



LOVE

There's a *thin line* between

HATE

QUINN RILEY

# LOVE/HATE

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SEALED WITH INK

BOOK ONE

QUINN RILEY

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Love/Hate

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This book touches on mental health, something that is very close to my heart.

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*You are loved*

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## PREFACE



Anxiety. It's your prison guard. It holds your body in a continual state of fear. It makes you think you are dying. You're suffocating on air. Irritable tension grabs you by the balls and spreads throughout you, leaving you shaking.

I wasn't always this way.

Dark thoughts now crept through my skull. Compulsive impulses and checking everything three times have become my life.

Why?

Korbin *mother fucking* Rose.

My bully.

My Tormentor.

He's every stereotype.

Football captain.

Blond hair.

Killer tan and freakishly hot.

He has gray eyes that pierce you like a silver arrow. Masculine lips that look like they've been kissed, ravaged, and have done every dirty thing you've ever fantasized about.

Okay, let me paint you a picture. Imagine walking across the desert for days.

Your mouth is parched. Lips scorched.

You spot a tall glass of icy-cold water with lemon and lime wedges.

Mouthwatering, right?

You take your first sip and wind up with a mouth full of sand.

That's Korbin.

Everybody in this town worships him. Hell, I'm sure they think he walks on water.

It's a dirty, stinking mirage.

I've seen the real Korbin. He came from the pits of Hell.

His hatred toward me appeared in our first few weeks of high school. I didn't even realize he knew me.

Korbin stopped in the hall and asked me to meet him and his friends for lunch. The pathetic loser I am fucking grinned and agreed.

The jocks always sat at the same table. Jasper appeared behind me, carrying a plate of leftovers from the trash.

"Dinner."

I will never forget his smirk.

I stepped back, knowing I'd been set up and glanced around to see all the students watching us.

Korbin stepped forward, eyes cold, no expression on his face as he took the tray off Jasper. The stink made me heave.

"Isn't this what trash like you eats?" The words fell from his mouth in a sneer as he shoved it into my face.

His words stirred the last drop of my self-worth.

Korbin tormented me for years. Never letting me forget I was trash, even in the town I'd been born in.

My mother, for her sins, was a Carlton; one of the elite families in Hill View. Her family disowned her for having a child with a guy from the wrong side of the tracks.

*Mother dearest*, bless her heart, tried the trailer life which lasted a month.

Mom ran home and pleaded for her parents' forgiveness. They agreed if she married Jacob Stand. They were married three weeks later.

Mom calls a few times a year, that's as far as our relationship goes.

Since she left, it's been Dad and me.

The rest of the Carltons are still in town, and to them, I am a bastard child who carries the Blackmore name and not part of their bloodline.

In one of her rare motherly moments, she paid for me to attend a private high school, telling Dad a private education would give me more advantages. It's more likely she felt guilty, and this was Mom's way of appeasing her conscience.

It was hell for a kid who came from nothing to go to school with trust fund babies.

I tried everything to fit into their world. I wore makeup to make my skin appear anything but the living corpse it resembled. I bought chinos and polo tops from the secondhand store and styled my hair in a goddamn side parting.

None of it worked.

I fell into a dark place and couldn't understand why they were so cruel and hated me.

*"Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you."*

It's bullshit. Words hurt. They cut you one slice at a time. Once said, they can never be taken back or forgotten.

Those words find you, whisper with their darkness until you're covering your ears to stop them, but you can't. They live inside you.

You believe them.

The truth of who I am.

*Unwanted* by my mother

*Rejected* by Hill View.

*Hated* by Korbin.

An unfamiliar emotion claimed half my soul. Anger. Gut-feeding fury.

Hatred toward myself.

It burned like a furnace in my stomach, raging through my veins, and with it came a fuck you attitude.

I pushed everyone away and hid the boy who still ached to be accepted, wanted, to feel worthy in his soul's deepest, darkest part, and to protect him.

I ditched the fancy clothes for black T-shirts and ripped skinny jeans. Swapped my loafers for boots. Got my lip and tongue pierced and added gauges to my ears. Now I wore a permanent snarl on my lips, and my eyes narrowed, daring anyone to get close.

Korbin's friends ripped me out of the proverbial closet our freshman year after catching me on a date with a guy from two towns over. By Monday, Hill View knew I preferred dick to pussy.

They were expecting me to back away... but I didn't.

I strutted right up to Korbin and dug my fingers into the asshole's Ralph Lauren polo, pulling him close as I spoke against his mouth. "You jealous, Rose? You wish it were you?" For once, Korbin didn't have a comeback.

Now, school is over, and I'm done with them and this town.

# Lyric

I pull into a space on Main Street, smirking as I jump out to see the old gothic sign above the entrance. Black tattoo font spelling out *Marked*, making it stand out among the historic stone buildings and tree-lined sidewalks. Hints of weed mix with blue spruce filling the air.

Old classic rock music hits me as I push the door.

“There’s our boy,” Ruby greets me, her bright blue eyes laughing as she flicks her multicolored hair over her shoulder.

“Hey, girl.”

“Have you eaten?” Not waiting for my answer, she pulls a candy bar out of her drawer filled with junk food and hands it over. The woman has one hell of a sweet tooth. “You look too skinny.”

I tear the wrapper open, taking a bite, knowing it makes her happy. She leans against the dark receptionist’s desk, giving me a view of my favorite tattoo. It’s a black cat with fur ruffled on its head. Underneath are the words “bad pussy,” and it makes my lips curve whenever I see it.

Zane, the owner, steps out of the back area. I swallow my unease as the snack bar gets stuck in my throat. It’s tough seeing Zane, he looks so much like his younger half-brother, Korbin.

Five years older, Zane didn’t come from the elite circle of Hill View but from the same trailer park I live in.

He stops a foot away from us, and the skull on his hand seems to grin as he itches his scruff.

“Hey, didn’t expect you in. It’s graduation in an hour.”

“Never been my scene.” I lift one shoulder, feeling my defenses rise.

Today I should be walking across the stage for my graduation. The school could damn well send it to me in the mail because you’d have more luck shoving a porcupine up my ass than getting me back there.

It had been daily torture to walk down those corridors. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d planned something for when I got my diploma.

The jokes on them. I’m done being the focus of their cruel entertainment.

In March, I received my acceptance letter and come fall, I’m off to one of the best art colleges—USC. I have a calendar in my room that I’m marking with big black crosses until I get to say fuck you to Hill View and never look back.

After a beat, Zane lifts his chin. “I promised Korbin I’d be there. I want you to sketch a butterfly. Let’s see what you’re made of.” Tapping his knuckles on the reception desk, silver rings click against the surface, before he walks out.

I turn to Ruby. “Is he serious?”

“Better get a move on.” She winks before answering a call.

Zane has gone retro with the interior using *Jerry the Sailor* as inspiration. The back wall is black with a partition splitting it into two workspaces and both have blood-red beds. The wall of the first station has a pin-up sitting in a martini glass wearing garters with her legs in a sexy pose. Playing cards, dice, and a bottle of whiskey surround the stem. A massive scroll underneath has the words “Man’s Ruin” written on it. On the other side are two large cherries. The way Zane has painted them, it seems like someone has taken a bite out of one, and the juice is dripping. Green stems connect them with the words “Bite Me”.

I go to the back area that holds two rooms, one for drawing and the other for “Ruby’s Piercing Palace”, as she calls it. I drop my backpack and see Zane jumping in his truck.

*You’re not good enough. Everyone hates you.* The words hammer inside my skull. I try to shake it off and start moving the pencil across the paper, watching as harsh lines appear. It’s where my mind goes numb. A creativeness comes alive and rushes through my veins. My hands move as if someone else is guiding them, transforming the lines as they turn into something beautiful.

After a few hours, I stretch my fingers, seeing the pencil groove imprinted on my skin, and go out the front for a smoke.

I bend my head, lighting the tip, and a puff of smoke escapes my lips as a fancy car pulls into a space across the street. My eyes narrow as a figure gets out. He’s in a three-piece suit, hair slicked back, and his mouth twists into a smug smile as he walks into the office block.

Bart Rose.

Zane and Korbin’s dad.

I’m positive Zane rents this space to piss off the man who didn’t claim him as his son. The thought makes my lip twitch at the irony of it.

The Roses didn’t claim Zane, but Korbin did. Which is the only decent thing he’s ever done. Who’d believe Korbin has a heart?

A blonde woman, over ten years his junior, in a tight red dress and tits someone’s paid for, giggles as she follows him into his office.

Bart is known in town for being a womanizer. It’s a secret everyone gossips about, but no one talks about it openly.

Zane’s mom was one of his many casual affairs while he was engaged to Korbin’s mom. She ended up pregnant, and both she and Zane took the backlash.

It’s how Hill View works. Rich small-town rules with women who walk around with their noses in the air and gossip

over olive-dipped Martinis at brunch while looking down on everyone else. They all ignore their husbands' cheating ways to keep their expensive allowance and raise carbon copies of themselves.

Rinse and repeat.

I flick my smoke, crush it beneath my foot, and go back in. Zane's lingering by the reception desk. He returned twenty minutes ago and can't stop talking about how proud he is of his little brother.

Hearing it makes my skin crawl. I want to scream exactly who his brother is.

He spots me walking in as he pulls off his leather jacket. Demons, hissing snakes, and skulls with hints of red curl around his arms.

"Show me what you've done."

I follow him into the back room, keeping a distance between us. I sense Zane doesn't like people in his space. The way he always stands a foot away. It's something I understand and respect. He sits on the chair as I lean against the door frame. He skims the pages, face blank, as he flicks from one sketch to another and back to the previous ones.

I spot Ruby watching us from the corner of my eye as I run my tongue over the black hoop in my lip, hating how my pulse pounds as self-doubt coats my skin. I want—no, I need Zane's approval. Art has become my hope. My ticket out of here. It has saved me in my darkest moments. Moving my hand across the page quietens the noise in my head and offers me brief moments of peace.

A cold sweat breaks across my skin as he runs a hand over his shaven head and stares at me.

"This design will work," he says, pointing to a purple butterfly.

Did he really say...? No way! "You're going to use it?"

Zane leans back as he crosses his arm over his chest. "It's good. There's an apprenticeship with your name on it... if you



want it?"

"That's the most you've ever spoken to me. It was like a full sentence." I blink and rub the back of my neck. Only Dad knew I'd been accepted into college. The offer was tempting, and I enjoyed working here, but Hill View was crushing me more each day. I know if I stay, it will take my oxygen altogether.

"Can I think about it?"

"Yeah." He stands, knocking his knuckles on the desk and leaves.

Ruby rushes over. "What did he say?" she asks, speaking around a cherry sucker.

I drop into a seat and blink at her, still unable to believe what happened. "Zane's going to use my work. Mine! Crap."

"Hey, Zane knows his stuff." She lands a sticky kiss on my cheek. "Believe in yourself." She shoves the sucker back in her mouth and strides out the front.

I stick around after my shift, then around seven a girl walks in. It's still crazy to think he's using one of my sketches. Anxiety curls around my spine and takes over my gut as he takes the girl over to show her the design. I can't listen, so I slip out for another smoke.

My leg bounces, and as I take a pull of the cigarette the door opening catches my attention. Zane shoves his head out of the door.

"You gonna stand out here or come in and watch?"

It takes a second for his words to register. "She wants it?"

His lip twitches as he nods. I ditch the smoke and follow him inside. Ruby gives me the thumbs up as we go past.

The girl is leaning on the bed. She glances at me, biting her lip. "Zane said you designed it?" she says, her voice cracking.

I nod, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans and feeling my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. Seems like we're

both nervous.

“You ready?” Zane asks, starting the gun.

Her eyes widen as she nods, taking shallow breaths as the gun touches her skin. Zane glances at me when I can't stop moving. His lips curve as I lean over his shoulder, biting my nail as he turns my sketch into a permanent mark.

Within an hour, a small lilac butterfly is inked on her shoulder. I know tattooing is what I want to do. Watching Zane highlight the wings and how he adds shading brings my sketch to life. It's a living work of art.

“Thanks.” She breathes a long breath. “You did an awesome job on the design.” She goes to pay as I clean the station.

Ruby turns the sign off and faces us with a wide smile. “Let's celebrate your first tattoo design. Zane can grill, and we'll get a few light beers in for you.”

“We can make a night of it,” Zane agrees, leaning coolly against his station, hands in his pockets.

I scratch my neck. I never went to parties out of fear Korbin and his friends would turn up, which left me socially awkward. Mostly, I cover the uneasiness behind my sarcasm and smirk while working. I haven't always been this pathetic. Once I'd been outgoing, but Korbin changed that. I grit my jaw, glaring at the floor. Even after leaving high school, he still has power over me.

I glance back at them. This is Zane and Ruby, my people. They didn't look at me the way the students did; repulsed. Didn't torment me or care about my sexuality.

They knew this town, felt its cruel grip, and how sharp its tongue could be. I shrug, trying to cover the pounding in my chest as I twist my ring and clear my throat. “Sounds cool.”



“K orbin, baby.”

Why couldn't I have made it out of the party without hearing her high-pitched voice?

Ashley is how you envision a cheerleader to be. Long brunette hair frames her sweetheart face. Enormous blue eyes and a tight body from cheering. A carbon copy of the rest of the squad.

She assumes we're destined to be as I'm captain of the football team and she's head cheerleader.

It doesn't help she's a Richmond. Her family has been acquaintances of ours for years. They've talked about us getting married after college. As my mother would say, she comes from the “right stock”. Ashley has been raised to be a trophy wife.

One problem, I don't like her.

She pouts her lips. “Stay with me.” She pleads, draping her arms around my neck and looking at me through dark lashes.

Last month, I made a stupid mistake and slept with her on the night of prom. Since then, she's been worse than usual. Clingy and making sure people think we're together.

We're not.

I let Ash play her games because it keeps the rest of the girls at bay. No one dares to go against her.

“I’m staying at my brother’s,” I slur, turning away to stare across the field.

“He’s not your brother. Zane isn’t a Rose.”

My eyes snap back to her to see her yawn as my jaw clenches. I untangle her arm and cross mine over my chest.

“He’s my brother.”

She rolls her eyes as Jasper walks over and goes straight to Ash, grinning drunkenly as he wraps his arms around her waist, making her laugh and stumble. With graduation today and most of us leaving come fall, we’ve all hit it hard.

I watch them. Jasper looks at Ash as if she’s made of gold. Ash bites her lip as she giggles at something Jasper’s whispered. Why the hell don’t they both admit they like each other. It would save me a damn headache.

It’s Hill View politics in full force. Ash wants what the Rose name promises; respect and power in this town, invitations to every social event, being the next Blaire Rose. If only Ash saw through the illusion, would she still want it? To step into my mother’s shoes?

“I’m out.”

“Come on, man. The party’s still going.” Jasper laughs, leaving Ash to wrap his arm around me.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m done.” I shake off his arm, sighing as I stride off.

Zane lives a ten-minute walk from the fields and lets me crash whenever I want. Usually, I’d call before in case he has company. Between walking in on my brother’s white ass screwing or staying with a needy, clingy Ash? I’ll take the risk.

The stroll to Zane’s doesn’t help. I’m swaying while searching for the key Zane keeps for me on top of his door. Running my fingers across the wood, I hear it hit the ground and curse. The world around me spins as I tilt down to grab it.

The sweet, sticky scents of barbecue hit my nostrils as I fall through the door, making my stomach rumble. I stumble

into the kitchen wall and search the fridge, finding a plate of chicken wings and carry them to the island. Not caring that the sauce coats my fingers, I devour the dish. Tossing the plate in the sink and washing my hands. The room spins, and I groan. My room seems too far away, so I move toward the couch.

I freeze, digging my palms into my eyes. I'm hallucinating. There's no way what I'm seeing is real.

Dark hair lands against pale skin in a mess as if someone sunk their fingers into it. An arm across his face bears vivid ink. I stab it, assuming I'd hit the air—the illusion disappearing, and I poke heated skin.

I pinch myself. "Damn." I'm not dreaming.

Why the hell is Lyric Blackmore in my brother's living room?

Quiet snores escape pink lips which appear swollen as if he's been kissed long and rough. His shirt been removed and chucked beside him as if he couldn't be bothered pulling it back on.

The part of me I don't understand, the part I hate and keep locked deep inside, perks up.

I can't believe I'm letting my eyes run over his bare torso. Seeing the milky skin as pale as his face, I feel my dick swell—a six-pack, hard dips, and curves of muscle. Tight black jeans painted to a narrow waist, displaying his obliques. A dark splatter of hair disappears beneath his belt.

The rapid sound of my shallow breathing seems to take over the room. As my eyes keep dragging back to his lips. I clasp my hands over my head, not knowing why I'm pissed at thinking Zane is the one who messed up his hair and made his lips puffy. Feeling my pulse beat in my neck, my fists clench. I stare at Lyric like a damn creeper.

I tilt my head. It's weird to see him without a snarl twisting at his mouth and glaring at me, his face flushed.

Yeah, I earned it. I made Lyric's life hell.

I could use the excuse that my father screws around and my mother is a closet alcoholic hooked on sleepers.

They didn't tell me I had a half-brother five years older than me until I bumped into him. Or the pressure they put on me to be "what a rose should be" or how they have my life mapped out to follow in the brilliant Bart Rose's footsteps. A philanderer, a bully, and a weak businessman who makes me sick to my stomach. To grow into the man I despise.

They weren't the reasons, well, not only them. It was a mixture.

He stirred something in me. I saw him coming down the corridor with another guy, grinning in our first week of high school. He caught my eye before shuffling past. One glance, and it felt like a damn punch to the chest. I wanted to reach out and touch him. I couldn't help glancing over my shoulder to watch him through narrowed eyes as he walked past, my pulse pounding.

My finger clenches at the thought of what he releases in me, how much I hate it.

So, I put all the hate on him.

Made his life a living misery. Saw him change from the innocent kid to the moody, shut-down guy who now glares at everyone.

Was it screwed? Hell yeah! Welcome to how the elite live, my twisted logic, and how my messed-up mind works. The perverse enjoyment of using Lyric to hide what I couldn't understand. What I hated about myself.

I lean in and draw my finger across his jaw, my brain still cloudy from drinking, studying his features more closely. Inky black lashes brush his angular cheekbones. His face is masculine yet carries a softness.

My pulse pounds as I lick my lips... would one kiss hurt? No one would believe him over me. Screwed-up thoughts, I know.

I touch my mouth to his. A whisper of flesh meeting isn't enough. I lick his bottom lip. My eyes widen at the softness,

and I use my teeth to tug on the hoop. If I hadn't been lost in my own head, I would've noticed his body tense and his fists clench.

“What the fuck?” The words smash into my brain. Wild olive eyes glare at me as dark brows slam down. “Korbin fucking Rose.” His face flushes as he shoves me. “What the hell are you doing?”

Already off-balance, I land on my ass.

Lyric twists to sit, causing his abs to contract and obliques to tense and flex, making my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. He rests his elbows on his knees, squinting as he runs his tongue over his lips, dragging my eyes there.

“You kissed me.” A sexy rasp, full of sleep and questions.

“No one will believe you.” I bare my teeth and wait for his lips to curl. They do, but not in the way I expected. He smirks and drops to his knees, so we're face to face. I narrow my eyes. “What are you doing?”

“You want to kiss me, Rose? Want to know what I taste like?” His breath slides across my mouth.

Is this a trick? I can't trust Lyric. I hate him, and he hates me.

Yet, I sit still, not blinking. Lyric yanks me toward him and presses his mouth against mine. Hard. The metal of his lip ring digs into me as he tilts his head, sealing his mouth over mine.

The kiss is forceful, a smash of mouths, a clash of tongues. Lyric tears his mouth away, and I realize somewhere during the kiss, I'm digging my fingers into his skin.

We sit here holding each other.

I can feel his body shaking, watching as his jaw clenches. “What the fuck?” he spits.

I lean my head against him, unable to speak, as we both pant heavily.

Why does it feel so intense between us?

Letting out a shaky breath, I cup the back of his head, my lips hovering over his. I try to ignore my fear of how much I want this. What it means.

“Korbin?”

I close my eyes tight and press my lips to his. The feeling of Lyric’s hot mouth is too good. He kisses me back in deep strokes as our tongues entwine, making my stomach ripple.

My hands seem to move on their own, touching any piece of skin they can reach. We fall back, and Lyric lets out a huff as he hits the ground. My arms shake as I lean over him, taking his mouth and gripping his thigh, forcing us closer, making me aware of every hard inch of him. The contact makes me gasp. I press my hips into his hardness as we start rubbing against each other. My skin feels alive, and my dick throbs in time with my pulse.

Lyric’s hitch of breath brings my eyes to his. Dark lashes flutter, and the olive color of his eyes seems to disappear in a pool of darkness. It does something to me, releasing an almost violent craving.

My muscles shake as they strain to hold me. Tingles run through my spine as my stomach clenches. “Crap, fuck.” Letting out a long groan, my hands fly to his shoulders, digging my nails into his skin. My teeth find the flesh of his neck to muffle the sound as my cock pulses. I roll onto my side, gasping as my body trembles. I’ve never cum so hard.

A new sensation works over me. “Oh, crap.”

I scramble, smashing into the wall with a hiss and sprinting for the toilet. My body jerks as I puke, and tears fall from my eyes.

“Well, that’s never happened before.” I hear the smug tone behind me as I groan.



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A pathetic sigh drops from Korbin as he hugs the toilet. Puke down his top after shooting his load in his pants. I take out my phone, ready to take a picture.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

I clench my jaw as my fingers tighten around the phone. My dad's face flashes in front of me. He raised me better. I hate disappointing him.

Don't get me wrong Dad would boot Korbin in the balls if he knew what he had done. I also like Zane and want to keep my job.

I curse, cramming my phone back in my pocket, and grab a cloth from the sink.

"You're disgusting," I say, speaking through clenched teeth as I jerk Korbin's hair, pulling his head back to clean his mouth.

Drunken, unfocused eyes follow me. I hate how those cold slivers stare right into me, exposing me. Balling my hands into the end of his top, I yank it over his head and chuck it in the corner.

"Yeah, you can sort yourself out." I glare at his cum-soaked jeans and swear red touches his cheeks.

"No one will believe you," he says, nostrils flaring, chin lifting.

“Are you joking right now?” The way those cold eyes narrow. I know he’s not. Korbin is seriously threatening me. Now! I shake my head as my pulse spikes.

“I mean it, Lyric. No one will believe you. You’ll be hated more than you already are.” His lips flatten into a tight line.

You’d think I’d get used to his words. That hearing them on repeat my mind would’ve learned to make them nothing but white noise. The pressure in my chest doesn’t agree. Korbin’s eyes don’t leave mine until I jerk my chin, telling him I’ve heard and understand. I watch him struggle to stand and curse as he loses his balance. I thought about allowing him to face-plant on the floor for two seconds.

“What the hell did you drink?” I seethe, gripping his arm.

Korbin moans about home-brew and points toward what I’m sure he thinks is his room. Trying to push the door open while supporting Korbin’s drunk ass is a challenge. I guide him to the bed and shove him on it.

“Why are you helping me?”

I yank his legs onto the bed. “I like your brother.”

Zane and Ruby have accepted me in a way no one else has. Today Zane gave me a chance this town wouldn’t.

I bare my teeth. “Don’t worry. I still hate you.” I close the door before he can reply.

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“What time did Korbin show up last night?”

I rub my eyes as if Zane stirred me. “I was dead to the world.”

His brow rises as he leans against the doorframe. “How much of a dick was he?”

“He wasn’t too bad.” I reach for my hoodie and yank it over my head. A cold sweat breaks across my skin as we stare at each other. I’m unsure if Zane knows how much of a nasty

ass his perfect little brother is. “Got to get the truck back to Dad.” I hide the way my fingers tremble in my front pocket, using the sharp point of my keys to dig into my skin and keep me grounded.

“Don’t forget I’ve got the chest piece at noon today,” Zane yells after me.

I wave over my shoulder, jogging down the steps to my truck. I switch it on and off three times. This is Korbin’s fault. Being around him brings my anxiety to the surface. He’s the one who broke me, made me into this pathetic mess. I used to have my crap together.

“You won’t win,” I growl, pulling into the street.

Dad’s standing by the trailer as I park. He tears the truck door open. “You okay, kid?” His eyes are wide, searching me. I avert my gaze. I hate the worry in his eyes which has gotten worse with each episode.

“Didn’t you get my message?”

“I don’t know where my damn phone is,” he grunts, following me into our trailer.

I open his junk drawer and hand it over. “I bought the phone for you to use.”

“Never needed one before,” he splutters. Dad’s from a time before Google. He didn’t grow up with a phone in his hand or a screen as his TV and has no interest in learning.

“Zane invited me over to celebrate using my sketch on a client.” Last night was the most relaxed I can remember being around people. There were no awkward questions. We all sat around talking crap about music and clients. Then Korbin had to show up, sending my mood plummeting and bringing my anxiety so close to the surface I could taste it.

“You went over to someone’s and stayed?” Dad’s voice brings me back, and I realize I’ve been staring. Disassociating is what the doctors call it, a trauma response. It’s where I check out for a few minutes and get lost in my thoughts. I turn to see his wide eyes.

“It was chill. We all had food and a couple of drinks. So, I stuck around.” Busying myself making coffee, I turn the stove on and off three times. A compulsive ritual starting at the same time as the anxiety with the intrusive thoughts.

“You’re eighteen. I should visit this boss,” he carries on. Since I was diagnosed with extreme anxiety disorder, Dad has been protective, and I roll my eyes.

“It was two lights, but I didn’t want to drive, so he said I could crash on his couch.” I place the pan on the heat and turn back to Dad. “If you had your phone on, you would’ve seen my message.”

“Don’t get smart with me, kid.” He runs his hands through his hair. “I want to do the whole father thing. But I’m so damn happy you went out and light beer isn’t too bad. You were responsible, I guess.” He’s still grinning. “And he used your sketch.” He laughs, making his eyes crinkle as he draws me into a hug. “Proud of you, kid.” He ruffles my hair like I’m five. Making me duck my head as we both mess around.

I hand him his coffee. “I’m going to shower. I told Zane I’d go in for a few hours.” My Dad grits his teeth and grimaces as he sits on his chair. His back is messed up from working in the factory. One day, I’ll get him out of this tin hole.

I strip off, turning my head toward the mirror so fast I almost give myself whiplash. Four bruises mark the skin on my shoulder, and there’s a red bite mark above my collarbone. I’d expected a snarky retort after I’d teased Korbin and braced myself for the vile comments and homophobic slurs he would spit at me. He stunned the crap out of me as he drew closer, kissing me with a bite of violence.

He didn’t falter.

Who knew the passion Korbin hid beneath the taunts and hatred?

The plan was to kiss him so he wouldn’t be able to forget it, even with the hangover he no doubt had this morning. He’d remember and hate himself for it.

I move under the pathetic pressure which forces out only a light spray and scrub his scent off my skin. My lashes flutter as silver eyes flash behind my lids, causing me to wrap my fist around my dick. Jerking myself off from root to tip, squeezing the head. The soap from the shower makes my hand slide easier, moving my other to my nipple. I pull on the ring and groan as my abs clench and my legs shake. Korbin's gasps ring in my skull. My palm hits the tiles as I cum. "Fuck, fuck!" I breathe out between my pants and punch the wall.

It wasn't the first time I'd thought of Korbin, of the image of him on his knees at my feet as my cum hits his face, while getting off.

I lean my head against the cold tiles. It's fucked up.

Fantasizing about a guy who tormented me any chance he had.

Made me feel worthless.

I secure the towel around my waist and move into my room, stretching my hand and seeing my knuckles red. Biting on my lip, my breathing quickens, and I twist my ring. I inhale four deep breaths, counting to four after inhaling, holding it, and releasing for four. "I'm okay," I repeat, taking a calming breath.

