And that realization makes me excited.

I shove him back hard. Watching him tumble over and hit the ground. "What the fuck?" he barks out, eyes shooting daggers at me.

I take a few steps before crouching down between his spread legs. "You like my kisses?" I ask, reaching up to run my finger across his lips, but he smacks my hand away.

“Screw you,” he growls, moving to stand, but I advance quickly, knocking him flat on his back before sliding over him. Blaine goes to hit me, but before he can, I grab his wrists and pin them down on the dirt over his head. He glares, rocking his hips up, trying to buck me, but it doesn’t work. I’m ready for him this time. His nostrils flare and his brow furrows. “Let me the hell up.”

I chuckle, shaking my head as I lean down, lips ghosting over his when I speak. “But I’m just gettin’ started.” Then I kiss him again.

I have no idea how we got here. One second I was ready to beat his ass, then we were kissing. I’m just going to blame it all on pure insanity. That’s literally the only excuse I have for this. The way he gets under my skin, how he has me ready to lose my mind. *Yeah, I’ve lost it alright.*

I get so lost in his lips that I let my guard down again, and a second later, I’m flipped once more. The twigs are biting into my back as he straddles me. He looks down at me for a second, chest heaving, eyes wild before he comes down on top of me fully. We’re connected from mouths to our thighs as he dry humps me into the dirt.

Everything he’s doing feels so good. My dick’s harder than it’s ever been. Jesus, how is that possible? How can I hate someone so much and yet be this fucking hard for them?

I hate this. Hate how he has me pinned down, how he’s running the show. How he thinks he’s in charge.

Well, he’s fuckin’ not.

I rear up, breaking his hold on my wrists, and wrap my legs around his calves to flip us yet again. He releases a surprised grunt when he smacks the earth. “Fuck,” he barks out, glaring at me. My hands are on each side of his head, my face inches from his as I stare down at him. His eyes are glazed, lips swollen from my kisses, so blissed out with need.

And God... I like it.

I kiss him again and he moans, hands wrapping around me, pulling me closer to him. We’re rutting, groaning messes, rolling around on the forest floor like two animals mauling each other. It’s dirty, crazed, and honestly really damn hot. So different from any other sexual experience I’ve ever had. Even if that’s not been many.

He slides his hand down my torso, pushing up my shirt so his fingers can play with the skin near my belly button. He’s teasing me and he knows it. I growl, pressing my hips into him harder, hoping he’ll get with it and fucking

touch me.

He releases a little chuckle, and I pull back slightly, glaring down at him. “What?”

“You want me,” he says, a bit too cockily, and the statement pisses me off.

He doesn’t say anything else, but the words are like a smack to the face because he’s right. In this moment, I do want him, but I refuse to admit it. “I don’t—”

He presses his finger to my lips, eyes ping-ponging between mine as he whispers, “Don’t ruin it. For *once*, just shut your fucking mouth.”

Then he grabs my neck and slants our lips together once more. His hand slides down to the button of my jeans, getting them open and shoving his hand inside, fingers wrapping around my dick. He’s not hesitant. Not resistant. Just dives right in and begins stroking my cock. And I have to admit, I like the confidence he’s exuding. It makes me wonder if he’s done this before. Gotten another guy off—if another guy has gotten him off? I growl, biting down on his lip hard, enjoying the moan he releases into my mouth. Why the thought of him with someone else pisses me off, I don’t know. But I don’t have time to dwell on that. Not when he’s about to make me come.

I lean up, pushing his hand away, not ready to come yet, but wanting to touch him, too. I get to work on his pants, biting down on my lip when his dick springs free from his pants. He’s about the same size as me, maybe a tad thicker. He’s cut, unlike me, and I can see the bead of pre-cum resting on the tip. I run my finger over it, loving the hiss he releases at my touch.

“You like my hands on you, Blaine?” I ask, teasing him for a second longer before wrapping a firm hand around his length.

“Fuck!” he cries out, back bowing off the ground as he chases my pumping hand. “Keep going.”

I jack him, loving the way he gasps on every downward stroke. He’s so sexy to watch. The way his eyes hood and how he’s biting down on his lip, so lost to sensation. Lost in the pleasure I’m giving him. It’s enough to make me break. I lay my body over his again. Adjusting until our dicks are lined up together. I’ve never done this before, but I have dabbled in my share of porn, and I’m familiar with frotting. Even if it’s nothing I’d ever expected to be doing. So I spit in my hand a few times, getting my palm nice and wet before I grab us both in a fist.

“Oh God. Jesus. Don’t stop,” he begs, and I fucking love how husky his voice is. How desperate he is. I dig the fingers of my other hand in the dirt by his head, trying to ground myself so I don’t come too quickly. But the sounds he’s making and the incredible sensations I’m feeling are so overwhelming, I know I won’t last.

I kiss him again, eating his sounds and working us both over. His hands fist in my shirt and he’s rocking his hips in sync with my pumping.

Oh God, it’s too much. It’s too fucking much. I tear my lips away from his just as the first wave of my climax hits me. I grit my teeth, eyes slamming shut as I let the power of my orgasm wash over me. This has to be the strongest one I’ve ever had. And it just keeps coming, rope after rope of my cum slicking us up, making it easier for me to glide up and down on him. I open my eyes, looking at his heated ones. “Come,” I bark out, ready to see him lose his damn mind over me. He rocks his hips once, twice, before a guttural cry tears past his lips and he’s bathing my hand in his cum.

And yeah, I have to admit, that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

I lean back, tugging off my jacket and shirt, using the fabric to clean us up before pulling my jacket back on. I stand, stuffing the soiled fabric in my pocket, all the while trying to not look at Blaine. He doesn't say a word and neither do I as we regroup, fixing our clothes. The only sounds are of our still labored breathing as we try to catch our breath. And of course, now that the fire has died, the only thing left is awkward tension and a hell of a lot of regret.

Not because I had sex with a guy. While it was a surprise, I couldn’t care less about that. But because of who it was. My fucking enemy.

Who fucks their enemy... and likes it?

He must agree because he breaks through my thoughts the next second.

“This changes nothing. I still don’t fucking like you,” he growls, standing up and re-buttoning his pants.

I snort, eyeing him in amusement. “The feelin’s mutual. Tell anyone about this I’ll. Kick. Your. Ass.” I jab him hard with a finger on each word.

He bats my hand away, only to step into my space once more and slam his lips against mine for a hard kiss. And despite my frustration, I open for him eagerly. My teeth cut into my lip and the metallic tang of blood coats my tongue when he pulls away. He wipes his mouth, looking disgusted. “Never again.”

My heart pounds, and a devastating smirk crosses my lips. “Whatever you say.”

He gives me one last hard look before stomping to his car. And I lean back heavily against a tree, trying to wrap my head around what the fuck just happened.

But mostly I’m wondering if I want it to happen again.

To Be Continued...

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A FINAL NOTE...

All ebook proceeds from this anthology benefit two LGBTQ+ organizations with a focus on mental health: The Trevor Project (USA), and MindOut (UK). Both organizations offer worldwide online support chat facilities and resources.

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<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

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