There's no need to lose it. Korbin wouldn't come and find me. He hates my guts as much as I hate him. We can avoid each other. I'll be gone soon, away from Hill View and Korbin. They'll be nothing but the sight in my rearview mirror.

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"I should be home in a few hours," Dad shouts as I jump out of the truck.

"Yeah, I'll make dinner tonight."

I wave as he pulls off into the traffic. We share the truck. I use it when Dad isn't at work, which isn't very often.

I meet Zane as he unlocks the door. “Hey, you didn’t have to come in so early,” he says, turning the lights on and pulling down his hood.

“Figured I’d help you open.” He nods as I go over to his station. Flipping the switch three times before keeping it on. Heat rises on my neck as Zane sees, and his brow pulls down.

“Korbin was rough this morning.”

“I bet,” I reply, rolling my eyes.

“Did you have a good night?”

I place my hands in my pockets and lean against the wall. It takes a second to realize Zane is talking about going over, not Korbin. “Yeah, thanks for asking me over.”

“I like you, and so does Ruby.”

Now I do smile. “She’s a wild one,” I laugh, causing Zane’s mouth to twitch as he sets up.

“Wait until she puts a needle through your dick. You’ll remember never to piss her off.” He laughs as my mouth drops.

I raise my brow, “You’ve got...?”

“My dick pierced—yeah!”

I grunt. “Was not expecting that.”

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know.” He raises a dark blond brow in challenge. I narrow my eyes, but before I can ask, his client comes in.

I grab my pad, chewing on the end of my pencil before letting my fingers guide me.

I don’t know how much time has passed, but as I stare down at the drawing, my hands start to shake. Full lips part, two top white teeth capture the edge of the lips.

*No-damn-way.*

There’s no mistaking it’s a memory from last night. The force with which I hold the pencil snaps it in half. Zane lifts his head; a slight frown appears. “You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry.” I clench my fist around the paper, scrunching it into a ball before chucking it into the bin.

Three hours later, Zane finishes the outline and sees James out.

“It’s going to be an impressive chest piece once it’s done,” I tell him, turning off the switch, clicking off, on, off, on, off, on, off.

I’m cleaning his counter as the door opens—not paying any attention until I hear Zane’s tone.

“Hey, what are you doing here? You alright?”

“Yeah.”

*No, no, it can’t be.*

I swallow, closing my eyes tight as I lean my palms on the desk, taking a deep breath to calm myself before glaring over my shoulder. Korbin’s silver eyes meet mine. I cross my arms over my chest, bracing myself for what will come out of his mouth.

“You work here,” he says, but it doesn’t sound like it’s a question.

“Lyric has been working here for a few months. I’ve asked him to be my apprentice,” Zane answers, glancing between us.

“It’s why you were at his house,” Korbin directs at me as if trying to make sense of last night.

“Yeah,” I reply, playing it off as cool as I can, grabbing my backpack. “I’m going to go. Leave you guys to it.”

“See you Wednesday,” Zane shouts out.

I wave over my shoulder, not looking back, and jog down the road and around the corner.

“Fuck.” I hit the back of my head into the wall. “Fuck.”

“What happened last night?” Korbin’s eyes narrow, and his fingers circle my wrist as he pulls me down behind a building.

I jerk my arm away as my pulse speeds and heat flashes through my body. My survival instinct kicks in.

Fight or flight.

“Don’t touch me. Is this where your buddies show up to beat the crap out of me?” I hiss, feeling the area around me getting smaller.

“I wasn’t... I’m not... No!” He runs his fingers through his hair. “I need to know what happened?”

Sweat drips down my spine as my eyes dart around for a way out. Korbin’s blocking the way; my breath comes in short pants.

*No, not now! Not here! In front of him. Breathe, damn it, breathe.*

*Look at you, you are fucking pathetic, losing it in front of him. No wonder he hates you. Do you blame him?* The voice laughs as panic and anger crash together.

“Lyric?” A hand lands on my shoulder as I try to suck in air.

“Don’t touch me,” I choke out, a mess as I shrug off his touch. Anyone who’s experienced panic attacks knows how hard it is to stave them off, to gain control.

“What the hell is happening?”

*You!* I want to scream. This is what you’ve done! But I’ll never give Korbin the pleasure of knowing how much he’s broken me. How damaged I am. The noises of the street all come back, and Korbin’s face comes into sharp focus as my anger takes over.

This I can deal with. This is better.

I notice how close Korbin is and shove him hard. “Stay away.” His brow rises, but the extra space gives me what I need. I take a deep breath, hearing my lungs sigh in relief as Korbin’s eyes narrow, tilting his head, watching me as the spot disappears from my vision.

Knowing my only escape is to face him and give Korbin what he wants.

“Do you remember anything?” I ask.



His lips part to slam shut as he shakes his head.

“What do you want to know?” I struggle to tone down my attitude and ignore the voice screaming at me to knee Korbin in the balls and then slam it into his nose. “Do you want the highlights?” I take a step closer. The remains of the attack make my attitude come out in full force. “Or do you want every filthy detail?”

He holds my eyes. “Tell me.”

“Do you remember coming to Zane’s?”

He tilts his head. “You were asleep on the couch.”

“I woke to you kissing me, licking my lips, tugging on my hoop.” To emphasize my words, I pull on the black metal. “I shoved you off. You landed on your ass.” My eyes flick to see Korbin’s dilate. “You kissed me like you were starved. Dug your fingers into my skin,” I twist, stretching my top enough so he can see the bruise. “You licked me from here to here.” Showing him the path with my finger, drawing it to the marks his teeth left as his nostrils flare. “I tried to stop it, but you kissed me again, and we hit the floor.” I close the last of the distance between us, tilting my head and watching his reactions. “You crawled on top of me. Want to know what happened next?” I lick my lip before catching it between my teeth.

Breathing heavily, he nods.

“You rubbed against me and came in your pants before puking on yourself.” I pat his chest and smirk as I step away. “I cleaned you up and tossed you into bed. It’s okay, Rose. Your virgin ass is still untouched.” I wink and step back onto the street, the facade dropping along with my shoulders as I take a calming breath.

It takes him thirty seconds to reach me. “Why did you look after me? Kiss me back. You hate my guts.”

“I respect Zane,” is all I say, feeling the tension return, not looking at him as I keep walking.

“Let me drive you home.”

I lift a brow, strolling backward. “You’re off the hook, Korbin. It wasn’t a date. It wasn’t anything,” I sneer, unable to mask my laugh.

He glances up and down the street before grabbing my wrist and pulling me across the road. “Get in,” he bites out as his top-of-the-range black SUV beeps beside us. “Please,”

“That looked painful.” I smirk as my phone rings. I pull it out, seeing Dad’s number.

“Hello... kid... are you there... stupid piece of crap?”

“Dad, turn it the other way.” There’s a noise then his voice appears clear, and I laugh.

“Lyric? You need a ride, kid?”

“Dad, it’s me. Korbin Rose is giving me a ride. I’ll be there in ten.”

There’s a pause at the name. “See you soon, kid,”

I finish the call and feel Korbin peering at me.

“Insurance, in case you do something.”

His mouth drops open before he slams it shut and doesn’t argue which is a first. “Come on then.”

I jump in his truck against my better judgment watching him through the window as he rounds the hood and jumps in beside me.

“Your dad doesn’t know.” His words fall away as he pulls out of the space.

“We hate each other? You’re a giant dick and made my life hell.”

Korbin’s head drops. “Yeah.”

“Nope.” I pop the P.

It hadn’t been to protect him.

Dad begged me to tell him what was wrong, but I couldn’t. He worked in the factory Bart Rose owned. Dad wouldn’t hold back, and he’d have ended up fired. We already lived paycheck to paycheck, so I kept my mouth shut.

As we ride toward the edge of town. My body notices Korbin's movement. The way he drives is damn sexy and confident. I see how he keeps glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

I shatter the silence about a mile from the trailer park. "Pull over."

"I'll take...."

I cut him off. "Pull over."

He does.

"Now shut the truck off."

He glares but, after a beat, listens.

We both sit in silence.

"Spit it out, Rose!"

His brows come down. "What do you mean?"

"You are trying to figure out how to say something. So, stop... and spit it out. You've never held back before."

He freezes, staring at me with wide eyes before he nods and runs a hand across his nape.

"What does last night mean?"

Okay, not what I was expecting.

"Nothing," I say, raising my brow.

He stares through the window, and I move to push open the door.

"We hate each other!" he hisses, gripping the wheel.

"We do."

"Why can't I get it out of my fucking head?"

I've never heard him curse in all the years I've known him. Too concerned he'd spoil his perfect persona.

"Does the church know you curse? And you kiss your mother with that dirty mouth. What would people say?" I mock gasp.

“I’m being serious.”

“Come on, you’ve heard of hate fucks, how good *they* are. It’s the same without the screwing.”

When he says nothing, I jump out and stare at him.

“We still hate each other. All’s right in your perfect Rose world again.” And I shut the door.

I don’t turn around as I walk away, my eyes focusing on our little tin trailer. It’s my safe place. Only a few more feet. My eyes already feel heavy, the adrenaline long gone. I can’t wait to drop into bed. The anxiety retreats, leaving my soul coated in numbness, exhausted and shaking.

“Hey, kid.” I give Dad a tight smile, looking away before he can see the truth written on my face.

*He’s going to be sick of you, too. How long is he meant to love someone like you? Pathetic! He’ll end up hating you and leave.*

I bite back the sob crawling up my throat as I push into my bedroom. Leaning my head against the door, I gasp out a breath, covering it with a shaky hand as angry tears race down my cheeks. My legs give out beneath me, and I slide down the door. “I’m okay.” I suck in a breath through trembling lips.



I watch Lyric stride away.

All day I've been going crazy. Thinking about what happened last night. I went into the shop to talk to Zane.

I saw Lyric and froze.

Still able to smell his fresh scent mixed with tobacco hints. I remember the sight of his lashes fluttering, those olive eyes darkening, and the taste of mint and hops. I remember what he felt like, all smooth pale skin and hard muscles.

I thrust my truck into reverse, heading toward the gym as my fingers shake against the wheel.

As I go in, I bite back a curse, spotting some guys already working out.

"Look who's come to join us." Jasper smirks, his chest puffs out as he strides toward me.

"Hey, Rose, you get pussy this weekend?" Garrett calls, thrusting his hips and closing his eyes as he moans.

Deacon joins in. "Hell yeah! Wouldn't you if you had someone like Ash!"

I don't miss how Jasper turns away, the muscle in his jaw working. Yeah, he has a crap poker face.

I grunt in response, crossing my arms over my chest and not in the mood to play along. The move makes all the guys shut up.

It's incredible how people don't listen and only see what they want. I never once admitted to sleeping with Ash or telling them we were dating.

Lyric read me better earlier than these guys who've known me my whole damn life.

I shoot them an icy stare before striding across the room and straight for the punching bag. Smashing it over and over until my knuckles are raw, sweat pouring into my eyes. I wrap my arms around the bag as my chest heaves, puffing heavily.

My mind flashes with memories of those kisses, and the hitch of Lyric's breath echoes through my skull.

"No!" I slam my hand into the bag, yelling with each hit.

I spent my life hiding, making sure I didn't slip. I'd never kissed a guy and hate the thoughts that enter my head.

There's no place more homophobic than a locker room. I spent years listening to it all. The ugly comments poured out of my friends, and I'm ashamed to admit, me too. Sat in the front row as they preach about a man's sins lying with another.

I read the homophobic slurs students wrote over Lyric's locker, which he ignored, and saw how the students treated him. Pushing him over, knocking his books out of his hands, and making him an outcast.

I close my eyes because I was there, front and center, a smirk covering my face, loving the hate they put on him. It meant while they were taunting him, no one was watching me watch Lyric.

Last night something changed, and it made me question it all.

If something was so wrong, why the hell did it feel so good? So damn right!

"Hey, bro, you okay?" I twist to see Jasper standing there watching me.

I grab the towel and wipe my face, shutting down all emotions too close to the surface and pulling the coldness back into my eyes as I hang it over my neck. "Yeah."

“What was that with Ash last night? She’s the hottest damn thing in this town.”

I stop the smirk from crawling over my lips. He’s fishing, wanting to know how I feel about Ash and if he’s free to make his move. Oh Jasper, don’t you know me at all?

I cross my arms over my chest. “Yeah, she was also drunk, and I’m not into sleeping with comatose girls. Are you?”

His face tints red. “No,” he grits out.

We stare at each other. Jasper’s trying to work out what I’m getting at. Am I joking? My face reveals nothing. After a beat, his lips curve, and he chucks an arm over my shoulder. “We’re all heading over to Deacon’s.”

I shake him off, and grab my water bottle, taking a gulp. “I told my brother I’d chill with him.”

Jasper presses his lips together. He knows better than to say anything about Zane. None of my friends accept him as my brother. He doesn’t wear the same surname as me. All too consumed with the politics and stature of this town.

As I watch the guys all leave, leaning against my truck, I can’t help but frown. We’re friends, so why does it suddenly feel like we are strangers?

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I pull into Zane’s drive, and he opens the door as if he knew I was coming. It’s a nice one storey, two-bed, open plan, living, kitchen. He hands me a light beer, and we go to his deck.

“Want to tell me why you’re chasing after my staff?” Zane doesn’t talk in circles. He is a straight shooter.

I take the drink and shake my head, not ready to speak.

“Lyric is good at what he does. I used one of his sketches last night. He’s great when he puts aside all the broodiness and attitude.” He’s watching me as he takes a pull on his beer.

I lean forward, putting my elbows on my knees.

What was the sketch? I didn't even know he could draw. Truth is, I don't know who Lyric is. All I know is how his eyes narrow each time he sees me. His fingertips constantly seem to be smudged with dark marks. How his lips curl into a snarl before he turns in the opposite direction.

"The attitude is my fault. Lyric used to... I don't know, look innocent." My shoulder slumps as I talk to the floor.

"I guessed something had gone down earlier. You could feel the tension between you." Zane grunts. "You were a dick."

I bury my head in my hands and shake my head. "I made his life a living hell. His mother should never have made him come to our school. She knew what it would be like for a kid like him. It would have been better for everyone!" *For me!* I want to roar, because up until Lyric I could hid in the denial. Once I saw him, how he affected me, everything was harder, I couldn't push down what I felt. It was as if they were alive, living just beneath my skin. "You don't know what he made me feel!"

The grin drops from my brother's face as his eyes tighten. "A kid like him?" Zane seethes. "I hope you're not saying what I think you are."

"No! Yes! I don't know, okay!"

"Why because he's the illegitimate son? Needs the right last name? Comes from a trailer park? Tell me, which one is it, *little* brother? What did he do? Hurt your feelings! *Poor Korbin.*"

"Stop it! I didn't mean..."

"Yes, you did," Zane spits. "Everything you despise about Lyric is what I am." He crosses his arms over his chest, his lips curling.

"I don't hate him." And I realize I'm speaking the truth.

Did I ever hate him? No, I hated what he made me feel.

"You don't understand!" My mind tries to process everything. "I did it to protect him, too. They would have



broken him.” I massage my temples, trying to explain.

“Fucking gallant of you. So instead, *you* broke him?” Zane shakes his head, turning away.

“You don’t understand my world.”

“Shut up, Korbin.” My eyes widen as he jumps up, entering my space. Zane doesn’t like people in his, always staying a few feet away. “Don’t come here and feed me your crap. If you’re going to act like a spoiled, entitled asshole, own it.” Sneering, he squints his eyes. “Don’t come here with some damn sob story because I could give you twice as much.” He shoves his finger into my chest. “And Lyric could too. Stay away from Marked when he’s working.” Cursing, he shakes his head. “Things make a lot more sense now.”

What things?

“And stay away from Ruby because she likes Lyric,” he growls.

I narrow my eyes, watching him. What did Zane mean? Ruby likes him.

“I kissed him... last night I kissed him.”

Zane freezes. “You kissed him?” He takes a step back, a flick of fear passes through his eyes.

“Yes.” I chuck my bottle against the fence. “He’s in here. I can’t get it out of my head!” I kick the floor. “Now you hate me! I knew this would happen.”

“Korbin.” He squeezes my arm and lets out a sigh. “Korbin, look at me, damn it.”

I lift my face. Zane looks more like the man who didn’t claim him than I do.

“I don’t hate you. I’m disappointed in the way you’ve behaved toward Lyric. Not because you kissed a guy.”

Fuck, it stings.

Zane is the only person I trust. I might not have known him until three years ago, but our bond is different. Zane doesn’t put pressure on me to be anyone but me.

He's my safe place.

"You're gay?" he asks, his tone softer.

"No, no." My eyes widen. "I can't let that kiss ruin my life. Do you know what they'll say?"

"But you kissed Lyric?" Speaking as if talking to a cornered animal.

"Forget I said anything."

Zane lifts his palms in surrender. "I can see this is messing with you. So, talk to me. We can sort through it together."

I let out a shaky breath. "Lyric was sleeping, and I don't know..." My finger clenches into my palm, helping to force the words out. "The next thing I know, I'm thinking about kissing him... then I am."

"And you only kissed?"

I nod, unable to tell him I'd cum in my jeans like a fucking kid, then puked my guts out.

"Loads of guys experiment," he tries.

I lick my lips, staring at the floor, unable to answer because I know it's not who I am.

"Have you tried talking to Lyric?"

"It's why I ran after him. He's convinced it's nothing." My teeth grind, remembering Lyric's words.

"And you?" he questions.

"I wanted to do it again," I confess, digging my fingers into my eyes.

"First, stop freaking out. Have you ever found any other guys attractive? Jasper, Garrett? Any of the team?"

I think about my teammates, the guys at school and cringe.

"That's gross."

He smirks. "Okay, but you do with Lyric?"

I can't speak words or lie, so I shrug.

“You said I didn’t understand what he made you feel. Explain.” Zane leans forward.

“He was walking past. We caught each other’s eyes, and I felt...” Zane waits. “Like I’d been punched in the chest, I could feel my damn pulse in my ears.” I lift my head. “I hated it.” A tear escapes.

“It’s okay. I swear.” Zane grabs my face, making my throat tight. “It’s going to be okay.”

I want to believe him. He gets up and leaves me alone as he walks into his place and coming out a minute later with two more beers.

I take one. “Thanks.”

“Does he still make you feel the same way?” he asks, taking the seat opposite.

I lean forward and take a long pull on the beer, wishing it was stronger and hating the truth. “Yes.” I bow my head. “I don’t want to hate him, to feel this way.”

“You don’t hate him.”

I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“Korbin, first, the feeling you’re explaining isn’t hate. It’s an attraction. I guess you’ve been feeling it for a while, and it came to a head last night.”

I suck in the air between my teeth. “You’re wrong!”

“I guess Lyric is the first guy you’ve been attracted to. It’s made you question everything you thought you knew.” He offers me a tight smile, resting his elbows on his knees. “It would be confusing, and Hill View isn’t the most liberal town.”

“It sounds like you know?”

Zane turns away, taking a long pull on his beer before glancing back at me. “You forgetting how I grew up?”

Bart wouldn’t claim Zane as his son, another reason I hated my father. I have more than most kids. Zane was

queuing for food stamps and lived in a small trailer while we had a pantry stocked daily and lived in a damn mansion.

“I didn’t... I’m sorry.” My words fall away.

“You’ve nothing to apologize for.”

“I slept with Ash after prom last month,” I say, trying to hold on to the last of my denial.

Zane frowns. “I thought you didn’t like her?”

“I don’t. I was drunk.” Ashamed. I couldn’t even remember it. I woke up naked next to her in the hotel where we’d all rented rooms.

Zane shrugged. “You could be bi. That’s something *you* need to work out. I can’t give you the answer.”

We both sit in silence and drink another three beers.

“Fuck.” I stare into space, my fingers tightening around the beer bottle. “I’ve always had it under control. I could hide.” My eyes widen, realizing I’d said it all out loud.

“I’ll take it to my grave and support any decision you make,” Zane says as he stares me dead in the eyes. A smirk crawls onto his face. “Didn’t think a broody he-devil would be your type.”

I snorted. “Neither did I.”

His smirk drops. “I want to protect you, and I know you’re not letting it go. You never do when it’s already in your head.”

Zane’s right. I’m already trying to work out how to see Lyric again.

“People will talk. You’ve come across as the straightest guy most people know.”

“Because I’ve kept that part of me hidden. I work hard for everybody to believe it’s who I am.” Feeling the tightness in my chest ease, letting it all out.

“I know, and I’m sorry you’ve had to struggle with it. You should’ve come to me sooner. Your parents won’t like it either.”

I cringe. My parents will send me to some damn boot camp. Make up lies about how Lyric has somehow corrupted me, and the town will join in.

“It’s a mess. Lyric hates me,” I say, not seeing a way around this mess.

“But?” Zane adds.

“You’re right. I was already trying to figure out a way to see him,” I confess.

“It’s not going to be easy. You’ve hurt Lyric. Bad by the sounds of it. You leave in a few weeks for Stanford, seventeen hours away.”

My teeth clench at Zane’s reminder. Another thing that isn’t my choice is where I’m going to college.

“Don’t start something you’re going to be walking away from, Korbin. Do the right thing and stay away,” he finishes.

He’s right.

I need to forget about Lyric and walk away.

But I’m so damn tired of fighting.

What Lyric makes me feel.

What it means.

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## Lyric

I'm sketching in the back room as Zane stops in the doorway. "What's up?" I try to bite back the attitude. The way he puts his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and gives a tight-lipped smirk, puts me on edge.

He leans against the wall. "He told me."

I grit my jaw and push from the chair, feeling my lips curl as I grab my backpack. It doesn't take a genius to work out what or who he's talking about. I haven't seen Korbin since he dropped me off a week ago. Again, I fell for his bull. Assumed he'd shut his mouth as I did in high school.

"Where are you going?" Zane snaps.

"You think I'm sticking around for you to fire my ass?" I feel my pulse pound as I dig my fingers into the strap of my backpack.

His brows rise. "You think I'm letting you go?"

Anger and anxiety hold me by the balls, bringing a snarl to my lips. "What, you'll keep the guy who molested your perfect little brother?"

He points a finger in my direction. "Cut your crap, Lyric."

I feel my face warm. "Fuck you." And push past him.

He catches my bag, causing me to swing around and face him. "Sit your ass down." We stare-off, then he says, "Sit and listen."

I move to the back of the area and lean against the wall, glaring at him.

“I’m not here to let you go.” I don’t move a muscle, continuing to glare. “Korbin told me what he did in school.”

“I’m over it.” Shrugging as if it’s no big deal.

His brow lifts to call me out on my bullshit. “Yeah, then you’re a better person than I am.” Sounding pissed on my behalf. “I love him. He’s my little brother.” He runs a hand over his head. “Don’t like him at the moment. I’m not making excuses for him. He grew up rich, but it doesn’t mean his life is perfect.”

“You think I don’t know? I come from the same town and hear the rumors.” The ones about his father barely going home, having a whore pad in town where he takes his women. Blaire, his mother, used to be a good one, but under the pressure of the elite society and her husband’s wandering eyes, she’s fallen into the bottom of a bottle, never coming out, and is hooked on sleepers.

Zane nods and stares at a space beside my head, as if unable to hold my eyes. “He told me about Saturday night.”

“How I violated him?” I smirk, taunting him.

“No, he told me it was all him. He came over, freaking out. I’m shocked you didn’t punch him.”

When Korbin dropped me off, I knew he was confused. Saw the way his eyes kept sinking to my mouth as I spoke. He was straight, but he felt something when we kissed.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I won’t say anything. Korbin’s reputation will stay intact.”

Zane’s blond brow rises. “Fuck, he’s done a number on you.”

I bristle. Hating how he’s able to see through the anger I wear like a shield, hiding the boy who’s done with being hurt.

“I told Korbin to stay away from here while you’re working. To stay away from you.” I shrug my shoulder. “My brother isn’t used to being told no.”

“We hate each other,” I argue, trying to wrap my head around what he’s saying. It seems like Zane is defending me, warning me against his brother.

“Korbin doesn’t hate you,” he states. “I guess he’s been going to Bart’s office every day because he’s trying to listen to me.” He fakes a smirk, “Korbin won’t hold back much longer, and the way he’s standing across the street staring at this place. You’ve got a few minutes before he comes for you.”

This makes my eyes widen. “Why would he come for me?”

Zane shrugs. “My guess is to apologize. I made it pretty clear he’s an entitled idiot.” I smirk, and Zane’s lip twitches. “And you get under his skin.”

“Yeah, it’s a nasty habit.”

“He’s off to college come fall, and you’ll be left behind.”

He knocks on the desk and opens the door.

My eyes widen. Korbin is standing on the opposite side. Zane doesn’t seem surprised as he glances at me over his shoulder, brow raised in a told-you-so look. “Careful, Lyric, is all I’m saying. We know this town.”

He turns back to his brother. “You lasted longer than I figured,” he says before stepping past him and leaving us alone.

Korbin stares at me. “Can I come in?”

I dump my bag on the floor, wanting to shout no. This is my space. Instead, I shrug one shoulder. “Since when has Korbin Rose asked?”

He doesn’t deny it as he closes the door and glances around. His eyes reach the desk where I’d been sketching. My fists ball as he moves toward it, then moves a few sheets.

“These are yours?” He picks one up. “They’re good.”

It takes everything in me not to rip it out of his grip. “What do you want, Rose?” My voice still carries a bite, making him release the sketch.



He stares at the desk as his words fall. “I want to apologize.”

I am glad Zane had prepared me; his words don’t take me off guard, and I let out an exasperated sigh. “I told you it was nothing.”

Blond brows narrow. “I’m talking about school, not Saturday. I’m not apologizing for what happened.” The force in his tone makes mine hike.

“I’m over that crap.” I slump down in the chair, spinning it to face Korbin as he struggles to study me.

*Good luck, buddy.*

I move my arm in front of me as he remains silent. “Spit it out. Make your conscience clear. I’ve got work to do.”

He sits in the chair opposite and leans forward, elbows on his knees as he wipes his thumb over his mouth. Fuck, an act of pure sex. It shows off the veins in his arm and makes me itch to lick them.

I hate how he’s able to affect me. How those silver eyes arouse a warmth in my gut and bring back memories of his lips on mine.

“None of it was your fault,” he says, talking to the floor.

“Why?” I ask the question which has been burning on my tongue for years.

He turns and holds my eyes. “It was a mixture of things.” I watch as he places his linked fingers on top of his head, tilting it back. “Fuck, Zane is right. I’m a spoiled, entitled ass.” He runs a hand over his face before holding my eyes, then after a beat he continues, “It stops today. No one will say anything to you.”

My nostrils flare, and I stand. “Leave.” His mouth drops. “You heard. Get the fuck out and take your brother’s advice. Stay the hell away from me.”

Korbin stands so we’re eye to eye and tilts his head. “What did I say to piss you off?” The idiot seems puzzled.

“Do you think you can show up in my space telling me you’ve told the guard dogs to back off, and what, I’m meant to be happy? You should have done it when we were fourteen,” I growl.

“I’m trying to make up for it now.”

It’s too late. The damage is already done I wanted to yell but kept my mouth shut as we scowl at each other.

All of what Korbin and his friends did blazes behind my eyelids. I crave to hurt him. To make him feel the same pain that coils around my bones like ivy.

“Do you want to kick me in the balls?”

“What?” I blink, coming back from the past.

Korbin widens his legs and nods. “Kick me in the balls. You can’t say you haven’t— Crap, fuck!” he curses as he falls to his knees, his face red as he heaves.

I glare down at him, smirking and watching as he drops to his side, moving into the fetal position. “You’re right. It helped.” I laugh as he peers at me through his watery eyes.

Zane strides in and sees his brother on the floor, cupping his junk. He looks at me. I can’t help the smirk that crawls onto my face. “Your brother thought me kicking him in the balls would help... he was right.”

Zane tries to cough back the laughter as he smirks down at his brother. “You okay?” Korbin blows a breath, nodding, and Zane shakes his head and closes the door behind him.

I go to the small fridge and grab an ice pack, then squat in front of him. “Here.”

He takes it, pressing it between his legs. “I forgot how much it hurts,” he grumbles and sits against the wall. His eyes trail over me. “The dark, brooding look is more you than those stupid polo shirts.”

I glare, even if Korbin is right.

I feel more in my skin with my hair dropping into a mess against my forehead. Chinos and polo shirts always felt like I

was playing dress-up.

This is who I am now.

He pushes off the floor and comes over to me. Setting his arm on either side of my chair, blocking me in. I dig my fingers into the fabric to stop myself from shoving him away.

“It’s hot.” He licks his lips. “Your pale skin shows the green of your eyes.” His tone is throaty, causing my breath to hitch. Lust appears in his eyes.

“Fuck it,” he snaps out before his mouth is on mine. I try to resist, to hold back, but my lips move with him, parting beneath his soft ones. Korbin doesn’t hesitate and sweeps his tongue inside. A sigh escapes him, making my body heat.

Remembering whom I’m kissing, I yank my lips away. We’re both breathing heavily, staring at each other.

“I’m sorry. More than you’ll ever realize,” he breathes against my swollen mouth as he tugs on my hoop. He likes the ring. His nose moves up my cheekbone to my ear. “I want you, Lyric.”

“You’re not gay.”

He leans backward and frowns, opening and closing his mouth. “Do I need a label?”

I bring my palms to his chest to shove him away and realize my fingers are digging into the material. “It’s intense. When you let it all go, putting it all into one kiss that’s what happens.”

“It’s more than a kiss. I’ve watched you since we were fourteen. You stir something inside me.” Korbin’s eyes flick over my features. “I hate what you made me feel.” He cups my nape. “I don’t want to hate you anymore or fight what I feel. Zane told me to stay away. I tried, but I can’t.”

I scan him, searching for the sarcastic laughter and trickery, but there’s none. All I get is lust, something I never expected to see in Korbin *mother fucking* Rose’s eyes.

The truth.

I have to cram down the burst of laughter. The way my mouth struggles to curl into a smirk.

An idea forms the ultimate payback, to play along with Korbin's needs.

"What are you saying?" I rasp out, flashing my tongue over my hoop.

"I want to try this." He points between us.

"Try this? Do you mean date? Sex? What?"

Panic flares in his eyes. "I want to spend time together. I want to kiss you a lot, and all the other things." He shrugs.

Now my lips arch. Oh, Korbin, I'm going to make you fall for me. I will get you on your knees. Then I will break your fucking heart.

I stand so we're eye to eye and cup his jaw, leaning in slowly. His lips part under mine as I lick the roof of his mouth and use the hardware in my tongue to drive him crazy. Moving my lips to his jaw and running my tongue along the hard bone and soft skin. I hear his breath hitch as I place soft kisses behind his ear. "Lust after me, want me, crave me." I let my breath slide across his skin. "Don't fall in love with me. It will be a mistake." I bite on his lobe, smirking as he hisses.

It's the one warning I am giving you, Korbin, before I rip out your heart.



I glance around the camp field. The bonfire is burning bright, trucks are parked around with guys on their tailgates and girls between their legs.

“I’m out.” I chuck the solo cup as Ashley shakes her brown hair.

“No way. You left last week. Not tonight.” She smiles, biting her lip, bringing her body close to mine. “We can have some fun together,” she whispers flirtily as she draws her finger on my chest.

How does she think it’s appealing? It stinks of desperation. I untangle her arm from around my neck.

My jaw clenches as I stare her down. “I said I’m leaving.”

Anger burns in my veins. The discussion with my father is still fresh in my mind. He wants me to put a ring on Ashley’s finger by the end of the summer, a business deal. It didn’t matter what I thought or felt because it was a sacrifice for the Rose name.

Bullshit is what it is.

The great Rose name comprises a father who barely comes home. A mom whom I have to put to bed. Her face red from crying, her voice slurred from the sleepers after finding out about dad’s latest mistress, but she wouldn’t do crap about it. She’d drowned in depression and alcohol for the next couple of days before resurfacing as if nothing had happened.

Neither of them gave a crap about me. It's all about appearances and having a kid to carry on the precious Rose name.

They never knew where I was or who I was with. Or if I was alive or dead, damn it.

“Who are you cheating on me with?” Ash’s high-pitched tone brings me back to the party, and I pull my head back, pissed. Her eyes narrow as she stares at the cheer squad. “Is it Tiffany? I knew the bitch wanted you. Well, she can’t. You’re mine!” she screeches, stamping her foot.

How old was she? Five!

I’ve had enough of this crap. I glance around at everyone, trying to act as if they aren’t listening.

“We are not together, never have been together. We fucked after I was too drunk to even remember.”

Her eyes widen as her mouth opens and closes. “Asshole,” she screams.

“I’ve been called worse.” I smirk, making her face flush.

Jasper moves in beside us. Ash pouts her lip, a manipulative move. I roll my eyes.

“Did you hear what he said?” She pretends to wipe away a tear as Jasper wraps his arm around her shoulder.

“He didn’t mean it. He’s playing it cool,” he says, speaking in Ash’s ear, eyes narrowing on me. His expression says he can’t understand why I’m not already sliding between her legs.

I shake my head and walk away. Getting into my truck, I slam my door, gunning the engine before reversing out of the field and kicking up mud behind me. A mile down the road, I see a dark figure walking. My fingers tighten around the wheel.

Lyric.

Three days ago, I told him I wanted him. Then I freaked out and stayed away.

He stops as I pull my truck beside him and press the button for my window. “Get in.”

His brows rise, and a smirk crawls over his gorgeous face. My eyes follow him as he saunters around the hood and opens the door.

“Well, hello to you, too.” Sarcasm drips off his smart mouth as he hops in and shuts the door, and our eyes meet. The smirk falls from his lips as his tongue flicks the black hoop.

“What?” I growl, seeing his eyes narrow.

His fingers curl around the handle as his jaw tenses, and he pops the door open, jumping out. “Thanks,” he sneers. “For reminding me who you are.” And slams the door.

I shove mine open. Lyric stops, staring at me with every stride toward him. “Yeah, and what’s that?”

He takes a step closer, our chests touch. “You’re a dick.”

I shove him against my truck, pushing my hips against his. “You want it. Admit it. You want my dick.”

His dark brow lowers before he laughs. “You’re serious right now?” I glare at his words, making him laugh harder. “You are.” His nostrils flare. “I hate you.”

“Shut the hell up!”

“Why, what are you going to do, Rose?” There’s a dare in his tone as he sweeps his arm in the space between us.

“Stop it.” I grab his shoulders, trying to get a hold of my emotions. It wasn’t Lyric I was pissed at. I’d reverted to the old habit of taking all my anger and chucking it at him.

His chin goes higher, and his fingers dig into my top, bunching into the material. “I hate you.” He says slowly, wanting me to hear every syllable.

“You don’t hate me. You want to, but you don’t.” The way he moves his body closer to me, hanging onto my top and pulling me closer, not pushing me away. His pupils dilate, his lips part, telling me what I need to know.

Lyric wanted me.

As messed up as it is. It felt good to be wanted.

Dad wanted me to follow in his footsteps and marry Ashley as a business deal. Mom wanted me to clean up her puke and make sure she didn't overdose on her sleepers.

Ash wanted me because of what it would mean to be married to a Rose.

Lyric just wants me.

“You know nothing about me. Am I attracted to you? Yeah. Doesn't mean I can't hate your guts.”

Not giving him time to react. I cover his mouth with mine, hissing as he bites my bottom lip, causing me to gasp as he holds the skin between his teeth. Pain and pleasure fight to win as he releases my lip and licks it before capturing my mouth and owning me.

I feel the tension fall from my body. This is what I need. Whom I need.

Pushing his hips against mine, a groan falls from my mouth. My hands pull at his top, wanting to touch his bare skin. Lyric pulls me tight against him. The hitch of breath I've craved falls from him.

We break the kiss, our breaths heavy. “Fuck,” I curse, unable to open my eyes briefly. My lashes flutter, seeing Lyric's lips wet and swollen, his eyes dark with lust and a wildness in them.

I lower my head to kiss his neck, remembering the mark and knowing it would have faded by now. I bite his neck where his pulse flutters, hearing him groan as I lick the spot and work my way up to his jaw.

“Stop!” Lyric takes a step back as if to clear his head and takes a deep breath.

Lyric was a hot mess and turned the hell on, and I would have smiled if I wasn't the same.



All I want is to push him against the truck and kiss until our lungs run out of oxygen.

Confusion appears. “What the hell is going on?”

The hottest damn kiss, but I keep it to myself. “I freaked out,” I say, telling him the truth.

He tilts his head, crossing his arms. “I get it, but it doesn’t give you the right to be an ass.”

“My head was a mess before I saw you. My father called me into his office and gave me a ring to give to Ashley.” I hated what I was admitting to him. I hadn’t even told Jasper.

“You’re with Ashley?” An edgy laugh falls from him. “The prince and princess, destined to get married and live happily fucked up together... and what does that make me?” His dark brow lifts. “The joker?”

He doesn’t know how close to the truth he has gotten.

“Like father, like son,” he spits, unable to hide his disgust.

“I’m nothing like him. Nothing.”

“Doesn’t seem that way from where I’m standing. Are you going to take me to your fuck pad?”

Everyone in town knew who my father was and what he did. But no one had ever dared to speak those words.

“What did you say?”

“This town knows who your father is.” He steps toward me and picks up his bag. “Who you are.” He spins on his heels and walks off.

If only he knew the truth. I had only lost my virginity a month ago. Hated it was a drunken fumble with Ashley. No one would believe me. They saw how the girls were around me. They saw my face, my last name. I could have any girl in town.

It wasn’t them I wanted; it was a moody he-devil who, no matter what I did, I couldn’t get out of my head.

I jog after him and spin him to face me. “It’s not Ashley I want. If I did, I could already be inside her.” His nose crinkles up. “I want you. I want to kiss you. Touch you. Damn it, Lyric, you’ve done nothing but mess me up since we kissed.”

His brows rise. “Me?”

“You.” I grab his chin, holding his eyes on mine. “Before I kissed you, life was simpler.” I run my hand across his jaw to his nape. “Now, everything is so damn messed up. I’ve never felt this way!” I lean my forehead against his. “You’re all I think about.” A frown pulls between his brows as I run my thumb over his mouth. “I want to know what makes you tick. What movies do you watch? What bands do you listen to? I want to know you.” It’s what freaked me out the most.

Lyric is beyond a fun summer. I wanted to see the smirk crawl over his lips and chill with him.

I want to see him raw, without the attitude and hurt in his eyes.

He told me he was over what we did, but he isn’t. It didn’t matter what he projected. How badass his attitude had become. It was all a protective mechanism. Lyric didn’t have friends and didn’t trust anyone.

It was my fault. I had broken Lyric, and now I want to take all those sharp edges and fit them back together.

I feel him soften against me, even though his eyes stay guarded. “You’re not with Ashley?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“And you want to try this?”

A part of me didn’t.

I wish I could settle this need with other guys who hide in the closet. Make it meaningless. Use them to scratch an itch.

It might have been possible before I kissed Lyric, but now all I want is him. For the first time, I understand the guys and how they all seem so damn girl crazy. I get it. Lyric makes me feel like I’m going crazy in the best way. The same way

skydiving does, free falling from fifteen thousand feet, the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Through all the uncertainty and fear, Lyric is the one thing that makes sense.

“Okay, if we are doing this, there are some ground rules.” I nod for him to continue, and I try not to get stuck on the if.

“We’ll keep it private until we know what the hell this is.”

I take a breath because I know I’m not ready to come out. “What else?”

“You don’t go near anyone else while we see where this goes.”

“And neither do you.”

He smirks. “There are not a lot of gay men in Hill View.”

“Anything else?”

“Kiss me.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I leaned in, sealing our lips together.

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# Lyric

My mind was still on Korbin last night. For years he had harassed me and thrown homophobic slurs knowing he was gay. Or he isn't as damn well straight as he played.

Which confuses me. Ash and Korbin had been together throughout school, and if the rumors are true, he had slept with most of the girls. Maybe he's bi?

Whatever he is, it has freaked him out. I saw his body tremble, eyes wide, the fear dancing in those stormy grays.

I shouldn't care. Korbin didn't deserve my pity.

He deserved nothing.

"Hey." I jump out of my skin and hate the reaction. I narrow my eyes at Korbin and ditch my smoke, crushing it beneath my shoe while trying to control my damn pulse. My thumb runs over my ring, placing a smirk on my face instead of punching him in his.

"Hey. Here to see Zane?"

He shakes his head, sending blond strands into his eyes as he holds up a bag. I swear his cheeks tint red. "Brought lunch."

I blink and take the bag. Peering inside, I see it's Chinese. "I'm starving."

Zane's brow rises as he sees us walk through the shop. I hold the bag up. "Lunch," I say as we walk into the back

room, closing the door behind us. Korbin wastes no time and pushes me against the wall, shoving his tongue in my mouth.

Korbin always acted like the damn Alpha male. When I'd agreed to whatever this is between us, I should've realized he'd think my mouth would belong to him to take as he wants.

He pulls back slightly but keeps kissing me with quick pecks. "That wasn't planned," he whispers between one kiss and the next.

I smirk against his mouth. "I'm not complaining."

My fist clenches at my side in frustration. I watch those silver eyes turn molten, loving and hating how my words affect him. I lean my forehead against him, and my jaw tightens, hating the pull I feel toward him as I brush my lips over his, barely touching. Our breaths dance in the air between us as I kiss him leisurely, ensuring he feels every stroke of my tongue against his and nibbling his bottom lip.

My lips curve, hearing his gasp as I move my fingers across the top of his jeans, using my little finger to dip beneath the denim. A shiver works through him as his fingers dig into my shoulder.

I have to hold back the smirk. *I'm going to take you to the edge. Have you begging for me, and then I will destroy you.*

Zane shoves the door open, making us drop our hold on each other and take a step back.

"Is it Chinese?" He grins, grabs the bag, and pulls out a box. "I'm starving."

"Make sure there's some for Lyric." Korbin frowns, making me smirk.

I grab my own and hold it up. "Better?"

Korbin's eyes narrow as he sits on the chair, noticing his polo shirt is hanging out. I frown at him as he discreetly lifts his polo to show the thick bulge in his jeans, making me choke on the noodles.

Korbin smirks. The ass. Zane glances between us. "You having some, bro?"

“In a bit.”

Now it is my turn to smirk as I suck noodles through my lips. Zane shrugs before knocking his knuckles on the desk and strolling out.

A burst of laughter falls from me, making Korbin’s eyes narrow before his lips twitch. “Not funny.” He smirks, grabbing his box and digging in. “Haven’t had to hide a damn boner since I was thirteen.”

“Is there a reason you brought me lunch?”

Korbin’s cocky attitude drops as he shrugs. “I wanted to see you.”

“Missed me that much?” I wiggle my brows, playing along.

He dips his head, and his lips curve slightly. Korbin freaking Rose acting shy! Who knew the guy who owns the words *cocky* and *confident* could be shy. “I want us to do something tomorrow night.”

The chopsticks freeze in my hand. My instinct is to say hell no! I wasn’t going anywhere with him alone where there weren’t people.

But for my plan to work, I have to make him think I trust him.

“I’m not going around town with you.”

He scowls but recovers quickly. “I’ve got a place in mind. We won’t be seen by anyone.”

“Like a date.” I grin, playing it off.

He surprises the crap out of me as he nods. We spend the rest of lunch eating in silence, but it isn’t awkward. It’s more like relaxing with each other, which is a joke, considering he stood there front and center a few short weeks ago, watching as I walked to my locker and wearing a smirk on his lips as I yanked the door open, ignoring the words carved into the metal. *You’re going to hell, Sinner, Fag.*

“I gotta get back to work,” I say, dumping the noodles in the trash, the sweet-tasting chicken suddenly turning to ash in my mouth. Korbin frowns as he stands.

“Yeah, I’ve been summoned to my dad’s office.” The tension returns to his muscles. I stop myself from reaching forward and stroking his arm to smooth him. Hating that my reflex is to comfort him, the guy who broke me.

“You don’t want to go?” I ask, curious.

Korbin’s brows pull tighter. “I’ve been working at his office since graduation. Dad doesn’t come in much anymore, which means he wants something.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Korbin shrugs as I follow him to the door. He leans in and presses a hard kiss to my mouth before pulling on my hoop. I have to fight the way my body wants to tense.

“What’s your number?”

My brows slam down and my eyes narrow. “Why?”

“So, I can text you.”

My skin prickles as I remember the sick things his teammates used to send until I closed all my social media. Telling him to fuck off is on the tip of my tongue, but I slam my lips shut. I pull out my phone and airdrop my number.

He smiles as my phone vibrates in my hand. “Save my number. I’ll shoot you a text later.” He winks, pulling the door open and leaves.

I don’t miss the way his body regains all the tension. The laughter in his eyes vanishes and becomes hard, reminding me of the Korbin I went through high school with. No matter how he plays it off, he doesn’t want to see his father. I wonder what their relationship is like. Is it as bad as the rumors around Hill View? The perfect Rose family isn’t so perfect.

I sink into the chair, letting out a deep breath as I stare at the door he’s just disappeared through.

How the hell am I meant to keep this up?

I think about what he and his friends did and the look that'll be on Korbin's face when he realizes what I've done.

The hated and unwanted kid who dared walk the halls of their precious school, the gay freak, who destroys Korbin *motherfucking* Rose and I smirk.

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I'm lying in bed, flicking through the channels as my phone vibrates. Three people have my number, so it doesn't take a genius to determine who's calling. I watch the screen light up and stop before it starts vibrating again. Taking a deep breath, I swipe the screen. "Sup?"

"Hey, I ummm... It's me, Korbin." Then he curses softly, "Crap, you know it's me."

There's an awkward pause. "Did you call for a reason or just to hear my voice?" I taunt.

"I've waited all night to call. Now I don't know what to say."

"Just talk."

"Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you have my curiosity piqued."

There's another awkward pause.

"What are you doing?" Did he seriously just ask me that?

"Is this where you ask me next what I'm wearing?" I joke, hearing him choke on the other side.

I hold back a laugh. Playing with Korbin is so much fun. I let him off the hook and reply, "I'm watching *Dream Home Improvements*."

"I thought you'd have been more into horror?"

"Nah, I hate those movies. Don't tell me you're watching reruns of football."

"*Junkyard Boys*."



“Yeah?” I sit up. “You’re into restoring? Did you see the old Mustang they did?” I whistle.

We talk about the program and the different cars for the next hour. I even put the same channel on, so we’re watching it together. We comment on the bodywork and what color we would’ve used before the big reveal.

“Black.”

“I should’ve guessed,” comes Korbin’s reply.

“And you.”

“Green,” he says without hesitation.

I yawn, seeing it’s one o’clock.

“I’ll let you go.”

“I’ve got to be at the shop early.”

“Night, Casper.”

“Casper?” I grunt.

“It suits you. All that milky pale skin.” His voice is raspy, and the sound curls something in my stomach.

I drop my voice as I say, “Night, Korbin.” I smirk as I hear a hitch of breath then hang up.

I swing my legs over the bed and walk the few steps into the kitchen. Turning the tap on, my fingers clench around the glass as I stare at the faucet. “Fuck,” I growl and tip the water out, unable to drink it without doing my ritual. I turn the water on three times before refilling my glass back up, feeling the tightness in my chest fall away.

I lean against the counter, glancing around the trailer. The flowered wallpaper Mom once put up is peeling off the wall. Everything is taped together, but it’s never bothered me. To me, it is home.

I smirk, thinking of Korbin’s hitch of breath. God, I wished I’d been there to see his face. My mind turns to tomorrow and what we’re doing, feeling my lips curve against the glass. The

move makes me grit my teeth, realizing I'm picturing him in my head and looking forward to seeing him tomorrow.

I can't deny when his mouth met mine, so damn soft, unsure but greedy. I swear, my whole body felt it. He turned me on quicker than a damn light switch. I shake my head; I can't let the lust take me off track.

I have to remind myself this isn't an actual relationship, and I plan to break him. The door opens, and I watch as my dad dumps his bag, pulling off his coat. His eyes are bloodshot, and dark marks circle them. That damn factory is killing him.

"Hey, kid, couldn't sleep?" I shake my head, grab the coffee from the cupboard, and put a spoonful in his cup. I turn the stove on, click, click, click before placing a pan on the heat.

"How was work?"

He shrugs, rubbing a hand over his face. "It pays the bills, mostly." He flops on the faded brown couch.

"If you'd take my money, it would help."

He shoots me a look to shut the hell up. We've had this argument over and over. Dad won't take a cent of my money. He told me to save it for college. I bought groceries, and he kicked up enough fuss.

"Dad, take the bed tonight. You look exhausted, and I'm not getting much sleep."

He hesitates. "It's your room, kid."

"And I'm fine out here. Now go."

He shakes his head like a stubborn old mule.

I pass him a cup of coffee, falling next to him. "I've got a date tomorrow."

Dad never cared about my sexuality. He'd heard the rumors from town that the jocks had spread and sat me down and asked me outright.

I hate that Jasper and Korbin couldn't keep their mouths shut and took my right to tell my dad when I was ready, forcing my hand. Dad grabbed my chin when I didn't answer, lifting my eyes to his. He told me he didn't care. A person's sexuality doesn't define them only the heart they show the world.

"Is it someone I know?"

"Yeah." I nod. "It's early. He's not out."

Dad purses his lips. "And you can live like that, hiding?"

"I leave for college soon. It's not going to be anything serious." I haven't told Dad about Zane's offer, and so far, I've been able to avoid answering him. As much as I'd love an apprenticeship at Marked, I need to get out of this town. But I can't get the words out to tell Zane no.

He glances at me. "Be careful and make sure you wrap it."

"Dad," I groan, feeling my cheeks turn red.

"There are sexually transmitted diseases."

I'm sure my face is bright red. "I'm going to bed."

"Safe sex, Lyric," he yells after me, making me curse as his laughter follows, my lips twitching.

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I get up in the morning to see Dad's already left. He'll kill himself if he carries on like this. I grab my keys to see a packet of condoms next to them.

Where the hell did he get them so early?

The thought Dad already had them makes me feel sick. He was still young at thirty-eight, and I knew women were attracted to him. He has a rugged, mountain-man look.

But no one wants to think of their dad still doing the dirty.

I text Zane, telling him I'm on my way and grab my backpack. At the entrance to the trailer park is a familiar black

SUV. What is he doing here?

My pulse spikes at the sight of him. I don't think my body will ever not react to seeing Korbin, but I keep the smirk on my face as I pull open the door.

“Should I be worried you're here at nine in the morning?”

Korbin leans across his seat, smirking smugly. “I've already been for a run, had a shower, and stopped to get you a coffee.”

The sweet smell hits my nostrils. I grab the cup and bring it to my lips, savoring the sugary goodness.

“Damn, it's good,” I say, unable to remember when I'd had a coffee that wasn't instant. I relax into his seat as he pulls onto the main drag to see him grinning.

“What?” I ask, glaring between him and the cup, thinking he's put laxatives in it, something old Korbin would do.

Why am I referring to him as two different people? My jaw clenches as I glare out the window. High-school Korbin and the one sitting next to me are the same damn person.

“Who knew coffee was your kryptonite? It turns you all soft.” He smiles.

I flick my middle finger, making him laugh. My lips twitch, ignoring how my pulse beats, and not from anxiety. This is different for us, from the hatred. It brings a warm sensation to my chest and relaxes all my muscles.

He pulls around the back. It's empty because Zane won't have clients booked for another hour. Korbin turns off his truck and twists to face me.

Heat appears in his eyes, and he leans over, moving a strand of my hair. His palm slides around my neck, cupping it, and pulls me closer. Korbin surprises the crap out of me as he presses a soft kiss against my neck and inhales.

“Missed you,” he whispers against my skin. His lips move across my jaw to my mouth, lingering, his hand still holding me firmly. “Coffee and Casper,” he hums against my lip, licking it. “It might be my favorite taste.”

I roll my eyes at the stupid nickname, ignoring how it pulls at something deep inside as I look him straight in the eyes. “Never say that again! It’s corny as hell.” Korbin smirks as he waggles his brows. Teasing.

Who knew Korbin Rose could be playful?

The smirk falls from his face, and his eyes widen. “You’re smiling” he gasps, his lips moving to match mine. I take a second to realize what he’s said, and it drops.

No, he can’t make me smile.

It’s not a part of the plan.

His eyes soften. “See you later.” He glances around before placing another gentle peck on my mouth.

“Later,” I mutter, getting out and watching him until his car disappears.

“Hey, doll,” Ruby greets, pulling a blueberry sucker out of her mouth as I walk into the shop.

“Morning, Ruby.” I smile, my head still back on that kiss.

She stares at me, her lips twisting as her brows come down. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I walk past her into the back room and sink into my chair, shaking my head. We’ve kissed loads, wild, angry, and passionate, but sweet isn’t one of them. Korbin isn’t sweet. He’s a jerk who made my life hell. I don’t want sweet morning kisses and coffee or him calling me Casper.

I want to hurt him.

Make him hate himself like he made me hate who I am. He ruined me.

*Korbin stalks toward me, his chin lifting, blond brow slamming down. He stands in front of me. I can’t take my eyes off the pulse in his neck, how fast it flutters underneath his skin.*

*The sound of a bang brings me back to reality. My tray of food is on the floor, making my eyes sting. It's the only warm meal I'll have. Dad has another two days until his check, and we only have a few slices of bread and cheese left. I'll tell him I've eaten. Dad needs it more than I do.*

*Korbin's lip curls, baring his teeth as his eyes trail over me. Sweat trickles down my neck, feeling the eyes of the students watching us.*

*"You stupid?" he asks, his voice loud, echoing off the walls. The football team behind him sniggers. "I asked you a question." He pokes my chest, making me stumble back.*

*My eyes flick back to his hard, cold ones. I've never seen someone look so emotionless. "Let me go," I demand, hating how my voice shakes. He takes a step closer, standing a head above me.*

*"Let me put it so even you can understand. No one wants you here." He smirks, and I hate that overconfident half-twitch of his lips.*

*He nods, and the guys circle, grabbing me as I struggle. "Get off me."*

*My chest tightens as they lift me in the air. I'm totally helpless. Pathetic. My breathing comes in short pants, drowned out by the students' laughter. My heart's beating violently against my rib cage.*

*They take me outside and shove me into the dumpster. My stomach jerks from the smell as I cover my nose and mouth with my hand.*

*I go to jump out but Korbin peers over the edge. "Stay. This is where trash belongs." The team surrounds me and ensures I stay until the day's end.*

*Why did Mom pay for me to come here? I hate it. Hate them all.*

*I walk home, the smell invading my nostrils. Luckily Dad isn't home. I rip my clothes off, not even waiting for the water to warm up, and scrub my skin until it's bright pink.*

*My reflection catches my eye from the shower, and I see it all, see everything they say I am. My lip curls at the sight of the guy in the mirror. "Pathetic loser!" I scream, jumping out, and slamming my fist into the mirror. I glare at the cracks, seeing my reflection disoriented, the truth of who I am. Heat fills my chest as I scratch my skin, trying to reach the pain. My breathing is too quick, and my lungs scream at me as I try to suck in oxygen. I feel my throat constrict, and pins and needles shoot through me. I'm dying. This is it. I slide down the door, leaning my head back against the wood. A salty taste hits my lips, and I realize I'm crying. Another sob breaks from me as if it's going to tear me apart. My finger clenches around my phone to call for help. I see the number through blurry vision as the pain in my chest intensifies. Images of Korbin, his friends, and everything they said and did attack me at once, and I loosen my grip. "Who would miss you?" I wheeze as darkness claims me.*

I grit my jaw as it all comes back to me. How Dad found me and rushed me to the hospital. A panic attack is what the doctors said. It was the start of them alongside the anxiety, the intrusive thoughts, and the rituals.

The worst part is I started to believe them that day. The words Korbin spat at me. Made me think I was worthless and destroyed my self-esteem.

I remember the pain as I tried to work out what I'd done. Why did they all hate me so much?

Most of all, I remember staring at my reflection and not recognizing the boy I saw. Instead, I saw everything they said I was and hated whom I saw staring back.



I wait outside the trailer park for Casper. My eyes run over the place. Most trailers are barely standing, the grass overgrown.

It's depressing.

My fingers clench around the wheel, thinking he's got to come back here. This is where Zane grew up. Seeing it and hearing about it are two completely different things. The way I live compared to here is night and day.

A figure appears, catching my attention. Lyric lifts his hand and acknowledges a group of guys sitting around one trailer.

I draw in a gasp as he gets closer. "Damn," falls from my lips.

An open-collared black shirt clings to his lean torso. A studded belt hangs over his slim hips leading to his ripped jeans and boots. Loose strands of hair land above his brows in a wet mess as if he hasn't been out of the shower long. A smirk plays on his lips.

He's gorgeous.

It's more than sexual attraction. It's how he looks at me when all the bull between us falls away. The way his lips move into a sexy smirk when he finds something funny. His sarcastic, smart mouth.



Ever since we kissed, he's consumed me. The slight hitch of his breath drives me crazy and makes me want to kiss him until I hear it.

I savor these private moments between us. It's as if I'm holding my breath until we meet again.

I knew I was different when all the guys could talk about was the girls in school. Yeah, they were pretty, but I was never attracted to them. When I saw Lyric, I knew why.

I hated what he made me feel. Tried my god damn hardest to hide that part of myself. I went along with the guy talk. Dated girls I had no interest in. It was expected of me. Even hating Lyric, I still felt this draw to him. I knew the urge I've always fought was right.

I'm gay.

Accepting who I am has brought some of my walls down, and the anger no longer lives on the surface. I allow myself to feel. The thoughts don't bring the same shame they used to, not when Casper looks at me the way he does, the way it makes me feel.

I hate how I projected my hate onto Lyric. He never deserved it. Lyric is much braver than me. Fuck, I would've never forgiven myself if I were him.

I know things are moving fast between us. But all the feelings I've suppressed have broken through the surface. Now I've unlocked the chains, my soul feels as if it's experiencing things for the first time. As if I've been imprisoned in darkness and Lyric has the key to my freedom.

The passenger door opens, and Lyric looks at me while running his tongue over his hoop. Who knew a damn piece of metal could be so sexy.

"Hey."

I swallow nervously. "I feel like I should change." Running my hand over my nape. I wanted Casper to be comfortable and dumped my polo shirts and chinos. Swapping them for more casual jeans and a T-shirt with my cap on backward.

Those olive-green eyes rake over me. I swear it feels like he's running his fingers across my skin. "Don't. I like it." Lyric tilts his head. "You seem less tense."

"I got you something."

His eyes narrow. "If you pull out flowers, I swear I'll smash you over the head with them before leaving your ass here."

My face warms as I try to hide the single stalk I'd bought earlier, and I chuck my hoodie over it, grabbing the bag instead.

"I noticed all the wrappers on your desk at the shop." Lyric frowns and peers into the bag, pulling out M&M's, Peanut Butter Cups, and Snickers.

He smiles genuinely and kisses me, making my pulse pound. Casper goes to pull away, but not allowing him to get far, I chase his mouth and press mine to his, kissing him lightly. As always, the kiss doesn't stay soft for long. I tug on the hoop, causing Lyric to hiss, wanting him to open up like I've been thinking about all day.

He doesn't disappoint. His lips part. I don't waste a second tasting him. This kiss is different, hesitant, almost as if we're kissing for the first time.

I groan as he breaks away.

"We need to move. Someone could see us."

My jaw clenches. "I hate that we have to hide."

Fingers come up and stroke my jaw. "We're not ready."

"I know," I breathe out. He's right, I'm not ready, but at the same time, I don't want to hide what we have. It makes me feel too much like my dad and how he hides his mistresses. Lyric isn't like them. I want to say more but can't force my mouth to work. It's as if the words won't come. I can't describe all these feelings, the intensity of them. What Lyric means to me.

All I understand is the sharp barbs and hateful relationship my parents have.

He smiles at me, almost shy. “I’m ready for you to woo me.” He winks, breaking the tension.

As we hit the main street, I reach over to stroke his leg. His thigh tenses, and I go to pull my hand away. He covers mine to hold it there. Long fingers slide in between mine. They’re not dainty. They’re masculine and rough, and I love the feeling. It settles the uneasiness which constantly coats my skin.

“So, where are you taking me?” he asks, shoving a Peanut Butter Cup in his mouth.

“It’s a place I go to escape.” I didn’t want to go far and spend most of the night driving my truck, but I want to stay out of the eyes of Hill View. With only 3,000 people, the whole town would know within an hour where we were.

I want him to myself.

The dust kicks up around my truck as I turn down a road most people would miss. The sun setting behind the trees gives way to an old ranch house. I drive around the back and shut off the engine.

“What’s this place?” Casper frowns, bending his head so he can see through the window.

I stare at it through his eyes. The place is overgrown, the white paint is peeling, and a large wrap-around porch is falling apart. Some of the stonework needs replacing, but it still stands strong.

“It used to be my grandparents’,” I answer and jump out, stopping myself from racing around to open his door.

Do guys do that?

He meets me at the hood and leans against it. “It’s nice. They used to love it. You can tell.”

“Yeah.” I link our fingers, walking toward the door. “I used to spend all my time here. They left it to me. One day I plan to do it all up. It’s going to take a while.”

“You’re not going to hire someone?”

“No. My pawpaw built it with his own hands for my grammie before they had money. She drew it on the back of a napkin. It was her dream house. I want to do the same.”

This place is more than what it appears. It represents what I want. Strong foundations. The love my grandparents shared here. I want this to become my home, a place where I belong.

My heart tightens as a flash of a future dances in front of me.

There’s only one face I see, Lyric’s.

A sharp intake brings me back to reality. Casper can’t mask his surprise. A soft smile lights up as he wraps his arms around my neck. “I like that idea,” he whispers, giving me a peck.

“What was the kiss for?”

He frowns before covering it with a twitch of his lips. “Do I need a reason?”

I shake my head, opening the door. He’s silent as he glances around, taking it all in. I haven’t changed a thing. My grandma’s soft pink walls cover the main living area with her overstuffed couch and matching cushions. Photos hang on the wall above the fireplace like a time capsule. A light blue kitchen with an old wooden table takes up the back of the house, and Pawpaw’s chair sits proudly.

“This place has good memories for you?” Casper leans against the counter next to me.

He understands what I don’t say in a way no one else does. “Every Saturday, Grammie had a plate of blueberry pancakes waiting for me, and Pawpaw would sit right there.” I point to his chair. “Without them...” I shrug as a sigh falls.

It was hard losing them. My grandparents were the only ones who showed me love and what family actually meant. I’ve felt lost since they’ve been gone as if I don’t belong anywhere.

“Without them, I would’ve been lonelier. Grammie went first, cancer. Pawpaw died six months later of a heart attack,

but it was more of a broken heart. Fifty-five years of marriage meant he didn't know how to live without her."

"Wow." Lyric blinks. "I'm glad you had them." He strolls over to the photos on the wall, his mouth twisting as he studies my childhood playing out in front of him. Not the one Hill View saw. Nope, this was the Korbin who wore a mismatch of clothes. Played in a blown-up pool filled with a hose, with toy animals and trucks. Covered in oil and eating sandwiches with dirty fingers. Not the cold, emotionless guy everyone now sees. I miss that boy, how happy he was, and how free he felt.

"Is that Blaire, your mother?" he asks while studying one of the photos. A young girl sits on the fence, dressed in mud-covered boots, a plaid shirt, and jeans. A far cry from the woman who walks around town in thousands of dollars' worth of clothes and even more in jewelry.

"Yeah, wanna hear the biggest joke? She is the Rose. All the money my grandparents had, and this is where they lived. The moment she married my father, it all changed." He was a greedy son of a bitch. Bart Rose didn't want the humble life my grandparents had built. No, Bart wanted to sit on a throne he didn't even create.

My pawpaw left the business to my mother. The sickest part, instead of helping mom, Bart kept her hooked on the sleepers and the house stocked with booze, so he could keep playing her like the puppet master he is. In control of all our strings.

I'd found this out after chucking every pill and bottle out, and it had all been fully stocked the next day while Mom was still passed out.

The saddest part, my grandfather had to watch his daughter become the cold woman she is. It destroyed him.

"Is that a...?" He leans closer to one of the pictures, bringing me back to reality. "A red 1970 Dodge Charger R/T?"

I nod, standing behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist. "Yeah, Pawpaw loved that car."

“He sold it?” he exclaims, his voice dropping.

Hiding my smile, I grab his hand to take him back outside and open the wooden doors to the garage.

“No way,” Lyric gasps as he releases my hand and pulls off the dust sheets. He moves in closer, running his fingers against the bodywork. “Does she still run?”

“She?” I laugh, and he nods, turning toward me. “Nah, she needs a lot of work.”

“Fix it,” he practically yells.

I cage him in as an idea forms. “What about you help me this summer?”

“Do you even know how?”

“I spent hours in this garage. Pawpaw showed me everything he knew, and we can look up what we don’t know online.”

His eyes soften at the mention of my grandfather as his top teeth scrape his plump bottom lip.

“I’ll even let you drive her first,” I add.

Saying it aloud sounds perfect. Now I have a way of making sure we spend time together. Leaving soon wasn’t something I wanted to think of.

“You don’t play fair,” he says, eyeing the car before nodding. “Let’s do this.” Our lips seal the deal.

I turn the TV on when we go back into the house. We both settle on the couch as the door knocks. He jerks off the couch and glares wildly between the door and me.

“You said no one knows about this place.” His eyes narrow, his chin coming out, the attitude he usually wears rolling off him.

“It’s the pizza.” I frown, seeing his thumb move over his silver ring, his chest moving fast, and his eyes widening like a startled animal.

“Pizza?” He nods. “Pizza,” he says, repeating himself as he blows out a breath.

I nod as something in my stomach clenches and pull my wallet out. Casper’s reaction doesn’t sit right, and I can’t put my finger on what it was, but it made me uneasy, wanting to go and soothe him, hold him tight.

I pay and tip the guy and take the three pizzas and soda. It’s too much, but I wasn’t sure what Lyric liked.

Lyric is still standing, his dark brow rising when he sees the boxes, and his lips pull into a smirk. I see it’s a cover to throw people off, but what’s happening with him?

“Are we expecting anyone?” he laughs.

I shrug awkwardly. “I wasn’t sure what you like.”

He sits at the table, lifting the lid and licking his lips. “You could’ve asked. Buffalo chicken is my favorite, but I eat anything.” He bites into the slice, closing his eyes and humming. “Ummm... this is good. You need to taste it.” Finishing off the piece, he grabs another.

“It’s from Louie’s. Nothing special.”

His forced smirk is back. I’m beginning to notice the difference between this and the real one. The real one has his lips twitch as if being pulled by an invisible string, or he’s fighting it. The fake one crawls over his lips, slightly narrowing his eyes.

“It is when you’ve never had it.”

Shame works over me. “I didn’t...”

“It’s all good. Dad makes us a special pizza.” He laughs at my confusion. “Toasted bread, ketchup, and cheese. Best damn pizza,” he laughs.

“Your dad sounds like a good man.”

“He works his ass off. We don’t have much, but we make it work.”

“And you get on with him?”

He nods around another bite and waits until he's swallowed. "Yeah, we're close. It's always been the two of us."

I drop the slice and wipe my mouth, watching Lyric eat like he is starved. "It must've been nice, and your mom?"

His body tenses before he leans back and shrugs. "We both know that story. Bethany calls when she remembers she has a son. Out of guilt or some other fucked up reason, you can pick."

"Yeah, I know a thing or two about crappy parents." I can't help the snort. "Dad is barely home, and Mom..." I stop myself. Mom was harder to talk about. I still remember how she used to be. How she'd smile and laugh before Bart sucked the life out of her. "Mom isn't much better."

"I've heard." Is all he says. "You and Zane seem close."

I smile, thinking of my brother. "We are. Zane nearly whipped my ass when he discovered what happened between us." My chest tightens. "I've already said it, but I'm sorry."

He pauses, biting into his sixth slice. Damn, the guy can eat. "I know," he says but doesn't look at me.

Silence washes over us. "Want to watch a movie? No horror." I smirk. He rolls his eyes and glances at the pizza. "Bring it with you."

"Nah, I'm good." He wipes his mouth and moves over to the couch, getting comfortable as I turn on a new trending action movie. I move toward him and freeze. I'd done this with girls, but did it work the same?

He glances at me and pats the place next to him. "Come here." His voice is soft.

I hesitate for a second before sinking next to him. I wait for the awkwardness, but it never comes. Lyric runs his fingers across my thigh as the titles come on. I don't think he notices as he laughs at something.

I can't concentrate on what's happening in the movie. Casper's body heat and his fingers on my leg make me shiver.



I ball my hands into a fist.

Tonight is about spending time together and getting to know him. I can only think about tasting his hot mouth, how I want his fingers to move higher, like a damn sex-starved, horny teenager.

My body feels full of pent-up tension when the movie ends, and I don't want the night to be over.

I twist toward Casper to see his eyes already on me. He leans forward, holding my face and placing a closed kiss on my mouth. My eyes close when he bites my lip to open up. Lyric wastes no time stroking his tongue with mine. A hitch of breath falls from his lips moving his body closer and pushing me back. Lyric pulls away.

“This, okay?”

I can't answer, panting against his mouth and nodding.

I spot the smirk before he takes my mouth, deepening the kiss. A shiver goes through me with the weight of him.

Casper breaks the kiss, and before I can protest, his lips meet my jaw, nipping and sucking to my ear. “Keep groaning like that and I won't be able to stop.” His raspy voice curls around my dick, sending my hips into his. A tightness appears in my chest as a swarm of locusts takes over my stomach, making me freeze.

He pauses. “Korbin?” he questions, pulling back.

The expression of pure lust in his eyes removes the olive, making them appear pitch black. Wet lips part as soft pants escape them. My fingers dig into his shirt to pull him back to me. I want to rip his top off and touch his bare skin. My dick twitches at the thought and those damn locusts come back.

He sits back, sensing my hesitation. I push up, my fingers curling into a fist, and my blunt nails dig into my palms.

“I don't think I'm ready.” My voice is deeper than I've ever heard. My body is hot as if my blood is burning.

It all feels right. I've never been so turned on. So why the hell is there a swarm of locusts in my gut?

“It’s okay.” He smirks, standing. “I’ve got to get going, anyway.”

I want to yell no, missing Lyric’s touch already; confusion makes me stand and follow him.

Casper walks out to my truck as I lock up, cursing myself the whole time, feeling more confused than ever.

The ride home is silent. My stomach clenches as we pull up outside the trailer park.

“I almost forgot my bag of goodies.” He reaches in the back for his bag of candy before I can stop him. “What the...?” He pulls out the flower. Lyric’s eyes widen, staring at it, then at me. “You... Did you? Is this for me?”

I’m glad it’s dark as my cheeks burn. “It was stupid.” I try to pull it off him.

“No,” he says, staring at the flower, running his fingers over the orange head. “I’ve never seen one like this before.”

“The lady at the shop called it the bird of paradise.”

He nods, not taking his eyes off it, his lips pulling into a soft smile. “Thanks.”

I grab his chin and kiss him hard, trying to show him what I can’t say. “Saturday?”

“Saturday?”

“We can start work on the car if you’re not at the shop.”

He glances at me, running his tongue over the hoop. “I’m not sure it’s still a good idea?”

I curse, rubbing the back of my nape. “I messed up tonight.”

“You didn’t. I never want to force someone into something they aren’t ready for.”

My fingers tighten on the wheel as I stare out the window. “What are you saying?”

“Maybe we should hit the brakes. Give you time to work out what you want,” Lyric mutters.

I can't answer. My chest is too tight. Taking my silence as an answer, Lyric jumps out and makes it three feet before I shove my door open and jog after him.

His brow hikes as he watches me. I open my mouth to speak and slam it shut. "Give me a minute."

Lyric nods as I run my fingers through my hair, walking a couple of feet away, kicking the dirt with the toe of my sneakers trying to put what I feel into words. "This is all new to me. My brain is still trying to adjust. I don't know how to rewire it or something." He goes to answer as I grab his shoulder to silence him, needing him to understand. "I grew up thinking, hearing this is wrong, what I am is wrong. I hid, then you come along."

Lyric's brows come down. "You hated me because you're gay."

"No! Yes." I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the roots before shooting Lyric a look revealing how I felt. I let him see how my body trembles. "I hated what you made me feel, what it meant."

He steps back, throwing his arms out wide, eyes narrowing. "So why now? What's different?"

I ignore the anger I can feel vibrating off him and grab him, placing my lips against his temple. "It's you. Through it all, it's been you. I'm so tired of fighting it, what it means, what *you* mean," I whisper against his skin, opening to the vulnerability of what it all means.

"Korbin," he breathes with a sigh.

"Give me Saturday, please."

The fight leaves him, and he nods. "Okay."

I press my mouth to his, and even as my lungs burn, I keep my mouth pressed against his, my hands on his back, holding him tight against me. I only break the kiss when I get lightheaded.

Neither of us speaks. As Lyric walks away, I lean against the hood of my truck until the lights in his trailer comes on,

and I can see he's inside and safe.

I curse myself as I slam the door of my truck. My fingers clench around the wheel. I have until Saturday to work out my crap because I can't lose him.

This thing between us is more.

He is more.

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# Lyric

I t's been seven days since I've seen Korbin and he freaked out.

I get it. I do! It takes time to work out your feelings.

Why you were non-intentionally checking out guys. How the guys at school all talk about the girls, which ones they like. How you study them, trying to see the same. Then comes the realization you haven't got a type of girl because girls are not your type.

It comes with the fear of will you be accepted? What will everyone say? Will you be hated?

It is why people hide their sexuality to live a "*normal*" life.

What the hell is 'normal' anyway?

Hotshot, alpha male, the straightest guy in high school. The same guy who bullied me about being gay yet isn't straight. The fucking irony of it.

The thick line of Korbin's cock in his jeans. The red flush coating his cheeks and neck. The way his pupils were dilated, leaving only a ring of silver, was all evidence.

Yeah, Korbin was turned on, and as much as I want to destroy him, I wasn't into pressuring him into something he wasn't ready for. He might never be.

It's why I'm staring at my phone with the message I've written to cancel today.

“You okay?” I jump, dropping my phone and cursing as Zane leans against the door, arms over his chest, the light catching on his silver rings.

“Yeah.” I pick up my phone and turn back to my sketch. Zane has asked me to draw a dagger but to make it feminine.

He picks up my drawing. “This it?”

“Yeah.”

It’s about three inches long with an intricate gold handle, adding as much detail as possible without risking it fading into one solid piece in a few years. I’ve added a ruby heart near the end of the handle. The steel blade finishes at a sharp point, and it will look real with shading. The blade and handle are entwined with a green stalk and thorns plus two red roses. Petals falling and two leaves finish it. One has a droplet of blood hanging on the edge.

My gut clenches as he runs his hand over his chin. All the self-doubt floods me as he shakes his head before his mouth curves.

“Damn, this is good. I’m proud of you.”

I swallow, turning my head away as my face warms. No one else apart from my dad has ever told me that. I want to believe him, but it’s almost like there’s a forcefield surrounding me, keeping the good out.

“Thanks,” I mutter, rubbing my neck.

My phone vibrates. Korbin’s number displays as I let it go to voicemail. Zane watches my phone dance along the desk, lifting his pierced brow.

“You going to get that?”

I shrug.

He watches me for a beat before closing the door, then asks, “What’s he done?”

When I don’t answer, Zane takes a seat furthest away. He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “I swear to you, it won’t

get back to my brother. Something tells me you need someone to help you with this.”

“And that’s you?” I try not to smirk as I arch my brow.

His lips curve as he relaxes, a cocky smirk making him and Korbin look so much alike. “Try me.”

“He took me on a date. We had pizza, watched a movie and he even bought me a bird of paradise.”

His brows shoot up, “He bought you a bird?”

“The flower!” I have to hold back a laugh. He looks like one of those cartoon characters, his eyes popping out of his head.

“Wow, okay, give me a minute to take it in.” He runs a hand through his hair again, eyeing me. “We’re talking about Korbin, right?” He shakes his head. “Damn, who knew the boy could be smooth,” he laughs.

This time I smirk. “It was... nice.”

“Nice doesn’t sound good.”

“He’s a decent guy when he’s not tormenting you.”

“He is.” He smiles. “But...?”

I feel my skin warm. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Leave out any details, some things a brother doesn’t need to imagine.” He fakes a shudder.

“We got heavy, and he freaked out,” I say, trying to put it as simply as possible.

“You’re a bright kid. You must have seen this coming. Korbin tried to convince himself he was straight. Now he has all these feelings he doesn’t know what to do with. There will be times when those old thoughts raise their heads.”

Leaning forward, I run my finger over my lips. “I get it. I do. But I don’t want to pressure him into something.”

Zane’s brows lift. “Are we talking about the same guy? Because no one can make him do anything he doesn’t want to.”

“His mom can, and we both know Bart does.”

Zane’s jaw clenches. “Fair point.”

“I don’t want to be like them.” Disgust curls around my words as Korbin rings again.

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“I tried to break it off. Give Korbin some time to work out how he’s feeling.”

“And?”

“He told me to give him today. I kind of agreed to help rebuild his grandfather’s Dodge Charger.”

“Give him today.” He knocks his knuckles against the desk as he stands.

“Why?” I get up, knowing he’s holding something back.

He glances over his shoulder at me. “He took you to the ranch?” It comes out as a question, but he already knows the answer.

I nod.

“His grandparents loved him, not the suffocating, toxic love Bart and Blaire show. They gave him a taste of what was real in the world. The place is special to him. If he took you there, you mean more to him than even Korbin realizes.” I open my mouth and shut it, stunned by Zane’s words as he leaves.

The phone rings again, and I swipe my fingers across it.

“Where are you?” Korbin’s voice comes through strained.

“At the shop. I’m leaving now.”

“You’re still coming?” Some of the tension drops from his tone.

“I’m not sure—”

“You said...” He cuts himself off and curses. “I know I fucked up.”



“Stop saying that, you didn’t. I’m not sure if this is moving too fast.”

“Give me today, and if you still want it to end... I’ll leave you alone,” he grits the words out as if he hates them.

“Okay.” I blow out a breath. “I’ll go home and get changed. See you later.”

I’m met with a few beats of silence when his voice comes through. “See you soon, Casper.” I suck in a gasp at hearing the damn nickname as he hangs up.

Thirty minutes later, I’m driving down the same dusty road when the ranch appears between the trees with that massive wrap-around porch that sets it off. Underneath the work that needs to be done, you can see how stunning the place could look.

It would be where as a kid walking past, I’d want to live. You can imagine having coffee on the porch as the sun rises, a golden Labrador racing around the garden. It’s a place that should be filled with love.

A home.

I park my dad’s truck next to Korbin’s, blowing out a breath as I grab the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hop out. Hearing a radio play from the garage, I make my way over and walk through the door then suck in a breath.

Damn.

Korbin is bent over the hood wearing a white tank top covered in oil and grease. Defined muscles move beneath his skin as his wrist twists on something under the hood. His skin glistens with sweat. Overalls are tied off at his waist. Pure sex. Every damn fantasy playing through my mind at the sight. My dick also notices and presses against its denim jail.

A deep furrow appears as he stands back and rubs his face with the back of his hand, spreading grease across his cheek. He grabs his phone and curses, picking up a wrench and chucking it against the shelf.

He turns and catches sight of me. I hear a sharp intake of breath as he moves around the hood and comes closer but keeps a few feet between us.

“You came.” His tone is raw, as his fingers clench beside him.

“I did.” My voice matches his.

I don’t know who moves first or if we do it together, but our bodies press against each other, and our mouths meet.

There’s no teasing. Our tongues clash, and groans escape the surrounding air. I deepen the kiss, moving my hand to his nape, holding him there, taking control of the kiss and leaving Korbin with nothing to do but follow.

I move us until I feel Korbin hit the side of the car, not removing my mouth, kissing him with a need I didn’t know was possible. Only releasing his mouth to breathe. Unable to keep my mouth off him, I lick along the hard bone of his jaw to his ear and bite the lobe, causing him to hiss and thrust his hips forward.

I smile against his skin as I work down his neck, and Korbin moves his head, giving me better access. My fingers dig into his waist as I push my hardness against his, rolling my hips, causing us both to pant and hiss.

He freezes, and his body tightens. I go to pull away as his fingers dig into my shoulders. “No,” he grits out, squeezing his eyes shut and smashing his lips on mine.

I tear my mouth away. “Korbin?”

“Fuck, fuck,” he roars, moving away, looking at me like a lost boy.

“It’s okay,” I pant, trying to control my breathing.

“No.” He grips his hair, putting more space between us. “I don’t understand!” he practically cries and slams his fist into the wall, leaving behind a red streak. I look down at his hand and see his skin’s broken.

As much as I could relish in the pleasure of seeing Korbin breaking in front of me, it doesn’t bring the same gratification

I thought it would, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

“Talk to me.” Korbin’s brow slams down, and he shakes his head. “Drop the macho crap. Talk to me unless you want me to walk away. I can and I will.”

He grits his jaw, eyes narrowing at the threat before giving up the internal fight he seems to have. “I don’t know how to explain it. I’m not good with feelings,” he grits out, turning away.

“Would it help if I asked you a question?”

He shrugs, still unable to meet my eyes.

I lean against the car, facing him. “Are you attracted to me?”

“Is that a serious question?” I raise my brow, waiting for him to answer. “Yes!” He points to the door. “Didn’t I show you!” Cursing, he shakes his head before holding my eyes, “It’s been a week, and it felt like damn months.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Are you?”

“You’re Korbin Rose. Who isn’t,” I grunt. His brows slam together. I push off the car and move in front of him, then press the pad of my thumb against his lips. “It’s more than the face or this package”—motioning to his body— “which I like a lot, but it’s you,” I add. “When you’re not being an ass, you’re a pretty decent guy.” I frown because the words don’t taste like a lie. “So, are you going to tell me what happened?”

“When we kiss, I’ve never been more turned on.” He grabs his hard dick, through the overalls showing the proof. “As things get hot between us, I get this feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“Don’t kick me in the balls.” Korbin tries to joke, but I’m sure he’s pre-warning me. I’m not going to like what’s about to come out of his mouth.

I cross my arms over my chest and take a defensive stance. “Okay,” I drawl.

“It’s like a damn swarm of locusts has taken flight in my gut! I don’t get it. I like what we do,” he reassures me. “But

they won't go away."

I try. Honestly, I do. But a bark of laughter comes out, and I bend over, holding my side as water falls from my eyes. Seeing Korbin getting pissed makes me laugh harder. I hold my hand up to speak, but more laughter comes. I can't remember the last time I'd laughed so hard.

Once I've controlled myself, I place a smirk on my lips. "Those locusts, as you put it"— my lips twitch— "are normal."

His narrowed eyes widen, and his jaw drops. "It is?"

"It's a fluttery feeling and sometimes tingles?"

"Yeah, that's it." He moves closer as if he's a kid finding out about wizards for the first time. It's actually adorable.

"Butterflies." I can't help my lips from curving.

His eyes narrow as he turns away. "Don't be a dick."

Ignoring his attitude, I continue, "They happen when you're nervous, excited, or attracted to someone."

"Bull," he sneers but looks like he wants to believe me.

I walk past him to his phone and hold it out. "Look it up." He scowls but takes the phone, throwing me a glare before his fingers work over the screen. I see his eyes widen and shoot to mine when he reads it.

"You're not lying." His teeth catch the edge of his bottom lip. "How come I didn't know this?"

His parents have messed him up more than he realizes.

"Have you ever had them before with someone else?" I ask.

He shakes his head, staring at me with pure heat in his eyes. "No," he exhales, moving back toward me as if on a mission.

"Korbin?"

"Damn butterflies." He smiles, pulling me close and slanting his mouth over mine. His hand moves to the back of

my head as he groans, pushing his hips into mine. “Casper,” he pleads.

“What do you want, babe?” I shock us both with the pet name. Korbin’s eyes go from large to soft and hot within a few seconds.

Blush touches his cheeks as he licks his lips. “What... we were... doing earlier.”

“If you want to stop, say.” I push him against the side of the car.

He nods as his eyes flutter shut, and his lips part. Instead of taking his mouth, I kiss his neck to his collarbone, licking the salty skin and feeling him shiver. Korbin becomes soft in my arms as I press myself against him, rolling my hips against his. My fingers grip the edge of his tank top. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

Holding his eyes, I pull the material over his head and quickly remove mine, throwing it somewhere behind us. When he spots my nipple rings, curiosity gets the best of him, and he pulls on one, making me hiss and grab my lip hoop between my teeth.

“Does it feel good?”

“You have no idea,” I pant, leaning in and kissing his collarbone, moving down his hard chest to his nipples. I glance at him and take my first swipe, causing him to thrust his hips.

“Fuck,” he curses as I nip before licking and kissing to ease the pain. Korbin throws his head back, baring his neck as he pants. “More,” he pleads, the words dropping from his swollen lips as I move across to the other, not wanting to leave it out. Sucking the stiff peak into my mouth and swirling the tip of my tongue over it.

I feel his fingers slide through my hair before he pulls me up. Kissing me, taking my mouth as if he’s fucking it. My body reacts as my breath hitches and my hips roll.

Korbin's fingers curl around my wrist, making me pull back. The hesitation is back, but it's different this time.

"What do you want?" A red blush touches his cheeks as he looks down at the floor. I grab his chin, lifting his eyes to mine. "If you can't tell me, show me, babe." Cursing inwardly as the stupid nickname comes out again.

As if my words settle something in him, he moves my hand to his cock. "Touch me."

I try to hide the shock. Korbin doesn't know he's my first. I never went further than a kiss and light rubbing of hips with a guy. Thank the internet and hours of research for hiding my inexperience.

"Are you sure?" I ask, running my fingers over his shaft.

"Yes," he grits out, moving his hips into my palm. "Yes," he says again, softer.

I yank the overalls to his thighs not taking my eyes off his face as I undo his buttons and pull down the zipper to his faded jeans. He nods, his tongue swiping his bottom lip.

His dick springs free, slapping his stomach as the tip of it leaks, spreading wetness across his abs.

My mouth waters at the sight. All nine inches, perfectly straight and circumcised. I lock my knees to keep from dropping to them.

We can fool around, but I'll never fall to my knees for him.

A groan louder than I've ever heard falls from him as I wrap my fingers around his cock. Thick and smooth. Korbin slams his head back as I stroke him, paying extra attention to his head as pre cum leaks over both of us.

I lean in to kiss him, taking what I want and more. To drive him crazy. So, when this is all over, he will be dreaming of this moment long after I'm gone. He'll be plagued by me.

I undo my zipper, shoving my jeans down and freeing my cock. Korbin's eyes widen. We match in size, but I'm slightly

thicker. I wrap my hands around both of us and start jerking us together.

Korbin can't take his eyes off my hand, our dicks moving together as our pre cum leaks, making us slide against each other.

"Fuck, that's..." His words end with a groan as he moves his hand below mine, stroking us as I play with our cock heads.

"Too good," he rasps between clenched teeth as his thighs start shaking and he begins to fuck my hand. "Lyric," Korbin gasps, his warning as his cum shoots between us.

The sight of his releases brings on mine. I crush my mouth to him, swallowing the groans which belong to us.

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It's Friday night, Korbin's head is resting on my lap, his finger drawing patterns on my thigh as he laughs at something on the screen. It's been two months since Korbin kissed me, since he came into Marked and I formed the plan to destroy him.

For the last six weeks, I've played my part. I spent my Saturdays covered in oil and grease as we worked on his pawpaw's car for a few hours before we fooled around. Wednesdays and Fridays became our nights, where we hide at the ranch house.

Korbin brings lunch into Marked a few times a week, and we sit together for the entire hour. He talks about everything from football to bands while I resist sticking my fork in him as the anger burns through my veins.

We went to Zane's for a cookout, and Korbin sat by me all night, ensuring I didn't need anything.

He's opening up in a way no one else has seen him.

He's vulnerable and raw, and the thought excites me, knowing it will be all the sweeter when I destroy him in a few more weeks.

I might seem like a cruel bastard. Hell, I'll take the title with pride. No one knows Korbin like I do, what he's capable of... he destroyed me, and now it's my turn.

I could sit here and lie to you and say I'm not affected by Korbin, and God damn, I wish I wasn't. Every time I leave



him, I've got to remind myself why I'm doing this.

Trying to ignore how Korbin shows me a side of himself I don't think anyone else has seen. When he drops the entitled asshole persona... I like the guy I see... and I hate that I do.

I grit my jaw, glaring at the back of his head, thinking about how desperate I've become to taste him and get lost in his kisses, I've been thinking about it all day.

How can we just chill? We don't need to fill the air with awkward conversations. I have to resist smirking when Korbin throws a tantrum. How I can call him out on his bull, and he makes it up with soft kisses and makes me cum harder than I have before.

The fact he can't stop touching me and needs constant contact. That Korbin carries enough Peanut Butter Cups to make me sick, knowing they're my favorite.

The sexual chemistry between us is off the charts. How Korbin looks as I make him cum, is so damn hot. We get heavy every time we meet, but it's never gone past hand jobs, rubbing our dicks together, and blow jobs on his part. I still refuse to drop to my knees for him.

How we've stayed out of the gossip mill and kept it from his teammates is by pure luck. We've been plenty reckless and nearly been caught a few times. It's as if he wants to get seen.

My eyes narrow on him as the thought lingers. No, he wouldn't. Would he?

Korbin turns to face me, a slight frown between his brows, feeling the tension in my muscles. "Casper?"

"Are you trying to get us caught?" Narrowing my eyes further as he looks sheepish.

He sits and blows out a breath. "Would it be so bad?"

His words shock me. Everyone in Hill View knows I'm gay thanks to Jasper and Devon. Korbin has seen how the kids at school were with me. Hell, he was front and center of most of the taunts. He saw the disgusting homophobic words

sprayed on my locker by his teammates. Hill View wasn't the best place to announce your sexuality.

“For the first time in my life, I'm happy. I'm not thinking about all the other crap.”

I lean in and stroke his jaw. “All those things are still there.”

He looks down. “I know.”

“You're off to college. I'll still be here in a town that already hates me,” I tell him, lying through my teeth. Last week I received my information letter. I will leave for USC a week before Korbin, which worked perfectly for my plan.

He jumps off the couch and starts pacing. “What if I don't want to go anymore?”

“Yeah, and what will you do to become my sugar baby?” I smirk at him.

“I could attend community college, learn to become a mechanic, and open my own place.”

I study him, leaning forward. “You've thought about this. Is it what you want to do?” His words almost make me smile. I've watched Korbin, and as much as I hate to admit it, he was damn good at it. The car would only take another week or two to be fixed. He came alive under the hood like I did with a pencil in my hand.

“How would your parents react? Aren't you meant to take over from Bart?”

“They'll most probably disown me,” he says casually, but I see the fear flash across his eyes.

“And how would you survive without the Bank of Dad?”

He throws me a glare. “Don't,” he snaps. “Don't look at me like everyone else does.”

I walk over to him, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing his mouth. “I don't, but you've always had everything given to you. It will be hard on your own to pay your bills.

You'd have to get a job and put yourself through college. It won't be easy."

He chews on his bottom lip. "What if I get an apprenticeship like you?"

My stomach clenches at the mention of my apprenticeship. Zane has been using my designs more and more.

My one regret.

Lying to Zane. We've become close, and I respect the fuck out of him. I love Ruby like an annoying sister. They've become more than friends. If anything could make me stop this revenge plan, it would be Zane.

"What if I had someone to split the bills with?" He grabs my cheeks, then runs his thumb over my pulse.

His words should make me happy. I've nearly got him where I want him. A flash of us living together dances before me. Coming home every day to Korbin in his overalls and grease-smudged face. I hate how much I like those images and jerk out of his arms. "Korbin, what are you saying?"

"It makes sense."

"In what world?" I spit. "We're eighteen with no money! Where would we live? How would we eat? You have no idea how the rest of us live. Not to mention you've only been my boyfriend for a month!" His eyes are wide as I realize what I said. "I didn't... I mean."

He cuts off my words with a kiss and wraps my arms back around the jerk's neck. "Boyfriend, huh?" He's smiling wider than I've ever seen.

I fight, my lips curving. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did, *boyfriend*." He laughs, causing me to groan. "I like it." He kisses me several times. "The sound of it." He nips my bottom lip. "In case I haven't made myself clear, I want to be your boyfriend."

"Babe," I groan as he deepens the kiss, digging his fingers into my skin and pulling me as tightly to his body as possible.

There's a knock on the door, making me pull away. "Pizza?" I roll my eyes. Since that first night, Korbin has taken it upon himself to feed me whenever we're together.

Korbin frowns at the door. "I haven't ordered any."

"Korbin, I know you're in there. Your truck is parked outside. Open up, dude." Jasper's voice comes through the door.

I instinctively move from Korbin, glaring between him and the door. "What are you doing?" I hiss as he moves toward the window, peering through the blinds and curses.

"Looks like he's brought the team with him."

I roll my finger over my silver ring as my chest tightens. The compulsions have cooled down lately. Thoughts don't hammer my head like they used to. The urge to check everything three times doesn't crawl against my skin.

Damn it, I'd been getting better!

All those conflicting emotions came rushing back, stealing my breath.

"Casper." I hear my name and feel his hands on my face. "Lyric, what the fuck is going on?" I hear the panic in his voice as his silver eyes flash with fear. "Do you have asthma? Do you need an inhaler? Fuck's sake, talk to me."

No, it's worse, much fucking worse. I recognize the tightness in my chest, the palpitations, and the way my heart squeezes as if it's about to burst. The ragged way my breathing escapes as I try to suck in air. Feeling as if I'm drowning, suffocating on my fear.

I'm in full panic attack mode.

"Dude, come on." The knock on the door gets louder.

*No, not now. God damn it, please, not now.*

"Ask me to find five objects," I say, holding my throat. It feels as if it's closing as dots start to take up my vision. Korbin stares at me as if I've lost my mind.

His fingers shake against my skin. "Give me five objects."

I glance around. “The TV and the movie still playing. Photos on the wall. My favorite is you and Pawpaw sitting on the hood.” My eyes flick to his. “You’re gorgeous,” I breathe out. “The couch where you first sucked my dick.”

His lips twitch, but he’s still trembling. Korbin gives me a peck. “Best night ever. You tasted so good. What’s happening, baby?” He strokes my cheek, and I lean in like a cat.

“Panic attack,” I breathe out, knowing I can’t hide it.

His eyes narrow, and the shaking stops as he clenches his fists. “They’ve caused this.” He moves toward the door.

I grab his wrist, stopping him. “You all did.”

He flinches, his skin losing color as I sink onto the couch. The lightheadedness of the aftermath makes my eyes shut.

“I’ll get rid of them,” he says, his voice small. I hear his feet move as I take another deep breath and hear muffled voices.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I open my eyes to see Jasper standing above me, lip curled.

Korbin moves before me, blocking Jasper. “He’s here because I invited him.” This stops the entire room, and everyone falls quiet.

Jasper looks around Korbin, pointing his finger at me. “Are you blackmailing him?”

I lift my chin as I stand. “Yeah, I know all his dirty little secrets.” Baring my teeth, we stare at each other as I feel my pulse pound in my ears. I speak to Korbin but don’t take my eyes off Jasper. “Let Zane know I’ve stopped by,” I say, lying through my teeth.

Jasper’s eyes narrow as I walk past them. As I hit the back door, fingers wrap around my wrist. “Stay.”

“Don’t do this,” I hiss so only Korbin can hear.

“I won’t if you don’t make me.”

I narrow my eyes. “Hide your balls because they will get personal with my knee soon.”

He smirks. “You like them too much to hurt them.”

I grunt as Jasper comes next to Korbin. “What are you two talking about?”

“Why, are you jealous?” I spit, feeling my lip curl back as my defensive mask comes back on. The attitude rolls off my tongue as my body vibrates.

“Why would he be jealous of you?” The high-pitched sound of Ashley hurts my ears.

“Tone it down, girl. Does your voice make cats scream?” Her mouth opens and closes.

“You’re going to let him speak to me like that?” Ash’s lips curl as she turns from me to look at Korbin. Who’s trying to hide a smirk. She elbows him, making him scowl.

“What?”

Ash huffs and shakes her head, walking over to the rest of the cheerleaders.

Jasper tilts his head as he looks between us. “So, he’s staying then?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

We answer at the same time.

Korbin turns to look around at his old teammates and cheerleaders. “Lyric stays, and no one says a word to him, or they answer to me.” His voice reminds me of the old Korbin, which drags against my skin like a grater.

They all move outside. I sit on a chair away from everyone, watching as Korbin tosses the ball with a few of the guys. He’s smirking, but his eyes are cold. He joins in with the banter, but his body is tense. I’ve never seen a guy who can lock down his emotions like him. How he doesn’t show any emotion on his face, but those eyes tell you what he’s feeling.

Has he always been this way? Even around his friends?

They took Korbin's words literally, and no one has spoken a word to me.

They've all come because Korbin has been missing in action over the last few weeks. They came looking for him when he didn't turn up at the field party tonight.

Korbin catches my eye as I yawn and stand. He drops the ball and crosses the distance between us. "You're tired?"

"Yeah." I go to lean my head against his chest and stop myself. "I'm going to make a move."

Korbin faces everyone and cups his mouth. "Everyone out."

"What the hell are you doing?" I hiss.

"You're tired. They're leaving."

I groan. "And tell me, wise one, how are you going to make them all leave and keep me here with no one talking?"

"Let them damn talk." He shrugs.

"Korbin."

"Yes, boyfriend." His eyes smile. See, this is what I mean. His face doesn't move, but his eyes show he's happy.

"What the hell, bro? We've just gotten warmed up." Jasper frowns, coming over with a few guys.

"Now I'm telling you to leave," Korbin shoots back.

Ashley looks between us. "Want some time alone?" She speaks in a sexy rasp, and it takes a second to realize she's talking about herself and not me.

I'm about to say screw it, grab Korbin, take his mouth, and show her exactly whom he's staying with tonight. My lips tighten as she moves toward him. One more step, bitch.

"Yeah," Korbin drawls, making her smile, causing me to narrow my eyes at the jerk. "With Lyric," he adds. I swear everyone's eyes widen, alongside mine. Did he? Crap, this is not the way to announce what's happening between us. At the same time, I can't help the way my lips curve smugly.

Ashley splutters. “With him?” She points at me. “You know he’s gay, right?”

“You can’t catch it,” I say, bringing her attention to me before my bullheaded boyfriend outs us. “I work at Marked. Korbin has been helping Zane around the shop. He’s coming over later.”

“Why aren’t you meeting over at his house?” Damn, she is smarter than she looks.

“Zane’s place is too small.” How the lie comes, I don’t know.

Ashley looks over at me. Her eyes narrow, as a cheer smile slides on her face as she turns to Korbin. “You don’t have to stay.”

I don’t know if Korbin realizes it, but he moves closer to me, making me smile.

“I told Zane I would be here,” he answers, frowning at my smile, and we stare at each other as if he can read my thoughts. His lips curve.

“You hate him,” Ashley snaps, bringing us back as she points to me. “Or did we all miss something?”

Korbin is close enough to feel my body tense. He faces everyone, and his mouth opens then slams shut.

I feel my face reddening. “I’ll go wait inside. Give Zane a call.” I hold my phone out, striding through them. I glare over my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Ash, he’ll remember he hates me when I stop sucking his brains out of his dick.” I taunt.

“You’re disgusting,” she growls.

I kiss my middle finger and wink at her, strolling inside.





“You can’t keep doing this!” Ashley spits.

Damn, Casper’s right. She sounds like a screeching cat. How have I never noticed? I grab her arm and move further from the house.

Her lips curve. “I heard our fathers talking.”

My teeth nearly break under the force. “Yeah. And you need to remember your job is to shut up and look pretty.”

Her eyes thin, lips twisting as she steps closer. “You’ve got to stop this! It’s gone too far.”

“Shut up,” I sneer. “Breathe a word, and the whole damn town will know daddy is going bankrupt.”

Ashley’s mouth drops open, blinking with large eyes “You won’t,” she gasps.

I raise my brow and smirk. “Try me.”

Ashley’s lips narrow as she stares at me before she stalks to Jasper’s truck. He pushes off the hood to grab Ash, but she goes past him.

Jasper holds my eyes as he crosses the distance, his head tilted. “Ash always ends in tears around you.” His eyes tighten on the ranch house, blowing out cheeks with a frown.

I move to block his view. “And you’re always there to wipe them away. Isn’t that what you want? Tell me, does she use them to lube your pin dick, too?”

His mouth drops, eyes widening as he steps back, making me grin. He's seen me act this way with plenty of people, but I've never turned on him. "You thought I didn't know?" I give him an enigmatic smile, raising my brow.

He rubs his neck. "It's... it's..." His words fall away as he glares at the ground.

"It's... it's..." I copy his stutter. "Exactly how it looks. At least have the balls to say it. See, Jasper, that's why she'll never want you" I let my eyes rake over him. "Because you're weak like your old man."

His nostrils flare, eyes flinty. "I'm your best friend," he seethes.

"No, you're in it for the Rose name, same as everybody else. You don't know a damn thing about me." As I say the words, I realize how true they are. We aren't friends. We've never chilled or spoken for longer than a beat on the phone. It is all about image. The elite all belong to the same social circles and means having friends in the right place who will come in handy later in life.

He jerks his arm toward the ranch house "And he does?"

I feel my pulse in my temple as I close the short distance between us. "Don't mess with something you will regret," I growl.

"We're talking about Lyric Blackmore! The loner, the poor gay kid you made us bully for years! What the hell is going on, Rose?" Vomit rises at the memories of what we all did as Jasper tilts his head, frowning. Fear curls my gut as his eyes widen and his lips curl. He shakes his head as if his thoughts disgust him. A part of me wants him to figure it out and say those words out loud.

I stab my finger into his chest. "Leave."

"You'll be sorry," he grits out, turning away.

I yank his shoulder so he's facing me. "Are you, Jasper Carmichael, threatening a Rose?" He pales, shrinking back. He shakes his head, shrugging my hand off him, then jogs to his truck and speeds off like a coward.

I take a heavy breath, staring at his lights getting smaller. Everything around me is changing so fast.

The reason is leaning coolly against the door frame. Casper finishes his smoke as I close the distance between us. He opens his mouth, but I cage him in, getting into his personal space, and shut him up with a fierce kiss. Breaking the kiss, panting, I run my knuckles down his cheekbone. “Stay. Stay with me tonight.”

He stands back, watching. After a beat, his fingers travel down my arm and intertwine our fingers. I let him move me inside, where he shuts the door behind us. Locking everybody else out.

Turning off all the lights as he leads me to the back room. We’ve messed around plenty of times, and it was rare we didn’t finish hot and heavy, but we haven’t had sex or been in a bed together.

In tune with me, realizing what I need before I do. Casper turns to me. “This doesn’t mean we have sex.” He offers one of those rare smiles.

“But we can still play?”

“Hell yeah!” He grins and yanks my top. We stumble through the door and on top of the double bed.

Casper pulls away, his eyes never dropping from mine as he removes my top and makes quick work of his own. “You need better friends.” He cuts off my reply with a peck. “Jasper’s a dick.” His lips curl, baring his teeth.

My muscles tense, stopping his hands. “Did you hear what we said?”

“I can guess,” he growls, moving down to my jeans and popping open the buttons.

My hips thrust into his palm as he strokes me over the cotton. “Lyric,” I moan, looking at him run his tongue over his lips as my cock whacks against my stomach.

“You’ve been a good boyfriend,” he rasps, wrapping his fingers around my shaft and moving in leisurely strokes,

playing with the head.

“Yeah?” I pant as he kisses my chest, nodding against my skin and humming before taking my nipple into his mouth. Moving his tongue in a way he knows drives me crazy.

“Bringing me lunch, making sure I always have Peanut Butter Cups,” he says against my skin as he licks and nips my flesh.

“More,” I choke out.

“What do you want, babe?” The word sends a shiver through me, causing my abs to clench.

“I want to feel you. Your dick against mine.” Heat no longer marks my skin when I ask him for what I want. Casper taught me not to be ashamed of my feelings when we’re together and ask for what I like. No one else could have opened me to all of this. I would’ve lived in denial if I hadn’t kissed Casper that night at Zane’s. Ashamed to admit it, even to myself, I would’ve followed my father’s plan by putting a ring on Ash’s finger and married her. It’s what I always thought would happen, a loveless marriage. Never did I expect Casper and what he makes me feel.

“Hey, where did you go?” His brow hitches as he plays with my cock head, spreading my precum before working me harder.

“Nowhere, I’m here.”

“Are you sure?” His voice is deeper, and I recognize he’s as affected as I am.

“Yes! Stop fucking teasing, Lyric,” I growl in quick breaths.

“I was going to let you fuck my mouth.” I freeze. I’ve sucked Lyric off, tasted him, and ran my tongue over those smooth balls. I tried to get him to do it, but I guessed not all guys were into it.

He tries to open his jeans, but I hold his wrist. Lyric glances at me.

“You don’t need to,” I breathe out, pretty sure my dick will hate me.

Casper moves off the bed, shoving off his jeans and boxers and standing bare.

Damn, he’s stunning.

All pale skin and trimmed with only a tiny patch of dark hair framing his perfect dick. Thick and smooth. We were well matched, around nine inches, but Lyric was slightly wider. A slight pang of disappointment comes as he crawls onto the bed. It disappears as his mouth meets mine.

His lips leave me and work their way to my jaw. “Have you heard of sixty-nine?” His breath whispers across my ear.

My eyes spring open. “Yeah? Can we do that?” I ask, my mouth watering to taste him. He pulls back and nods, moving down the bed and offering me his bare ass. I can’t resist leaning in and biting his cheek. Hearing him yelp, he throws me a narrow-eyed look over his shoulder as his mouth fights not to curve.

I get where he’s going as we’re the same height. He lays on his side, top to tail, his cock in front of my face. I lean forward, licking the thick vein and taking the head into my mouth, loving how heavy he is and the slightly bitter taste on my tongue.

I release the tip of his cock with a curse at the first feel of Casper’s hot mouth covering me. He uses his teeth to tease, slowly hollowing his cheeks. “Fuck,” I gasp, only able to suckle his head, too wrapped up in pleasure. “No,” I groan, feeling his mouth leave.

Lyric crawls over me, making us groan as our dicks rub, and straddles my chest, using the headboard to lift himself.

“Suck me down, baby. Take me in your hot mouth.” He rubs his head across my lip. “And I’ll make you cum like never before,” he vows.

Casper’s hips shoot forward, knocking the back of my throat. Tears leak from my eyes.

“That’s it, baby,” he growls, his thumb outlining the shape of my lips. “Seeing your mouth stretch around my dick... so fucking good.” I groan at his words, sucking him harder, his dirty words turning me on.

Wet sounds fill the room, blending with our moans. The smell of us hangs in the air.

I can feel the way Lyric’s breath hitches. His stomach stiffens as his legs shake. “Baby, I’m going...” His words fall away, then with a shout of my name, he bursts over my tongue.

He pulls back, his dick slipping from my mouth. His pale skin flushes as he gives me a tender peck and that twinkle returns to his eyes.

“Your turn.” He winks, licking a path across my chest. Nipping the skin of my hips, causing them to thrust. Holding my stare, he wraps his fingers around my dick, lowering his mouth.

I swear I stop breathing as his smart mouth takes me to the root. “Fuck!” I curse, my toes curling, and a deep groan coming from him.

It was as if Casper had been dying for weeks to taste me, and now he has the chance. He isn’t wasting it.

He lifts two fingers to my mouth, shoving them between my lips. “Suck.”

Wasting no time, I twirl my tongue around his fingers, sucking them and moaning as he withdraws them.

“Trust me?” I nod, then he licks across my balls. We’ve played with the muscle, never further than a bit of pressure, but there’s no other person I trust more than Lyric.

Moving off the end of the bed, he spreads me open, then with the first swipe of his tongue, my back arches. With all my research, I know this is a thing called “rimming”. It doesn’t sound as good as it feels, making my eyes roll back.

“Fuck, don’t stop. Damn....” My body aches from the pleasure, and my muscles shake. It’s as if all my desire gathers

in one place. “More,” I yell, needing something, not knowing what but entrusting Casper to take care of me as my fingers dig into the sheets.

I feel pressure against the tight ring of muscle, then his finger slides into me as my cock sinks into his hot mouth.

“That’s it, babe.” His muffled reassurance calms me, and his finger slides in deeper.

My body is a tight ball of need as Lyric finger fucks my ass and sucks my cock. A feeling I don’t realize is possible claims me. I move my hand to his hair, my fingers digging in, as if to hold myself to him, as he adds another finger. Pain takes my breath before it’s replaced by sweet pleasure.

I’m lost... completely and utterly lost. Aware of nothing but the feel, taste, and smell of Casper. I feel like I’m drowning in him and never want to resurface.

My hips thrust and sounds I’m not sure are human tear from my lips as Casper’s wet moans cause my stomach to clench.

“Oh, fuck.... There.... Stop... don’t you dare stop....” Words fall from me in a mix of pants, curses, and grunts as he strikes something inside me. It feels like I’m being fucked from the inside. The pleasure shoots through me, tingling every nerve ending to a point I don’t think I can handle it. My pulse pounds in my ears. “Lyric,” tears from my lips as an orgasm stains my vision and claims me.

“Hey, you.” I squint, gazing at Casper. He’s never looked more beautiful. Dark damp strands of hair stuck to his forehead and eyes bright with desire. His lips are swollen from sucking me.

A powerful reaction smashes to the surface.

I might be emotionally stunted because of my parents, damaged, but I recognize this one. It overpowers everything I’ve felt before. It’s on the tip of my tongue.

To tell him how I feel.

I kiss him instead, dragging his hot body over mine. We kiss until our lips are raw. Then he turns me in his arms, bringing me close to his body with a peck on my nape. “Sleep, babe.”

I feel happy and at peace for the first time in my life.

A warmth surrounds me.

There’s no denying I’m in love with Casper.



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## Lyric

I yawn, feeling hot. Korbin's legs are tangled with mine, hot breath against my neck. The same way I've woken every Friday and Saturday for the past two weekends since we became *official*.

My lips curve, and not for the reason they should. Korbin is where I want him. I should already be ripping his heart out.

I could use the excuse that the ultimate revenge is waiting for those three little words.

But it's a lie.

In the past two weeks, something has shifted. The countdown to my leaving in a week doesn't excite me as it used to. Lead has taken its place.

The ass has gotten under my skin like a damn parasite and dug his way into my flesh. I want to take that damn frown away every time he leaves his father's office.

When Korbin smiles at me, I feel those damn locusts, as he put it.

Worst of all, he makes me feel complete.

A part of me hates it. How can I forget what he did to me? But a bigger part wants to trust what I see in his eyes. Allow myself to be loved and wanted. I can almost hear the boy in my soul begging to be let out. The anxiety is still there, but I'm no longer drowning in its chaos, but it comes in soft waves. The rituals are becoming less, and they no longer hold

me by the balls. I no longer cringe when I catch sight of my reflection. Korbin broke me, but he's also fixing me.

"I can hear you thinking." Comes Korbin's voice in a morning rasp as his lips touch my skin, causing me to shiver as he tightens his arms around me.

"I've got to get ready," I say, making no move to get out of bed, drawing patterns on his bare skin.

Korbin rolls on top of me, causing us both to groan as our bodies meet. We haven't had full sex, but I can feel the tension building between us. He looks down at me, blond strands falling into his eyes. I push them out of the way to see the early morning look on his face.

"Stay with me today," he asks, tracing the outline of my lips. I push at his chest, making him move so I can slip out from beneath him and shove my boxers on.

"Your brother would be pissed." I glance over my shoulder to see Korbin's eyes on my ass, making me smirk. He rolls his and leans on his elbow, the sheet falling.

Damn.

Maybe five minutes wouldn't hurt. A chuckle pulls my eyes to him, which are laughing. He raises a brow and lifts the sheet, his dick hard and waiting.

"You don't play fair," I growl, storming to the bathroom, and hearing Korbin laughing behind me.

I take a piss and brush my teeth. Korbin comes and leans against the door frame, still naked as the day he was born. Since the start of summer, Korbin has grown in confidence. He no longer fears asking for what he wants or concealing the heat in his eyes. Korbin no longer feels shame as his eyes rake over me, and he takes his time to savor every detail as if he's branding it into his brain.

He watches me through the mirror. "I wasn't joking."

"What?" I frown, spitting out the paste and turning off the faucet.

“You’re not going in today. I got you the day off.” He grins. A fine line between his brows appears as my eyes narrow.

“You did what?”

He tries to smile but looks unsure and confused. “Perks of being your boss’s, brother.”

I shake my head and walk past him, shoving my jeans on. Korbin tilts his head. “Did I do something wrong?”

I jerk my top on, pointing at him. “The fact you don’t know shows how messed up you are.”

Korbin sits on the bed, yanking his boxers on. “Want to tell me what’s crawled up your ass?”

“You! You can’t take over my life and tell Zane I’m not coming in. Do you know how hard he works? Of course, you don’t,” I snap. “Zane has clients booked for weeks. He’s building something solid!”

“Are you finished?” he sneers, those silver eyes losing all their heat, turning cold.

“Don’t speak to me like—”

“Shut up,” he says, cutting me off and crossing the distance between us. “That’s how you feel about me? That I don’t care about Zane? That I’m just a spoiled brat!”

I frown because I don’t, not anymore. Korbin cares about his brother and me, he may not speak the words, but he shows it by bringing us food and ensuring we eat. Korbin carries around chocolate because he knows how much I love it and turns up every morning to take me to work, even on his days off, with a coffee.

When I don’t answer, he crosses his arms over his chest. “What is this we’re building if you still think of me like that!” He runs a hand through his hair. “I thought we were past all this crap. I was fixing things between us.” His brow furrows as he rubs his temples.

This would be the perfect time to out myself and not the way his friends did.

Tell him it's all a revenge plan.

To break him as he broke me.

His mouth opens only to slam shut. He stares at me, waiting for me to say something. When I don't, he offers me a tight smile. The corners of his mouth turn down as he walks away.

My chest tightens as I bite the inside of my cheek. Hearing his footsteps walk away causes my pulse to pound in my ears and panic flares in my gut.

"Korbin," I shout, jogging after him, finding him in the living room, staring out the window. "Is this going to happen every time we argue? You're going to walk away? That's not how it works." I walk around him until we were facing each other. "We fight, and we get pissed, then we talk it through and fix it."

His nostrils flare as his arm moves through the air between us. "And you want to be with someone you think so little of?"

"I'm pissed. You just blindsided me."

"With a day off!" His voice rises.

"I spit stuff I don't mean because my damn pride gets in the way. You should've asked me first before arranging me a day off." I try to lower my voice. "I'll lose a day's worth of money and can't afford that. I help dad with the groceries."

He turns back to the window. "It was a surprise! The only person who didn't know was you. I asked Zane weeks ago if it was okay, and he said yeah. Ruby is covering for you. But no, I didn't think about how much it would cost you." He frowns.

"You did? Why?" I follow Korbin with my eyes as he takes something from on top of the fireplace and slams it down on the coffee table.

"This is why."

I look at the two pieces of paper for a beat, glancing at Korbin and seeing the muscles in his jaw moving beneath his skin. I pick one up, seeing it's a ticket to the vintage car show.

My fingers shake. It's the one I mentioned weeks ago and told him I'd always wanted to go to.

"You bought these for me?" My voice is quiet as warmth fills my chest, my eyes still on the tickets.

"Yes, dammit, Casper. You're my boyfriend, and I can't walk down the street holding your hand!" He holds up his palm to stop me from speaking. "I know you've said we're not ready, and I trust you."

I glare at the floor, feeling my face heat. Shame crawls over my skin. I've fucked up. I put the tickets down.

"Korbin." I grab his chin, making him look at me. "A few weeks ago, you asked me not to let you fuck this up. Looks like it applies to both of us." The strain in his muscles eases, "I was an ass. I should've asked instead of assuming. I'm sorry." I carry on, "There's something I haven't told you." Those slivers narrow as his lip pulls tight. "It's about the guys you think I've hooked up with."

He jerks back as if I've electrocuted him. "I don't want to hear it."

"Korbin, listen..."

"No!" His eyes turn wild as he grabs my shoulders. "Shut up, Lyric."

"Take your hands off me." He does and stalks to the back door. Where he thinks he's going half-naked, I don't know. He pulls it open hard enough it slams against the wall. I find him outside pacing, tugging on his hair, and cursing.

He spots me and crosses the distance between us. "I don't want to know." His voice is threateningly low. "I can't think of them touching you, knowing you the way I do."

"They haven't." His head jerks back. "I haven't been with anyone like I have with you. You're my first of a lot of things, too. Including the boyfriend title."

"But... how... You're hot. Guys have got to want you."

"Thanks." I smirk. "Your friends scared off the one guy I was hanging out with. We kissed twice and rubbed clothes is

all.”

“You know what to do. What I need? You’re telling me you’re not experienced because I felt your mouth around my cock?” He groans, desire sparking in his eyes at the memory.

I can’t help laughing. “Thank all the years of research.” I shrug. “With you, it’s easy. I don’t know how, but I know what we need.”

“You’re not lying?” He comes face to face with me.

“No.”

He lets out a breath. “Thank fuck. I can’t stand to think of anyone else touching you.” He grabs my face and slams his mouth on mine, fisting my shirt. As our tongues meet, his fingers loosen, moving to my hips. The heat melts away, turning into brushes of lips and shaky breath. We break apart, both breathing heavily, unable to keep our lips off each other, delivering soft pecks as if we both need the reassurance of the other.

Korbin moves a strand of my hair. “I can’t be like them.” Unable to look at me, I know he’s referring to his parents.

I grab his chin until his eyes rise to meet mine. “We won’t,” I swear. He pulls me tight against him and lets out a shuddering breath against my neck.

Our connection and the strength of our feelings should scare me. We are both hiding from the real world. It’s not reality locked in a bubble that could burst at any moment.

This *fake* relationship isn’t being built on a solid foundation.

But instead, lies, hate, and revenge.

We’re constantly building like a deck of cards, but what happens when it all falls around us?

Can we survive?

Can we forgive each other? I know secrets don’t stay hidden forever.

“Hey, where did you go?” I blink at Korbin, feeling his palm holding my cheek. Unable to answer, I do the one thing I swore I’d never do and fall to my knees for the guy who bullied me.

Tormented me.

The guy I’ve been planning revenge on all summer.

Korbin mother fucking Rose

The guy I’m falling for.



My mother meeting me as I walk through the door, dressed and without a wineglass in her hand, should be my clue that something is wrong.

My father, whom I've barely seen over the summer, settles behind her and places his hand on her shoulder like they're showing a united front. It should be the glowing neon sign that my life is about to change in a way I never expected.

But my mind was still on Lyric. Yesterday, I had the best day of my life. Casper had smiled so much at the car show, I swear his cheeks must have hurt. We went back to the hotel and slept in each other's arms all night, kissing until our lips were raw. I couldn't help capturing the moment, now my current screen saver. I'm looking at the camera, my hair a mess, our lips red, while Casper has his head buried in my neck, turned at an angle, teeth biting his hoop. No one can see the photo and not know we're together.

This morning, I didn't want to leave the hotel. A ball of worry had taken over my gut, a heavy dark feeling. It felt like the end of summer represented the end of us.

I won't let it happen.

In two weeks, I'm meant to leave for college. Stanford is hours away from Hill View, and I don't like the uncertainty.

We'll make it work; we have to. I can't go back to how I used to be, cold and emotionless.



“Son,” my father says, breaking through my thoughts. I turn to face him, locking all my emotions down.

“Father.” I nod, turning toward my mother. “Mother.” Her lips curve as she fidgets with her gold necklace.

“Korbin, darling.” Her voice cracks as she glances at my father before the floor.

“I finished everything at the office before I left. What’s this about?”

“Anderson has been very impressed with your work.” He studies me. “We have guests.”

An icy feeling causes me to shiver as I turn to the living room my mother uses when people come over and see the Richmonds. Ashley sitting in between them with tears racing down her face.

Mr. Richmond rises. “Do you know what you’ve done to my daughter?” The words leaving his lips with a sneer as his wife pats Ashley’s leg.

“I suggest you remember my son is a Rose and let the kids speak,” my father says calmly.

This isn’t because he cares or is defending me. It’s because Hill View has a pecking order, and Mr. Richmond comes below us, and my father is reminding him of that.

I step into the living room. “Sir, Marianna, Ashley,” I greet them.

“I’ve tried calling you all weekend.” Ash narrows her eyes, her lips thin.

“And I told you to leave me alone.”

“I need to speak to you.”

“No, you want to. There’s a difference.” The coldness from my tone makes her flinch. I can’t believe Ashley brought our parents into this. This is dramatic even for her.

“I told you this had to stop! You can’t mess me around anymore.”

I grit my teeth, moving further into the room. “We. Are. Not. Together. We never will be.” I rub my temples, tired of all the politics. “It’s not my fault you made up dreams about us being together in your head.”

“Dreams!” Ash hisses her face turning red. “You said...” Her words fall away as her brows come down.

“Never! Not once have I ever said I wanted this or you.” I run my hand through my hair, taking a deep breath. “Look, I’m sorry. I let you play your games for too long, but I will never be with you. Never love you.”

The Ashley I’ve known since middle school stands and steps toward me, gone is the innocent little girl act she puts on for our parents. A manipulative look appears, and she gives an enigmatic smile.

“For years, I did everything to make you notice me. I made sure I became the cheer captain. I kept my mouth shut as the girls followed you everywhere, knowing they wanted you. We were young, and you were getting it out of your system. We both know how our world works. It’s better now than when we’re engaged or married.” She can’t hide how her nose crinkles as her eyes flick to my father. Mr. Richmond’s cheeks turn red, and he looks at the floor.

“When we slept together at prom, I thought it was the beginning for us. You were meant to ask me out. I waited for your call. You acted as if it hadn’t happened!”

I sweep my arm between us. “Doesn’t that tell you something? I was drunk. It was a foolish mistake!” I seethe.

I watch Ash’s lips curl and hate it because I know what that grin means. She thinks she has a better hand. “*That* drunken mistake got me pregnant.”

Everything turns to white noise around me. I swear my heart stops. I’m not even breathing as I take a step back. “You’re lying,” I gasp.

God, no! Casper.

“No, you’re lying,” I roar, a desperate feeling pulsing through me as I grab Ash’s shoulders. “Stop lying! Please.”

Tears race down her face, and a flash of vulnerability sparks in them for a second. I clasp my hands over my head. She's telling the truth. Ash is pregnant.

I know this is the end of Casper and me. It is all so unfair to have a taste of happiness and to lose it because of her. Rationally, I know Ash isn't to blame. I can't remember if I used anything, but rational thoughts didn't exist.

My body shakes as I point at her. "How do I know it's mine? It's probably Jasper's." I accuse, trying to grasp at anything to make this not real.

"I've never slept with Jasper!" she shouts back.

"I'm meant to believe you. All the times he's taken you home drunk. Everyone knows he's in love with you," I carry on, knowing the words I'm spitting aren't true, but an emotion holds me by the balls. It wants to disappear, hide from the truth, to find Casper and let him wrap his arms around me and never let me go.

Ash's mouth opens and slams shut. It looks like she's the only one who doesn't know, making me shake my head. She's been so focused on me that Ash hasn't seen Jasper worshipping her.

Mr. Richmond comes and stands by his daughter. "What are you trying to say?"

"That she's a drunken ho. This whole town knows, and if it's mine, it's a trap because I know you're a dollar from bankruptcy." I spit all my anger at them, back to my old ways of destroying rather than be destroyed.

A hand strikes my cheek, sending my face sideways, but the pain doesn't register. It wasn't from Ashley or Mr. Richmond, even his wife, but my father.

"Enough, you've made your bed. Now you will lie in it." He stares at me, eyes as cold as the man I grew up with.

His words hit one after the other. I feel my face flush as my jaw clenches, and I do the one thing I've never done. I don't cower to him, remember my place. Instead, I let it all out.

“What, like you did? Huh, dad? Where is your other son?”

“He is no son of mine. His mother is a liar,” he snarls, his eye twitching.

“He’s yours. The results are still in your office. Zane looks more like you than I do.” His fist smashes into my cheekbone. I smirk, wiping away the blood. “And there he is. The real Bart Rose!”

I see my mother move toward me, but my father grabs her arm, his grip tightens as her eyes go to the floor. I turn to Ashley.

“This is what you want? The great Rose name isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” I laugh.

Mr. Richmond looks to the floor uncomfortably as his wife looks pale. Even Ash seems shocked.

I glance toward my mom and see her eyes are distant. She’s checked out, counting the seconds to when she can fill her glass, take her little white pill, and forget everything around her exists.

“I’m out.” I stride across the room, ignoring the voice rising behind me. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out to see it’s Casper. I can’t answer, not now, and instead shove through the door.

“Korbin.” I grit my teeth as Ash grabs my arm.

“It’s because of him, isn’t it? Lyric Blackmore! It’s the only thing making sense.” She speaks as if she’s working it out as she goes. “You hated him!”

I could deny it, but I can’t.

He means too much.

“No! I hated what he made me feel, what it meant.”

She looks at me, disgust in her eyes. The fear I thought would come with someone finding out doesn’t.

“Finish it, or I will,” she threatens.

“Go near him, and I will *destroy* you.” Holding her eyes, Ash knows I’m not playing. Once she gets the message, I jump in my truck and shove it in reverse. Casper tries calling again. I stare at his face lighting my screen, and let the call go to voicemail.

My mind is a blur as I drive to the ranch house. Ash will consider no other option, it didn’t matter we were fresh out of high school. None of us are ready to be parents. We’ll be bringing an innocent life into our fucked-up world.

Our mothers will have the wedding planned within a few hours to hide the scandal of pregnancy without us being married.

It doesn’t matter that I don’t love her. If Ash takes a minute, she’ll realize she isn’t in love with me but a fantasy she’s dreamed of. A guy who doesn’t exist.

As soon as I open the door. The scent of us hits my nostrils. I grab onto the chair to steady myself.

Several hours ago, I had everything I wanted.

Casper in my arms.

I put all my fear aside and let myself be happy. I did something I never thought I’d do, never even dared to dream; be in a relationship with a guy and fall in love.

“Noooo!” The word rips from my already destroyed throat, coming from the pits of my stomach.

I can’t lose him.

I drop to my knees, gripping my hair as a tear falls from the corner of my eye.

“Casper.” His name leaves my lips in a tortured whisper.

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“Is he still not answering?” Zane asks as he locks the shop.

“Nah, most probably held up with Rose business.”

Zane can't hide his frown as he leans against his truck.  
“You need a ride?”

“I'm good. Going to head home.”

I can't get rid of the knot in my stomach as I bite my lip. I stop, looking down at my phone. Still no calls. It's not like Korbin and doesn't sit right after the day we had yesterday.

Yesterday was the best day of my life. Korbin held my hand all day, placing pecks on my cheek too. He didn't hide that we were together. We went back to the hotel and kissed all night. I woke to Korbin tracing my features, our legs tangled together. It was a strange feeling. I wasn't restless and anger didn't coat my skin, nor did thoughts hammer my skull. It was peaceful. I couldn't explain why Korbin made me feel what he did, but it just made sense.

“If you're pouting, I'm going to kick your ass,” I hissed into the air, making my way to his grandparent's house.

Panting and sweaty after the four-mile walk, I go to the back of the ranch house and see Korbin's truck.

“Jerk,” I snarl, kicking the wheel as I storm toward the house, ready to kick his ass.

I stop by the door, the air is too still, and it doesn't hold its usual Korbin presence. I know it sounds stupid, but it's true. I

drop my backpack and walk into the living room. Nothing has been touched from when we'd been here yesterday morning as if waiting for us to return. The thought makes my lips curve. This house has become our place.

Maybe he's sleeping? I know I'm tired. I go to the room we've taken as ours. The bed's still a mess, the imprints of our bodies still in the sheets, but no Korbin.

My stomach twists as my chest tightens. Anxiety has my breath quickening and coats my skin as my fingers tighten around my phone as I dial his number. Korbin's smiling face lights up my phone, something he did weeks ago.

I jerk, hearing his voice break the silence and follow the sound back to the kitchen where I see the light of his phone dancing around the floor. What makes me freeze is Korbin is sitting next to it. His eyes glazed over, and he has a red mark that looks like a bruise on his cheek, which wasn't there yesterday morning, with dried blood on his bottom lip.

I end the call. "Korbin?" He doesn't move, just stares ahead. I squat in front of him. "Baby, what's happened?" I ask, pushing a strand of hair off his face, which he doesn't acknowledge or seem to feel. Those silver eyes I love so much are red and glassy, making my heart clench.

Korbin wasn't a guy who showed his vulnerability. The only person he offers it to is me. This is different. He looks raw, beaten. Pain shines from his eyes, and I want to kill the person who put it there.

I realize I no longer want to be that person.

I don't want him to hurt. Instead, I want to take his pain.

I no longer want to make him pay.

I don't hate him.

"Baby, can you stand?" Korbin blinks as if seeing me for the first time, and I jump up, holding my hand out. His lip quivers before he holds it tight between his top teeth and reaches for my palm, curving around mine and squeezing.

I pull, seeing the pain in his eyes, but focus on the marks on his skin, rubbing my thumb over the raised redness of his cheek. “What happened, baby?”

He shakes his head, not answering, and instead buries it in my neck, letting out a shuddering breath.

I pull back. “Okay, come with me.” I say, letting him stay silent.

I take him to our room and sit him on the edge of the bed. He grabs my wrist, holding it in a painful grip. “Don’t...” His voice is raw as if his throat has been hurt. “Don’t go.”

I should pay more attention to those words and question him. Instead, I nod and sit down next to him. “I was just going to run a bath. It’s okay. I’ll stay right here.”

“Promise me,” he whispers, grabbing my face, and running his thumb over my lip. “Promise me.”

“Korbin?” I question, full of confusion. What happened in the time we were apart? “Who hit you? Was it your dad?”

“I deserved it.” He drops his hand and looks at the floor.

I grip his chin, turning his face to mine. “No, you didn’t. It doesn’t matter what you did. You don’t deserve to be hurt.”

“What about you? Do you want to hurt me?” My hand freezes. Is this it? He’s found out about my plan. How I set out to break his heart.

No, there’s no way. I haven’t told anyone.

Instead of lying, I tell him the truth. “Maybe there was a time I wanted you to hurt, but not anymore.”

He nods, staring off.

He lets out a deep breath while I sit with him. “I’m tired, so fucking tired.” I don’t think he means just for sleep.

“Okay.” I stand and pull his T-shirt off. His eyes never leave mine. I move to my knees and tug his trainers off. Next, I take off his sweats, leaving him in his boxer briefs. “Come to bed,” I say quietly, unsure why but knowing he needs it.



Korbin sinks into the mattress and watches me as I strip and move to lie next to him.

We face each other, and I run my fingers over his shoulder, moving to his hair as Korbin leans against me, until I hear a little snore escaping him. Curving my body around his, I lay awake until his breathing takes me under.

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“Korbin,” I hum, feeling him stroking my cock as he shifts between my thighs, his lips working his way to my jaw.

“I thought you’d never wake up.” I feel his lips curve against my skin and open my eyes to see dark circles under his, and his cheek is now shades of blue and purple. The sky is dark, letting me know we’ve slept for a few hours.

“Baby.” I cup his jaw, running my fingers over the marks. He shakes his head, no, before taking my mouth. He curves himself around me, pressing our chests together. When our lungs burn for oxygen, he buries his head in my neck, kissing me as his palms race over my skin.

“I need you,” Korbin says between kisses. I try to push him back to see his face. He holds me tighter, his breath whispering across my temple. “Casper.”

“I’m here.” I wrap my thigh around his and spin us, so he’s on the bottom. His eyes widen, making me smirk. “What do you want, baby?”

“You.” He bites his lip, staring past me as his mouth opens, bringing his eyes back to mine. He grabs my face. “I want to feel you inside me. Nothing between us. Mark me, Casper. Make me yours. You can’t leave me, *ever*.”

Again, these words should make me stop. I should’ve asked about it last night. I can see the fear hidden with the lust and, dare I say, love in his eyes. A voice inside screams to take note of the desperate way he says it, how his fingers dig into my flesh as if to hold us together.

It was William Blake who said. *“Hindsight is wonderful, but foresight is better, especially when it comes to saving a life or some pain!”*

“Casper, please.”

The need to care for him flares through me, to give him this pleasure, to take away the pain, even if it’s just for now. I lean over him, placing soft kisses against his skin. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he breathes.

He groans as I take his nipple into my mouth, using the tip of my tongue to drive him wild beneath me. Hearing his curse, I smirk and move down his body, nipping his skin and running my tongue along his obliques as I pull his boxer briefs off slowly, deciding to tease him.

I bypass his cock, lick his thighs and smile as he opens his legs wider, begging me to touch him where he wants it most.

“Casper, please, touch me... I need to feel you.”

Giving in, I run my tongue up the thick vein. “Love your taste,” I say before taking the tip in my mouth, twisting my tongue around the head.

His tongue swipes at his bottom lip as he leans to watch me.

“Fuck, Casper.” The vibration slides through his body as his hands clench into the sheets, turning his fingers white. Knowing he’s on the edge, I remove my mouth.

Moving down, he spreads himself; I stay there, building his anticipation, watching as his abs clench and he curses. I flick my tongue over his hole, giving him a taste of what’s coming. If he wants to go all the way, I’m making it as good as possible. My guy loves his ass being eaten out.

Korbin’s body jerks with each thrust and lick of my tongue, his back arching as sweat coats his skin. He moans, curses, and groans, not even making sense.

I’ve never been so hard as I am seeing his reactions when I push two fingers inside him, using his wetness. A slight hiss

comes before Korbin rocks his body and rides them.

“More,” he begs, as his body shakes, calf muscles tensing.

I twist my fingers, adding another. Three is the most we’ve ever done. I lean over Korbin, taking his mouth in a fierce kiss as I stretch him beneath me, bending my fingers and smirking against his lips as I touch that patch of nerves.

Korbin rips his mouth away, letting out a deep moan, his neck arching, eyes fluttering. “I can’t...” he whispers, followed by gasps of breath.

We’ve been together enough for me to know he wasn’t asking me to stop, but his pleasure was building to the point I want. Precum leaks from his dick, covering us both. I give him a soft kiss, different from the desperation between us. This one is filled with an emotion neither of us has experienced.

“Grab the lube.”

Korbin throws the pillow, grabbing the bottle we keep close. If I wasn’t so turned on, I’d laugh as he fumbles with the bottle. Our fingers touching causes us to look at each other with a sharp intake of breath.

It’s changed between us. This is real.

There’s no hate, no plan. It is just us.

I open the tube with shaking fingers, cover myself, and push his legs to his chest. “Hold them there.”

“Can we do it this way?” he asks innocently and looks at me as if I’m everything. No one else exists, making the last of the thorns fall from my heart.

I’m in love with Korbin mother fucking Rose.

I swallow the emotion. “Yeah, are you sure? We don’t have \_\_\_”

“I want this, you,” he says, cutting me off.

This is when I lose my virginity, and Korbin will lose his, too, but differently.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper, lining up my cock with his twitching hole. Korbin’s fingers curl around my wrist, making me look at him.

“I love you, Casper. Love me too.”

“I already do.” My voice hitches, making his eyes flare as I push forward, feeling him tighten around me. “Relax.” At my voice and the feel of my palm running across his body, his muscles begin relaxing. I grit my jaw, pushing a little further. Never had I expected it to feel like this. So intense.

My balls draw up as I sink into him inch by inch. Watching my dick disappear into his hot body has me already feeling on edge. “Baby,” I curse, slipping in the last four inches. “I’m in all the way.”

“Move,” Korbin strains out, and I see pain coating his features.

Instead, I lower over him until our chests touch and press a kiss to his mouth. “You feel amazing, so good.” Korbin shivers beneath me. Something crosses those silvers. He stops my thoughts with a kiss rivaling all others.

“Move, please. Love me,” he whispers against my lips.

I move my hips, short strokes, deeper ones, watching his face to see what he likes and the ones that have him leaking precum.

The pain turns to pleasure as groans fall from him as I hold his hips and roll mine.

Korbin cries out, making me stop. His eyes fly open. “Don’t stop.”

I realize I’ve hit that bundle of nerves and smirk, doing it repeatedly, watching his lips part and lashes flutter as he gasps, fingers digging into the sheets.

Sweat covers our bodies, and we’re both panting as I grab his cock and stroke him, matching my thrusts. Korbin’s body shakes, abs rippling and fingers tightening in the sheets as his back arches. I lean over him, whispering in his ear, “My turn next. You’re going to make me yours, too.”

“Casper!” My name rips from him a second later as he cums, coating our stomachs. My thighs shake as I feel my body warm from the inside out.

“Korbin, babe, fuck!” I roar, releasing inside his hot body and pushing my hips tight against him, trying to get closer, as if I’m trying to crawl inside him.

I collapse on top of him as we both breathe heavily, our scent hanging between us.

Once I regain my breath, I push up, watching my dick fall from his body. Cum follows, and I groan at the sight, but Korbin’s hiss distracts me.

“Are you okay? Was I too rough—” He cuts off my words with a deep kiss.

“No, it was... Thank you.” He smiles, placing a soft peck against my mouth.

“Shouldn’t we get clean?” I ask as he wraps his arms around me.

“Not yet,” he says, holding me tighter.

Without my brain consumed with sexual tension, I ask the question. “What happened yesterday?”

He turns his face away. “Nothing I want to remember.”

I lean on my elbow so I can see him. “Korbin, talk to me. That’s what I’m here for.”

“I will,” he sighs but says nothing. I let it go and curl my body around his, wrapping my arms around him. After a few minutes, I hear his soft snores.

I kiss him softly on his nape, trying to ignore the ball tightening in my gut.

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“Kid, either take a piss or spit it out.”

“What?” I stop my leg from bouncing, turning to face Dad.

He places his mug down and clutches my shoulder. “Ever since you’ve been a kid, you move like you’re going to damn piss your pants when you need to say something.” He smirks. “So, what’s on your mind?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, struggling to figure out what to say. “What if I stay here and take the apprenticeship with Zane,” I rush out. Well, I guess that’s one way to say it.

Dad’s eyes grow as he keeps silent, moving beside me then leaning against the kitchen counter. “This got to do with the guy. The one who dropped you off in that fancy ride at the crack of dawn?” His brow climbs.

My cheeks heat as I rub my neck. “I guess he’s part of it, but I love working at Marked. Respect the hell out of Zane, and you know how much I like Ruby.”

He nods. “I do, but several weeks ago, you couldn’t wait to escape this place, the small, narrow-minded town. What’s changed, kid? Because as far as I can see, it’s the same place, the same people.”

“I know.” I pace, not upset at my dad, but at myself. “Everything I wanted to run from seems to be the reason I want to stay. I know it doesn’t make sense... but, Dad, trust me.”

“Over the summer, I got you back. I’m not letting this town, those people, this place destroy you again!”

“It won’t happen... It’s different this time.”

“Is it, Lyric?” He runs a palm over his face before looking at me. “I hope to God you’re right. Not for me, for you.” He pats my shoulder and glares out the window.

I take my backpack. “I’ve got to go.”

He studies me and nods. “I love you, kid. More than anything.” There’s a hitch in his voice.

“I love you too, Dad.” My voice chokes as I close the door behind me.

Dad’s overprotective. He’s seen it all. The darkness that circled me and seized me by the balls. The bubbly teenager I was and the guy he now sees, held by his compulsive habits and restlessness.

Is he right?

Am I an idiot for staying for the guy who tormented me and made me loathe myself?

I know Korbin said he loves me, but does he?

He can’t.

Because it’s all been a lie. I got him to fall for me.

Until it fused with what’s real. This has caused all the lines to blur. If I stay, I’ve got to tell Korbin the truth.

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I feel my shoulder being knocked. “Look where you’re going.”

“Ass,” I grit out, scowling as I see Jasper. His eyes tighten. “Move out of my way.”

His lip curls as he shoves me into the wall. “You look happy for a damn vamp and considering your boyfriend just got engaged.”

Ignoring the name he called me, I realize what he said. “What are you talking about? Took too many balls to the head?” I smirk, shoving down the fear as Jasper’s body shakes, baring his teeth.

“Korbin, you dumb piece of trash. He and Ashley got engaged this morning.”

“No!” The word breaks free before I can stop it. I shove him off me. “You are lying,” I snarl.

“The only liar is Rose.” He laughs in my face. “You were just another one of his games. His last chance to play with you. Make you fall in love with him before the end of summer, then he throws you away like the trash you are, and they go off to college.”

My fists clench at my side. All the self-doubt paints my insides. No! He loves me, and we’re together. It’s not a lie! “I don’t believe you. Korbin wouldn’t... he—”

Jasper grins, cutting me off. “What? Wouldn’t treat you like crap and torture you? Use his last chance to crush you?” he mocks.

“No, he...” I shake my head, hating how quiet my voice sounds. How does Jasper know about Korbin and me? He can’t be telling the truth. He can’t. I feel my rib cage tighten, my pulse pounding in my ears.

“I guess he got fed up before he got you to say those words.” He shrugs.

I step back, his words knocked into me, and I feel the color drain from my face. My throat constricts, choking off my words. I set my fist on my chest, feeling my lungs burn, heart squeeze.

“Oh, hell, you didn’t?” His laugh rings through my skull as I see his mouth curving, see the delight in eyes at my pain. “You did. You told Korbin you love him.” He moves toward me, staring me dead in the eye. “Korbin will never love you. He’ll love no one apart from himself.” His last sentence wrecks me. “He’s been fucking Ashley all summer.”



“No.” I shake my head, leaning my hands on my knees, trying to breathe, and peeking at Jasper as he walks away. I hate that I don’t punch him, that I say nothing and retreat to the weak, helpless fourteen-year-old boy I was.

By the time I get to Marked, the shock and pain have left, taken over by a gut-clenching rage and fury I’ve never known.

*“What, you thought it was real? You’re pathetic, a joke! They’re all laughing at you! How many times did he leave you to go to Ashley? You’re not worth loving. You’re nothing.”*

“Shut up,” I growl, clutching my hair, trying to tear the thoughts from my head as I shove the door open, making Ruby jump. She takes out her sucker, smiling then sinking as I stalk past her into the back room and slam the door.

“Fuck!” I explode as I swipe my hands across my desk, sending everything flying and let out a gut-wrenching roar.

The door is shoved open, and Zane strides in, pausing when he sees the mess, Ruby behind him.

I stride toward them, pointing my finger. “Did you know?” I seethe, feeling my body shaking as if this feeling is trying to tear me apart.

Zane steps further into the room, holding his palms up. “Lyric, what the hell happened?”

“Your brother happened. I hated him. Hated him. Korbin motherfucking Rose,” I growl. “What he did to me at school. How he made me feel. I wanted to get back at him, to make him feel an ounce of the same damn pain.” I punch my chest as Zane and Ruby remain quiet. “So, I created a plan the day he showed up here for me. A plan to make him fall for me, then crush his heart.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Lyric, you are not like that.” Ruby’s tone is soft. “Like them.”

“I wasn’t, but they made me this way.” I grunt. “Every day for four years they verbally abused me. Chucked me in the dumpster because I was trash. Shunned me because I didn’t have the same money as they did! Pulled me out of the closet. I came to school to face homophobic slurs on my locker daily!

Do you know what it does to a kid? How it messes with your head?" I lean closer to them, tapping my temple. "No one could talk to me. I had no one! I was the disgusting trailer trash gay guy." I shake my head and lean against the desk, struggling to control my breathing as a dark laugh drops from me, and I turn to face them. "Do you know the worst thing? I fucking believed them! I hate myself." I stare at the desk. "Fuck, I still do."

A small gasp comes from one of them, not sure who.

"Korbin was playing me. Make a poor trailer kid fall in love with him. To get the guy he treated like nothing to say those words." My voice hitches. "Then chuck him away like the trash I am."

I stand straighter, facing them. "I didn't take him to lunch. Didn't ring him to talk for hours. Ask him to work on my pawpaw's car. I didn't buy him damn car show tickets!" I say with a growl. "While fucking my girlfriend all summer." I punch my chest. "I didn't say I love you and get engaged the next damn morning after losing my virginity." A tear slips down my cheek as I clench my jaw. "I didn't..." My breath hitches. "I didn't..." An inhuman sound tears from me.

Ruby races across the room and takes me in her arms. "You ban your brother from this place!" she barks at Zane.

"Who told you this? Are you sure it's all true?" I know he doesn't want to believe his brother is messed up.

"It is," Ruby answers.

"What?" I ask, tearing from her grip, taking a step back as my eyes race over her. "You knew?"

"No!" She shakes her head. "No, Lyric, I would've told you."

"Spit it out, Ruby," Zane snaps, his irritation building.

She shoots him a look that would have most guys covering their junk. "I was at the store, and Mrs. Regal was there."

We all know Mrs. Regal is the town gossip. She might be eighty-seven, hard of hearing, and nearly blind, but nothing

gets past her. “She spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Sarson, telling them about the engagement.” Ruby hesitates and glances between us.

Zane narrows his eyes at her. “What are you not saying?”

Ruby’s shoulder drops as she watches me. “She also said Ashley is in the family way.”

“Jasper didn’t... he didn’t say.” I shake my head, looking at Zane. I don’t know how, but I know those words are true.

Zane growls as he strides out.

“Lyric, are you okay?” Ruby asks, smoothing her hands down my arms.

“I don’t know,” I say robotically, going past her and falling down the wall, burying my face in my hands.

Zane’s cursing makes me lift my head to see Ruby sitting in the chair, watching me as she chews her lip. Zane is holding his phone and puts it on the desk. A ringtone shatters the air, letting us know he’s on speaker.

“Hello, who is this?” Bart’s voice echoes down the line.

“I know my brother has my name saved, so cut the crap, Bart. Where is Korbin?” Zane seethes.

“He’s busy celebrating his engagement with his family.”

“So, it’s true.”

“Yes, I’m sure he would’ve told you before it appeared on the evening news.” His voice is dripping with sarcasm.

“The baby?” Zane grits out. Silence holds the call. I swear I stop breathing and close my eyes, readying for the pain I know is coming.

“Where have you heard this information?”

“We both know this town doesn’t keep secrets,” Zane bites out.

“It will be kept secret until after the wedding. You don’t want to harm your brother’s reputation.” The prick uses the family card.

Zane ends the call and turns to punch the wall, letting out a frustrated yell. Still facing away from us, he tries to even his breathing.

Once he's got control, he turns to face me, running a hand over his face. "What you did was pretty messed up, but I know you fell in love with my brother."

A weird sensation works over me as I stand and cross the room, grabbing my backpack. "I'm out." I'm numb.

"Lyric."

My eyes flicked between my first friends in this town. "I respect the hell out of you both. I'll be in touch."

I don't wait for their reply and make it home in record time. My dad stands as I come through the door.

"What are you doing back?"

"You were right. This town is still the same. I'm leaving. Now."

"Lyric, kid, what's happened?" He searches my face, but I've had plenty of practice hiding my emotions from him. I shrug my one shoulder.

"I got reminded of who I was." I move to my room. Most of my stuff was already packed ahead of time, and the dorms will be open in two days. It would take around seventeen hours to get to California. I could stop at a motel overnight and take it slow. By the time I get there, the dorms will be ready.

"Kid, I know what I said this morning..." He stops. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

I swing my backpack over my shoulder and grab the suitcase as he grabs the other. "I want out of this place."

He opens his mouth but slams it shut, mouth thinning as he nods. We pack my stuff into his truck. I hate taking it off dad. He swears he's already organized a car share with a guy from the factory.

He rubs his neck and pulls out a rolled-up note. "It's not much," he says, holding it out to me.

“I’ve got enough savings from working. Keep it. Get a new truck.”

“It’s yours. Take it, kid. It’ll make me sleep easier.”

I know there’s no point in arguing with him. “Thanks, Dad.”

He pulls me into his arms. “Love you.”

“Thanks for everything.”

He tries to hide his glassy eyes as he opens my door. “You’ll call me as soon as you get there?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ve got all your information?”

I hold up my pack. He nods. “Bye, kid.” He closes my door, offering me a wave with a frown.

I pull out of the trailer park, taking one last look at it.

I drive past Marked and to the edges of Hill View. The lane to Korbin’s grandparents appears, and I make a sharp right and drive behind the house. I lean against the truck, glaring at it. The place had become ours. No, it was all a lie. If I could, I’d burn the damn place down.

The violence beneath the surface breaks loose as I jog across to the garage.

Pulling the door open, I see the dodger Korbin had surprised me on Sunday morning. It was fixed, and we drove it to the car show, holding hands the entire way. If I close my eyes, I can still see him reaching over, placing his hand on my neck, and whispering how much he’ll miss me. His lips lingered inches above mine for a few seconds, holding my eyes in a heated stare. Kissing me from my lips to my jaw and neck.

I spot a crowbar and pick it up, feeling the weight in my hand as my finger clench around the cold metal.

Lifting it, I smash it against the window. “That’s for calling me trash,” I roar, striking it against the bodywork. Tears slip down my cheeks as my chest heaves. “That’s for

making me sit in a dumpster.” I slam the bar into the windshield. “For making me hate myself,” I scream. “That’s for bringing me lunch!” Another violent sob rips from me. “For buying me tickets to the car show!” I yell, hearing the glass shatter and the metal dent. I don’t feel the sharp shard sinking into my skin or the blood smearing over my arms.

Breathing hard, I step around to the hood and bring it down over and over. “That’s for making me fall in love with you.” I drop the bar. A painful noise leaves my throat, cutting off my ability to speak. I cover my mouth with my fist as I sink to my knees. “I hate you,” I whimper, clenching my fists. “I hate you,” I roar, then I stand, and without looking back at the car, I step out and get in the truck.

The sign for Hill View moves into view, letting me know I’m at the town’s edge. I grip my phone and call his number, getting the answer phone.

“You lose Korbin. I never loved you. I hate you.”

I roll down my window and chuck my phone out, resting my elbow on the window and raising my arm and middle finger.

Fuck you, Hill view.

Fuck you, Korbin mother fucking Rose.

Fuck you all.

I’m out.



I pull into a spot outside Marked, ready to get my guy. I'll kiss his smart mouth and explain everything. He might get pissed, but we can fight, then we'll talk it through. Damn, I'll let him kick me in the balls again if he needs to.

I can't help how my mouth curves. I've never felt so free.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Ruby hisses, her eyes red, as she steps around the reception desk, getting into my space. "Get out! You broke him," she screeches.

"I'll deal with him." Zane puts his hand on her shoulder, keeping her back.

My brow rises, but the stern look on my brother's face kills my cocky remark. He's never looked at me like he is now, as if he doesn't even know me and can't stand the sight of me.

"What the hell is happening?" I ask Zane, following him into the back room.

I hesitate by the door, looking at the place trashed. An icy sweat breaks across my skin. Has something happened to Casper?

"Where is he? Where's Casper?"

"Did you expect him to stay around? You're engaged! Thanks for that, *bro*," Zane spits. "And Ashley is pregnant?" he asks but already knows the answer.

"How?" I clutch Zane's top. My fingers dig into the material. "What did you say to him!" I roar, trying to free

some of the building emotion. “Where is he?”

Zane freezes at my touch. “Get your hands off me.” His voice shakes, and I don’t miss the glint of fear in his eyes. He shoves me off when I don’t react immediately, sending me back a few steps. “Don’t touch me.” He visibly shakes. He wasn’t scared of me, so what the hell brought the fear into his eyes. Before I can try to figure it out, Zane growls.

“I didn’t say anything! You damn well should’ve. I told you to stay away from him.”

“I couldn’t!” I explode, not caring who is listening. “I love him!”

Zane’s lips curve back. “If that’s your idea of love, then it’s as screwed up as your father’s.”

I jerk back from his words. “Zane,” I whisper.

“You need to leave. I can’t look at you.” He shakes his head. “Give me time, Korbin.”

He goes to leave, but I catch his arm, feeling his muscles tense under my fingers. “I’m not him! I’m not Bart!” I hiss.

He leans against the door, crossing his arms over his chest. “You got five minutes to tell me what the hell is happening.”

“Bart blindsided me. He even gave Ashley a ring. All morning I’ve tried to figure it out. I told Ash I’d support her with the baby, but I’m not getting engaged.”

All morning I’d been doing damage control, working to figure out a plan to keep Casper and limit the backlash on him.

“Bart wasn’t happy and threatened to disown me. I walked away from it all.”

Zane’s brow lifts. He shoves off the door, studying me. “You’re not lying?”

“No!”

He curses. “And you weren’t... what was it again, playing a sick prank to get the poor trailer trash to fall in love with you?”



The fact he was uncertain hurts. Causing me to take a step back. Yeah, I could be an ass, a damned bastard. But Zane knows how I feel about Casper. What it's meant to try this with him.

"No," I grit out.

Zane curses. "We need to find your guy." He snags his keys, racing through the shop. I jog after him, ignoring Ruby calling behind us. He hops in his truck, and I rip open the passenger door and dive in as he peels into the street.

"Want to tell me what the hell is happening?"

"Short version. Lyric played you. He wanted to make you fall in love with him before he broke your heart to get revenge for all the bull you pulled."

"What?" No, there's no way. I felt the way he kissed me, how he touched me. Then his eyes would soften. What happened between us last night, how he looked after me, loved me.

It wasn't a lie.

"He ended up falling for you. That dude might deny it all he wants, but he's in love with you. We've all seen it," Zane finishes.

My pulse pounds as I nod. "Okay," I drawl, feeling the pressure in my chest slacken slightly. Casper was getting a kick in the balls for this one.

"This morning, someone told him you were playing him and all about the engagement. Lyric was wrecked when he came in, accusing me of knowing. I rang your phone, but Bart answered."

My head shoots to Zane. "He answered my phone! What did he say?"

"You were celebrating your engagement with your family and confirmed Ashley is pregnant."

I growl under my breath. If I wasn't sure about giving up Rose's name before, I was now. Bart had messed with the two people he shouldn't have.

The guy I love and my brother.

“I would never do that to you. I was trying to do damage control. Figuring out how Lyric and I could be together and still be a part of my kid’s life.”

“I get it.” He clutches my shoulder. “You should’ve come to me. We’ll talk about it later but know I’m here for you.” He tries to smile, but I see the uncertainty in his eyes.

“Casper lost his shit?” I continue, digging my nails into the seat, needing to touch him. I needed to look at Casper.

“Yeah, but after the call, he shut down and said he was out and would be in touch.”

“What are you not saying?”

Zane glances between the road and me. “It didn’t sound like he meant it in a few days.”

“He wouldn’t leave.” *Me*, I add silently and close my eyes, as an anxious feeling washes over me, and my pulse rings in my ears. “Move,” I snap, seeing the trailer park come into view.

I jump out before Zane kills the truck and race up the steps, tripping on the broken one.

“Lyric.” I bang my palm against the door. “Lyric! Casper!” The screen opens, revealing an older version of Casper, apart from the wrinkles on his face, which show he’s had a rough life. He presses the door open, frowning when he meets me.

“What the hell are you trying to do, boy? Wake the dead!”

“No, sorry, sir... is Cas...I mean Lyric, here.”

His eyes narrow as he strides down the steps. “You’re Bart Rose’s boy, ain’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

His frown disappears as his brows jump, and he curses. “It’s you he’s been fooling around with all summer?” Cussing again as he runs a hand over his face.

“Umm... yes, sir.”

Those olive eyes narrow as he tilts his head and turns away, shaking his head before they fly back to me. His nostrils flare as his arm sweeps between us. “It was all you, weren’t it?”

Confused, I don’t answer. Eric grips my top, dragging me closer, flexing in the material as if it’s taking all his strength not to punch me. “You are the reason my boy changed.”

“Mr. Blackmore, Eric.” Zane steps in front of me, only for Eric’s fingers to dig tighter into my top.

“Stay out of this, Zane,” Eric growls at my brother.

“I can’t. He’s, my brother.”

“And Lyric is my son.” Eric’s voice rises as he turns back to face me, eyes flinty. “You are the reason my boy...” He sucks in a breath. “You’re the reason my boy hates himself.” A tear falls from the corner of his eye, and I watch it roll down his cheek.

The truth of the pain I caused Lyric punches me like a blow to the gut.

“I didn’t... I mean...” I nod. “Yes, it was me.”

Eric’s face reddens, and a vein in his temple pulses. “Do you know what you did? You broke him!”

“I... I...” I slam my mouth shut.

“Eric, they were kids.” Zane stands beside me, defending me.

“Kids!” Eric spits, shoving me at Zane, who catches me. “Have you noticed how he checks everything three times? How he plays with that damn silver ring or rubs his chest.”

“I have, but...”

“Anxiety, the doctor said, compulsive habits, panic attacks because of him,” Eric spits, his fist clenching. “I like you, Zane. You helped my boy, and he respects the hell out of you. I’ll let him walk away... one chance. Get him out of here. Or I will rip him to shreds. I ain’t messing.”

Zane grabs my shoulder. “Come on.”

“No.” I shrug him off.

“Yes, it was me. I made Lyric’s life hell. I thought...” I shake my hand. The words sound weak. “Sir, I’m in love with your son.”

He leaps toward me, finger practically touching my nose. “You don’t know what love is. All of you are the same. The only person you’re in love with is yourself!” A cruel smirk pulls at his lips. “He’s gone, and I’ll never tell you where he is. I hope he never comes back. This town doesn’t deserve someone like my boy. He’s better than all of you,” he taunts before glaring at Zane, and my brother seems to pick up a message I don’t as three guys I hadn’t noticed walk toward us.

“You’re always welcome here, Zane, but Eric has asked him leave.” I hear the implied words; they won’t ask as nicely.

“We’re leaving, Matthew,” Zane shouts, forcing me into the car. He keeps his eyes on the men as he rounds the hood and jumps behind the wheel, reversing out with a speed that causes dust to fly. “Damn, that was close. Looks like your guy’s got a lot of respect around these parts, and it ain’t easy to gain.”

I glare out the window.

“Korbin, you listening? You’re coming to stay with me.”

I wasn’t listening. Casper couldn’t be gone. “The cabin. He could be there.”

Zane blows out a breath. “He’s miles away. Sorry, bro, he’s left.”

“No!” I say, refusing to believe it. “It’s our place. He said we argue, get pissed, and talk it through.” Zane frowns, not understanding. “Take me there. He’s there.”

“Okay.” He does a U-turn. As we pull down the dusty road, my gut drops when we see no truck. I hop out, hearing Zane’s door slam, and jog over to the garage.

Hope flares through me.

I’m coming, Casper. I’m going to fix it.

Yanking the door open, I freeze.

“Crap.” I hear Zane curse behind me.

I shake my head, staring at the wreckage of the car. All the windows smashed, the bodywork dented, and “Hate” scraped into the hood.

“Damn, he’s gone Carrie on you.” Zane winces, studying the damage.

To me, it’s symbolic. It’s truer than anything his father said.

Casper has gone.

The pain was unlike anything I had ever felt. The car was nothing but a metaphor for how much I damaged him.

He wanted me to see it, to feel it.

Casper may love me, but he hated me too.

Ignoring the car, I walk into the place that has become ours and switch on my phone.

I see it glow with a voicemail.

“You lose, Korbin. I never loved you. I hate you.”

His voice replays in my head like a broken record.

“Casper.” I break into a sob, dropping to my knees. Zane is in front of me, and I look at his mouth working but can’t hear the words. I need only one person, and he’s driving as quickly as possible to get away from me.

Hating me instead of loving me.

There’s no getting pissed.

No fighting.

No talking it through.

We are like the car.

Broken.

It’s over.

Fuck, it hurts.

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*Four months later...*

I pull my hoodie on. It's mild in California but still warmer than what I'm used to in Colorado.

The campus is enormous with trees lining paths, buildings with fountains out front, and flower beds.

The school colors are red and yellow, which sit proudly around campus.

It took weeks to adjust to the fact I didn't have to watch my back, and no homophobic slurs were hurled my way. Seeing people smile at me and acknowledge me took longer than it should to start feeling normal.

My roommate is a guy called Gabe. He's okay, I guess. He seems cool, if not immature.

I told him I was gay the first night. I wasn't going to hide and wait for the attitude, for his snarl, to demand I leave. He surprised the crap out of me as he shrugged and said it didn't matter. Then he asked me to go to the party he was going to. I froze. Was this it? Where he sets me up? Have his friends been waiting for the new gay guy?

I spent the night waiting for something to happen. My body was in fight-or-flight mode as I hid in the corner of the room. Sweat trickled down my nape as my pulse pounded whenever I saw someone coming my way. It was all one big trigger.

But something strange happened.

Guys came to talk to me, genuinely interested to find out about me. It freaked me the hell out. I realized I'm more socially awkward than I thought.

I've tried to hide my compulsive habits, not wanting to be the freak, not this close to having some type of friendship.

I shove the door to the campus coffee shop and spot Gabe in the corner booth with another dude I don't know. I breathe as the world around me speeds, matching my pulse. My muscles are tense as I force my feet to move and place a smirk on my face as Gabe meets my eyes. He lifts his chin as I approach.

"There you are. Sorry I got lost in the assessment." He groans, studying his laptop.

The guy next to him glances and does a double take. His eyes race over me before jerking back to mine as a deep blush covers his cheeks. He's good-looking, in a nerdy type of way, with auburn hair that falls over thick black glasses.

"Crap, sorry, this is Austin. Lyric, my roommate." Gabe introduces us with a lazy hand wave before his eyes return to his assignment.

"Hello," Austin squeaks before sighing and turning back to his laptop, his cheeks glowing pink.

I take a seat. "Hey."

Austin peers over his screen. "I've heard about you."

I fight back the impulse to snarl and ask what he's heard, and instead lean back in the chair. "Don't believe a word this one says." Placing a slow smirk on my face.

"Hey," Gabe interrupts with a grin. We'd become sort of friends.

"I've never seen a business major with smudges on his fingers." I glance down at the marks on my fingers. Art is my heart, but I swapped it out for business. One day I wanted a place like Zane's and needed the know-how.

The thought of Zane clenches my stomach, and my fingers tighten. Blunt nails dig into my palm. God, I miss working with him and Ruby. I really miss them.

“Lyric breaks all the rules.” Gabe smirks, bringing me back.

“I like to draw,” I add, getting up to place my order as Gabe gets up.

“He’s good too.” Placing a hand on my shoulder, he says, “I’ll get these. I owe you a few.”

Austin glances at me, blue eyes smiling, red still tinting his cheeks. He opens his mouth to talk and slams it shut nervously before returning to his laptop, mumbling.

“You’re doing graphic design the same as Gabe?” I ask to break the silence.

He sits straighter and nods. “Yes.” The light in his eyes dies a little. “If I pass.” The lilt to his tone sounds like he comes from the south.

Gabe returns, placing a coffee in front of me as his phone rings. “It’s Sasha.” He smiles. His girl from back home. “I’m off.” He packs his stuff and rushes out, waving over his shoulder.

I rise and grab my backpack. “I should get going too.”

“We could get something to eat?” Austin blurts, his cheeks turning bright red. “Or not, sorry.” He blushes deeper, scrambling to put everything in his bag.

“Hey.” I touch his shoulder. “I’m starving.”

A smile takes over his face as he chews his lip. “There’s a café outside of campus. It’s cheap.”

“Let’s go.”

We go through campus and see the jocks coming out of the training building. I stop and stare. Half of me expects to see Jasper, Devon, and Korbin in the mix.

“You know them?”



“Nah, do you?”

His eyes widen as he shakes his head. “What! No... I’m gay.”

“I guessed.” I smirk.

“Jocks and gays don’t mix. Have I missed the signs? Sorry.” He blinks at me before scurrying off. I jog to catch him.

“Hey, what are you running off for? I thought we were grabbing food?”

Those blue eyes blink behind his glasses. “You still want to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He waves his hand in my direction. “You’re hot—like really hot! And seem so cool. Look at you.” His mouth slams shut as if he can’t believe he said all of that.

“Trust me, I’m not the cool kid.” I laugh.

Austin snorts as if he doesn’t believe me. “Come on then. It’s not far.”

The walk to the café is silent but not awkward. Austin glances over his shoulder, pushing through the café door. We take a seat by the window as a server comes over, and we place our orders.

“I’m gay.” I speak first, making him tilt his head.

“Gabe mentioned something, but...” He looks down at his cup before glancing back at me. “Are you out?”

“Have been since the jocks at my school caught me with a guy.”

“Damn.” He nods as if he understands.

I laugh and run a hand through my hair. “Yeah, something like that.”

“You don’t seem like the guy who would take crap.”

The server stops our conversation, dropping off two subs and sodas.

“This came later,” I say, biting into my sub.

“I guess we all have a guy who made our life hell. What was yours like? Typical jock? Ass?” He raises a brow.

Korbin flashes through my mind, and I drop my sub onto the plate, unable to finish it.

Now the anger has gone, pain replaces it. I hate to admit how much of my day is consumed by thoughts of him.

I want to say I’m over him. I damn well should be! But I am a sucker for pain because I miss him. It feels like a part of me is missing. Those damn silver eyes haunt my dreams.

“He was something.” I turn to look out the window, trying to hide the rawness I feel, and sit straight, seeing a tattoo shop called Forbidden Ink.

“Maddox’s place.”

“Who?” I turn, facing Austin.

“You haven’t heard of him?”

“No?”

“It’s LGBTQ plus friendly. He helps kids kicked out by their parents and runs The Guarded. It’s a safe place kids can turn up to get off the streets and be safe. Word is Maddox was once a street kid.”

I grin, liking the idea. “Do you know if they need help?”

“I’m not sure... you could ask.”

I grab my backpack, leaving my food and feel excitement move through me. Austin jumps beside me, and we jog across the road and push through the door of Forbidden Ink.

A guy with a faux mohawk and dark eyes—as dark as his hair—meets me at the desk. His lips purse as he takes me in with an attitude matching mine. A smaller guy sits on the chair next to him. Blond hair hangs in his eyes as if he’s hiding behind it.

“I’m looking for Maddox,” I say, glancing around the place. It’s bigger than Zane’s, holding six stations. The style is

more rock-looking with black walls and a red couch. Old English font spelling out the words “Forbidden Ink” in blood red on the back wall.

It’s dark and edgy.

“Maddox,” he shouts, louder than the music. Those dark eyes never leave mine and filled with suspicion.

I turn toward the main floor in time to see a guy rising from his seat. Pulling off black gloves over thick wrists leading to wider arms covered in bright ink. Even his hands are inked.

My eyes rise with his. A half-smile smirk curls at his thick lips. He comes into full view from the partition. Dark hair, longer on one side, falls down over his face in a designer mess, the other is shaved. The ink from his nape climbs his skull. He’s got an extra two inches on me, making him around six foot two.

“You want some ink?” he asks, leaning against the reception desk, studying me. His black T-shirt doesn’t hide the solid muscle underneath, but he’s not bulky. Leaner, defined. The ink of the skull with red shading takes up his throat and curves around his ears. Connecting to the ones on the back of his head. His left nostril holds a small silver ring, and his ears carry more hardware. A deep scar runs across his cheekbone, just missing his eye and both are an intense aquamarine color. He’s got to be a few years older than me, maybe twenty-three, twenty-four.

“No, I want to help.”

He looks over at me. “Got any experience, kid?”

“I worked in a place in Colorado.”

He stands straighter. “Colorado?”

“Yeah, it’s in a small town, but my boss knew his stuff.”

“What did you do there?”

“I designed for the boss and cleaned the shop and made bookings.”

He's unable to hide his surprise. "You got some photos of those designs,"

"I can bring some in tomorrow."

He studies me and looks over to Austin before meeting my eyes. "Yeah, okay..."

"Lyric," I answer, making his eyes widen as he tilts his head.

"Lyric... it's an unusual name." Maddox watches me for another beat. "Come by around three."

"Thanks, man." I grin and lift my chin in his direction.

Maddox walks back to his client, his eyes glancing at me. He gives me a nod before picking up the gun.

I take another glance around the place before leaving.

"You really do like drawing." Austin smiles as we go back toward campus.

"Yeah."

We go back to the dorm. Silence takes over and not the comfortable type. I open the door, letting him in. He glances around as I dump my backpack by my bed and grab us each water.

"Thanks." He smiles and stands. He's a few inches shorter. I freeze as he places his fingers against my waist. "Since I met you, I've wanted to kiss you."

Nervousness moves through me. Korbin's face flashes before me, and I grit my jaw, hating it. He's probably married, and the baby will be due next month.

Has he gone to college? Or stayed in Hill View and worked for his dad?

Lips touch my mouth, soft and unsure. Austin pulls back, smiling. Not like it was the most awkward kiss in history. "Lyric is everything okay?" His smile fades.

"I'm sorry. You're good-looking."

He frowns, taking a step back. "But?"

“I’m not ready for it... this.” And take a seat on my bed as he sits on Gabe’s.

“Who is he?” he asks.

I lean forward, staring at the wall behind him. “My jock,” I bite out.

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting that.” He covers my hand with his. “No pressure. If something happens, it happens.” He looks at me with so much hope.

“Let’s start as friends,” I answer, and Austin struggles to mask his disappointment but agrees.

My body itches to leave, but it’s my dorm. Gabe walks in a few minutes later, making my breathing easier. My phone rings, and I pull it out to see my dad’s number.

“Got to take this.” I wave my phone in their direction, walking out of the room and go to the roof.

“Hey, kid, you, okay?”

“I’m good. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, same crap. Have you spoken to Ruby? Don’t answer because I know you haven’t. That girl comes here every week to see if I need anything. She keeps asking if I’ve given you her number.” Disappointment laces his voice. He raised me better and knows I’m avoiding Ruby, something she doesn’t deserve.

“I’ll call her,” I answer, saying the same thing I have for the last four months.

“Yeah, make sure it’s sooner than later, or I’m coming there to kick your ass, boy.” I smirk, knowing he would. We kick shit for a few more minutes. I tell him about Maddox and going for the job at Forbidden Ink before saying goodbye.

I take a seat on the ledge, take a deep breath, and dial the number. My pulse pounds with the ringtone.

“Hello... Hello?”

My chest aches. I lift my hand, rubbing it as if I can remove the feeling. “Hello!” She huffs, and I picture Ruby

rolling her eyes, lips pursed.

“Hey.” I break the silence, rubbing my neck.

“Lyric! Shit, are you okay? Course you are, you’re calling. I could kick your ass for not saying goodbye or calling!!” she rants.

“Yeah, sorry, girl. I needed out.”

“I get it. It was a shit storm. Korbin came in after....”

“No,” I bite out, cutting her off. “I don’t want to hear it. Or hear his name.” I know it’s unfair to snap at her.

She doesn’t know how many times I’ve sat in my truck, ready to hit the road and go back and beg him to pick me. I freaking cried over that guy for five days. Not a few tears, gut-wrenching sobs, which shook my body. It’s all I allowed myself.

Every damn night I see those damn silver eyes.

“Lyric, listen to me, he....”

“No! I am finally happy, Ruby. I like it here. God dammit, I have friends.” I stand and pace, gripping my hair. “I need to do this my way. If you can’t respect that, I won’t call again.”

“Okay,” she sighs. “Okay.”

We catch up for a bit, and she steers clear of mentioning anything to do with Korbin.

“You promise to check in every week?” she asks.

“Yeah, sorry. I was a dick,” I apologize.

“I understand, but look, Lyric, you need to hear—”

“Ruby, no!” I snarl.

“But—”

“No!” I roar and end the call. My fingers tighten around the plastic as I throw it, gritting my teeth as it smashes against the wall. It looks like I’ll be getting another cheap phone. I lean against the wall and slide down, gripping my hair as my throat and eyes sting. “No,” I grit the words out. I won’t lose another damn tear over him.

I hate him so much.

Yet I still love him.



I wake up spluttering, water drips from my hair into my eyes and see Zane standing above me.

“I tried calling you!” he growls, tearing open my drawers and flinging fresh clothes at me.

“What the fu—”

“Get up,” he says, cutting me off. “We need to move. Ashley and Jasper have been in a wreck.” I swing my legs over the bed, jerking off the soaking sweats where Zane chucked water over me. Trying to understand everything he’s saying through the leftovers of a drunken haze.

He turns to face me. “Sorry, Korbin, but Jasper is dead.”

I freeze at his words, visualizing the guy I grew up with. He’d always been at my side, an arrogant grin on his lips. Jasper features in every childhood memory, even if our friendship ended badly.

“Ash is in a bad way.” He stares at me, watching for a reaction, but I feel numb as if his words aren’t sinking in.

“The baby?” I rasp around my dry throat.

He strides over and squeezes my shoulder. “I don’t know. Come on, we’ve got to leave.”

I follow Zane through the house and jog down the steps, tearing open the door to his truck. I sold mine. Since I’ve been cut off, I got rid of anything of value. Gave it all to Ashley so she could get what she needed for the baby. Word of her



family bankruptcy hit Hill View a few weeks ago, not from me.

Ashley no longer wanted to get engaged. She and Jasper got together days after, and he put a ring on her finger within hours. Ashley, still pissed at me, let the town know I was gay, and within an hour, my father had stopped all my cards. My stuff was dropped outside the gates of the house I'd grown up in, along with a note to never return.

People whom I'd known all my life now crossed the street to avoid me. The guys who had once been my teammates looked at me as if they'd never seen me before.

My college application had been revoked without my dad's investment, but I'd already decided I wasn't going.

Ashley wanted to tell everyone the baby was Jasper's. There was no way I'd let it happen.

I guess karma finally came and bit me on the ass.

Also, I learned Casper had received an acceptance letter back in January. He always knew he was taking off. Everything he told me was a lie.

My mind has gone back to the first day at Zane's, over and over. Casper warned me and told me not to fall in love with him. He'd been warning me.

He won.

He broke me.

For the past four months, I've drunk until I couldn't remember. Then drank more when those memories came too close to the surface.

Last night, I went to a different town to find a hot body and forget all about Lyric Blackmore. Fuck him out of my mind and body.

The guy I met was good-looking, and we stumbled into the restroom. All I could fixate on was his tanned skin, not pale, and those eyes were dull brown, not olive. He grinned at me, not the smirk I wanted. I couldn't go through with it and turned away from the guy.

“It will be okay.” Zane’s voice breaks through my thoughts, and I can only nod.

Because nothing is okay.

We pull up outside the emergency room, and I thank God Zane is with me because I have no clue what to do.

Ever since Casper left, it’s like I’m spiraling.

“Korbin.” I blink, seeing Ruby in front of me. Zane must have rung her.

“I’ll see what’s happening.” Zane squeezes my shoulder as he strides off. Ruby takes his place at my side. We’ve got over our crap. I honestly think she saw the shitstorm of my life and felt sorry for me.

“Are you okay?”

I shrug because I don’t know how to feel. How to process emotions. Ash, Jasper, and I were once inseparable, but we became strangers who shared memories.

Jasper could be a brutal fucker. He was a part of the reason Casper left. Another slice of information I found out. He’s the one who told Lyric I’d never love him, and that I’d been messing with Ashley all summer. I don’t know how Jasper had worked out what was happening between Lyric and me, but he had. He couldn’t hurt me because the girl he loved was wearing a ring he thought I’d given her, so Jasper went after Lyric. I get it; I do. He was in love with her, and that shit makes you do stupid things.

I punched him and haven’t spoken to him since. Did Jasper deserve to die? Hell no. He’d been eighteen and had his whole life in front of him. Ash is carrying my kid, so we’re connected for life.

“You stink. What did you do shower in whiskey?” Ruby’s nose crinkles, bringing me back to the waiting room. I don’t answer. We both know why. To shut the noise in my head.

Zane steps over to us. “Mr. and Mrs. Richmond are over there.”

“I need to see them,” I answer. Ruby takes my left as Zane takes my right, and we walk over.

Her father lifts his bloodshot eyes to me as her mother stares ahead. “They’ve taken her for emergency surgery,” he strangles out.

I nod, having to swallow three times past the fear before speaking the words. “The baby?”

“No word.” Again, I nod, moving numbly to the seating section, and we all sit in the hard chairs.

I run my fingers over the new ink on my wrist, the numbers from my pawpaw’s Dodge plate. The tattoo was for Casper. It became ours. I needed it branded on me to carry a piece of us. Not that I needed it. Everything we did still haunts me, branded itself onto my damn marrow.

I nearly broke when the guy came to collect it. A piece of me hated Lyric for that, but the other part realized this pain was nothing compared to what I’d thrown at him over the years.

I feel Zane elbow me, and I turn to glare as he nods toward the door to see the doctor speaking to the Richmonds. Glancing at the clock, I see we’ve been here for six hours.

I watch slowly as Marianna, Ashley’s mom’s body, coils in on itself. Her dad struggles to wrap his arm around her, but his legs give in as a blood-curdling wail pierces the air.

I rise without thinking. A sickness breaks across my chest, nearly taking my legs from underneath me.

“I’ve got you.” I hear Zane’s voice, but it sounds as if it’s underwater.

I’ve never hidden the fact I was too young to become a dad. I never chose a baby.

But I’d come around.

Accepting this is the hand life has given me. Ash and I sat down and talked. I told her I wanted to be a part of the baby’s life, and she finally complied.

Zane and I made my room into a nursery. We had everything ready. I bought diapers, clothes, and soft toys. We'd both read all the baby books.

The thought they'd never get used yanks me to my knees. "The baby," I choke. "I can't breathe." I struggle to speak as tingles race through my body, and my pulse hammers against my skin.

I was going to be a dad. No matter the factors, I loved the gritty image of a son or daughter, even if they looked like an alien.

It was my alien.

Ruby slips in front of me, holding my face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "You have a daughter."

"A daughter? She's alive?" I cling to her words.

"She's a little early, but the doctor said she's doing well."

Zane helps me to my feet as I glance at the doctor standing a foot away, his eyes glazed.

"I have a daughter?" I breathe the words out.

"Yes, sir. You can come and meet her."

"Can they come?"

"Yes, of course, this way."

I stop, looking at Ashley's parents leaving, her dad's face wet and her mother's void. "I know it means nothing coming from me, but I'm sorry."

Mr. Richmond's throat works, but no words escape as he nods.

"It's a girl. She's okay... are you coming to see her?" I ask. They are her grandparents.

Another sob tears from Marianna, who clings to her husband as he shakes his head.

We follow the doctor through the halls and to a place with plastic cribs. He gestures to the nurse, who gives a soft smile.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

“My daughter?” I demand, knowing what’s happened to Ashley and Jasper will hit me soon. I can only concentrate on the pink blanket in the nurse’s arms, swaddling my daughter.

“Take a seat.” She motions to the chair behind me. Zane grabs my shoulder as my knees cave in. The nurse moves the blankets into my arms, and I take the first look at my daughter.

She’s beyond beautiful, with rosy cheeks, a button nose, fuzzy dark hair, and her love heart lips pursed as she sleeps soundly, unaware of the tragic circumstances circling her birth.

“She’s so small. Is she okay?” I ask, unable to take my eyes off her.

“Yes, she is only two weeks early and is a good weight. We will have to keep her in tonight, but you can take her home tomorrow.”

A fresh fear works through me. Will I be able to look after her? What if I break her? Can I do this?

“The look on your face is the same every parent has.” The nurse smiles. “It’s natural to feel fear. You’ve got this new little life to look after.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how....”

“How about you start by giving her a name?”

“Ash, her mom, wanted to name her after her grandma, Beatrix,” I whisper as I touch her hand, and she curls it around my finger.

Tears sting my eyes. “Beatrix, you like that, huh?” I smile.

“I love it.” Ruby leans closer. “Hello, Beatrix. I’m your Aunt Ruby.”

I look at my brother, whose eyes are bloodshot. He gulps twice. “Hello, Bea, I’m your uncle,” he says, his voice cracking.

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It's been a week since I brought my daughter home from the hospital. Zane drove so slowly it took us nearly an hour rather than the thirty minutes it usually takes. The first day I was terrified something was wrong. She didn't cry, other than a bit of a squawk. Bea quickly made up for it and frightened us when she used her lungs for the first time.

She's a demanding little thing, reminding me of Ashley, and I laugh. Ash would love how much Bea is like her.

"I think that's all," Ruby says, puffing. She's been a godsend and has come over every day to help. Growing up in foster care and helping younger children, she knew what to do. I was scared I would mess it up and screw Bea up somehow.

I set Bea in the car, checking the car seat three times before sliding in next to her and playing with my tie.

Today is Ashley and Jasper's funeral. It still hasn't sunk in that they are both gone. Once, they were both my best friends, and I still have good memories through all the messed-up crap between us lately.

"You ready?" I blink at Zane and glance out the window, seeing we're outside the funeral home. The whole town seems to be here. I nod and push open my door to whispers from the crowd as I lean in and lift my daughter out.

Zane takes my left and Ruby my right as we make our way inside, seeing the coffins with photos of both of them together, single portraits, and even some with the three of us.

I don't go to the front where the family and friends sit. It seems wrong, so I sit a few rows back. Ignoring the stares and the urge to run.

I hear Zane curse and look in time to see my father walk past me, not even acknowledging his granddaughter or me, but my mother surprises me as she stops. A shaky hand raises to her mouth.

"A girl?" she whispers. "She's beautiful. What's her name?"

I swallow, the words stuck in my throat.

“Beatrix, but we call her Bea,” Zane answers respectfully. My mother surprises us all as she smiles at him.

“Did that just happen?” Ruby asks, her eyes tracking my mother as she walks off and takes her seat next to my father.

The service is nice. A few football guys and cheerleaders read poems and say nice things about them.

As it ends, Mr. and Mrs. Richmond walk out, stopping when they see me. Marianna physically flinches as she spots Bea, who sleeps in my arms. Mr. Richmond’s breath hitches as his eyes dart from my face to his granddaughter’s.

“I named her Beatrix,” I rush out.

“It was my mother’s name,” he says as his wife’s face crunches in pain.

“I know. It’s the name Ashley always wanted.”

Marianna lets out a painful whimper at Ash’s name. He wraps an arm around her and holds her tight.

“We will be leaving, moving to Florida. It’s too painful to stay.” He looks at his granddaughter. “What happened between you and my daughter... We’ve always liked you, Korbin.” He shakes his head. “Take care of her,” he rushes out before they leave.

I wait until everyone is gone before making my way to the front. I first walk over to Jasper’s coffin and place my hand against the top.

“You didn’t deserve this. I know you were hurting when you saw Casper. I get it now. Love makes you crazy. Give them hell. Sleep tight, brother.”

As I move to Ash, I feel my throat tighten. “I named her Beatrix. I swear to you, she’ll know who you are.” A tear drops. “I’ll look after her, protect her. I know you’ll be watching. Sleep tight, Ash.”

It is an hour after we come back when the front doorbell rings. Ruby goes to answer it. She pauses, and I stand as my mother walks in.

She looks around when her eyes find mine.

“Mother.”

She tries to smile, but her lips barely move.

“I’ll take Bea.” Ruby breaks the silence, and I watch her slip into my room.

“Would you like a drink?” Zane speaks when no one else does.

“No, thank you. I won’t be here long.” She hands me a large white box. “Mr. and Mrs. Richmond wanted you to have this. Pictures of Ashley, baby stuff she’d bought, and a beautiful pink blanket.”

I take it from her hands, unable to look at it straight away.

She fumbles with her bag, pulls out a check, and hands it to me. “It’s not much... I’m divorcing your father. He got his...one... one of those women pregnant.”

“Divorced? Pregnant?” None of it made sense. I look into her eyes. Seeing if she’s telling the truth. Looking for the drunken haze or drug-filled pupils.

“I’m not high, Korbin.”

“You can’t blame me for suspecting.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be the mother you needed. I let that man take everything I was... It’s no excuse.” Her eyes become glassy. “I took what I could and sold a few pieces to give you some and enough for me to leave.”

“You’re leaving? Now? I need you!”

She walks over to me, placing an icy hand on my cheek. “No, you don’t. You haven’t for a long time.” My mother turns to Zane. “Thank you for being what my son needed, for being the parent we should’ve been.”

“He’s my brother,” he says, his voice quiet.

“He is. It was never my choice to keep you apart. You look after each other.”

She goes to leave.



“Where will you go?” I ask.

Her lips curve. “A place I went as a child on the coast. I need to find myself. Maybe one day...” She lets it drop away.

“You’re welcome here,” Zane answers.

“Don’t let this hurt turn you bitter. Don’t turn into us, Korbin.” She turns and walks out the door. I sink into the chair, looking at the check for fifty thousand. It’s a lot of money to most, but it used to be pocket change for my parents.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting that,” Zane says, looking at the door.

“It should’ve happened a long time ago.”

He squeezes my shoulder and leaves me alone. I pull out my phone and scroll through the messages I’ve sent to Casper over the last four months. The last one is a photo of Bea, showing him my daughter. One saying I need him, but they are all undelivered.

Mom is right. I can’t let the hurt I feel twist me until I become bitter.

No more falling into the bottle but surviving.

I need to be the best I can be for Bea. She deserves it.

I’ll always love Casper, but part of me hated him too.

He was meant to be different.

He was meant to love me enough to stay.



*Three years later...*

“Are you ready?”

I look at Maddox and nod. “Yeah, my stuff is set up.”

We are at an ink convention. It’s my first one, and I’m booked all day.

Maddox hired me three years ago. After six months of working for him, I’d dropped out of college and become Maddox’s apprentice.

I now held a name for myself in the community.

“And your T-shirts?”

“Yes, stop stressing. We’ve got this.” I smirk. A year ago, The Guarded needed a roof. The kids would be back on the street if we didn’t raise funds.

We all came together and put on events to raise money. I had an idea and designed T-shirts all dark and edgy in several different designs. One with a dark skull face and the word Misfits dripping, like it’s melting. Another with a smiling skeleton and the words Lucky Thirteen. Others had a king of hearts playing card over the left side of the chest, but the heart was broken with red dripping like blood. All of them are based on my tattoo designs.

They had been so popular. We had them in the shop as merch and put them on a website where we sold over ten

thousand on the first day.

“Kid.” I turn to the voice.

“Dad?” I last saw him a year ago. He still looks tired, but something’s different about him. He seems lighter, looks like he’s lost weight, and has been looking after himself. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, Maddox thought this was a big deal, and you should’ve told me.” He gave me a disapproving look.

“Yeah, sorry.” I rub my neck.

“Look who’s gone and grown up on us.” I turn at the sassy voice, blinking.

“What? How... Ruby?” I grab her, wrapping my arms tight around her. She’s taken by surprise. I wasn’t a hugger. We’d kept in contact at least once a month. She pulls away, taking me in.

I do the same. Ruby’s hair is in a short bob, dyed black with dark blue slices. She is wearing an oversized sweater with tights and big chunky boots, fitting in with every other artist, and a cherry sucker in her mouth.

“This place looks good on you.” She smiles and runs a hand down my arms, looking at me the way a big sister would.

“The guys are awesome,” I say, feeling a hint of regret. “How’s Zane?”

“He’s... He’s good.” She gives me a tight smile and looks away as awkward silence falls between us.

Maddox walks up and stands beside me. “Hey, Lyric, your guy is here.” I see Remy walking through the crowds with a smile on his face. Everyone around him turns and gasps as they see him. Remy is gorgeous. He’s always been a celebrity. We aren’t dating, and he isn’t my guy.

We met at a nightclub and exchanged numbers. We’ve both been taking it slowly, only sharing a few kisses.

Remy was my mirror, and we both held back, but neither of us questioned it or talked about why. Remy didn’t make me

feel the way Korbin did. It was safe.

“Hey.” He grins, standing in front of me. Remy is stunning, a model for a massive jean company called Early Bird. His best friend, Sienna, waves at me. They were joined at the hip and had been since college. Remy, like me, had dropped out to pursue modeling.

I smirk at him and move my hand toward my dad. “This is my dad, Eric, and a good friend, Ruby. You’ve already met Maddox.”

I watch fear flick in his eyes as they widen at me before he grins and holds out his hand. “Hello, Remy,” he says, still looking at me from the edge of his eye.

“Nice to meet you.” My dad shakes his hand, full of smiles.

Ruby hesitates as she watches me before faking a smile and waving. “Hey.”

“Ready for your ink?” I ask Remy, who nods, still looking overwhelmed. He follows me to the seat and lies down.

“I didn’t know your dad was going to be here,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, that makes both of us. Maddox asked him. This is my first convention, so kind of a big deal.”

Remy’s eyes soften, and he grabs my wrist. “I’m sorry. I was just surprised.” He leans in, giving me a peck.

“Strip.” I smirk, biting my hoop. Remy’s eyes fill with heat, and his lips curve as he yanks his top off, causing me to hiss. Damn, he’s stunning.

“You’ve seen it before,” Remy says smugly.

I grunt. “In pictures. The real deal is better.” He laughs.

I shake my head, grinning as I grab the stencils I’d drawn and place the black stars on either side of his obliques. Now it’s Remy’s turn to suck in a breath. I raise my brow as his cheeks heat.

“Do you blame me? You’re freaking gorgeous, and you know it.” He shakes his head, a soft smile pulling the corner of his mouth.

I grab the gun. “Ready?” He nods as I touch it to his skin and start the outline.

“I want one of these.” I hear Ruby’s voice behind me,

“They are Lyric’s. He designs and makes them.” I hear Maddox, knowing he’s talking about the T-shirts.

“My boy?” my dad says.

“Yeah, they’re making him a pretty dollar.”

“The designer is called Casper,” Ruby’s voice falls away. I see her out of the corner of my eye, watching me. She knows what it means, who gave it to me.

I pretend I can’t hear her. Remy seems to have listened to the conversation also and frowns at me. I try to relax my body and smirk but know it falls short.

“Lyric said he used to work with you?” Maddox’s deep tones reaches us.

“Yeah, I do the piercing. Zane is the artist.” Ruby’s voice sounds shaky.

“So, I’ve heard, and this Zane owns the place.”

“No, he rents it. There’s not much property for sale in Hill View,” I hear Ruby answer. “You should come down. Zane spots for guest artists.”

I hold my breath, waiting for Maddox’s answer, and glance at him. Maddox knows Hill View hasn’t got good memories for me but doesn’t know why. I frown when he seems to freeze, a slight movement. You wouldn’t notice unless you knew him. A lopsided smirk covers his mouth.

“Colorado doesn’t interest me, sorry.” He looks at me, lifting his chin as he walks off to meet someone approaching.

“You’re done.” I wipe the ink clean. “Do you want to look before I cover it?”

“Yeah!” I grin at his answer and grab the mirror, showing him my work.

Remy’s lips curve. “I love them.”

“They look good,” Sienna agrees as I cover the ink.

He stands and puts his shirt back on. “We still on for tonight with your dad in town? If you want to pass.” He shrugs, disappointment in his voice.

“I’ll shoot you a message.” I lean forward and press my mouth to his a little longer than a peck.

“Later.” He licks his lips.

I wink. “Later.”

---

Dad, Ruby, and I go to a small restaurant near my apartment. It hasn’t gotten past me how close they both are.

My dad seems to move where she is without even knowing, talks to her softer, and Ruby smiles at him in a way that says they are more than friends.

Honestly, it’s funny to see them both trying to hide it. But it doesn’t bother me. Dad deserves to be happy, and Ruby is an incredible chick.

It’s nice to know someone is watching him.

My dad’s cheeks heat as he sees me watching them, and he clears his throat.

“Old man Carlton died,” he says as he pulls an envelope out of his pocket and passes it over. “A guy came to our place looking for you to give you this. I don’t know what’s in it.”

Why did my mother’s father want to give me anything? He’s never even spoken to me. I take it and shrug.

“It doesn’t matter.” And shove it in my back pocket. “What time do you leave in the morning?”

“Our flight back is in the afternoon.”

“I’ll try to stop by.” The server comes over with the bill. “I’m paying,” I say and hand him my card.

Dad doesn’t seem happy about it but nods. “Thank you.”

Ruby, who’s been unusually quiet, looks at me. “You and Remy? He seems nice.”

“He’s a good guy, safe,” I answer as we walk out, feeling my defenses rise.

“Korbin misses you,” she rushes out. “He—”

“We were nothing but a lie. Damn, Rubes,” I shout, not caring. People stop to watch. “I’m over it, over him.” It is a lie, one which burns my tongue. I don’t hang around, storming off after feeling everything I’ve tried to escape rush to the surface.

“What the hell are you playing at?” I hear my dad’s voice.

“Lyric needs to know,” Ruby answers. “He can hide here as much as he wants, but he’s still in love with Korbin. He’s not okay.” her voice is drowned out by the traffic. She can see through the facade I’ve built. I hate it.

I grab my phone, shooting Remy a message.

*I’ll be there in ten.*

He’s staying at a hotel and leaving in two days for a shoot in LA. Walking through the lobby, anger burns under my skin as Ruby’s words still hammer around my skull. No, she’s wrong.

I don’t love him.

As soon as Remy opens the door, I don’t wait for him to speak before I kiss him, really kiss him, kicking the door closed behind me. I push him against the wall, rolling my hips as my tongue sweeps in his mouth. Remy groans.

I squeeze my eyes tight, my fingers against the wall curl into fists. I rip my mouth away. “Fuck!” I storm across the room. “Fuck!” I roar.

Remy pants, looking at me when something like understanding crosses his eyes, and he smiles. “Who was he?”

“What?”

Remy walks to the fridge, grabs two beers, and pops the caps. “Who was he?” he repeats as he hands me one.

I down a mouthful and shake my head. It’s been three years since I left Hill View behind. Korbin.

All that was left was pain. It became a part of me.

Two years ago, I’d broken my rule, looked Korbin up, and saw his social media. A picture of him and a baby girl smiling with no teeth and drool down her chin. There was no mistaking Ashley as her mom. Damn, the baby was the cutest thing.

Seeing the picture of Korbin and his daughter made me smile as much as it hurt. The smile he wore in the photo was natural. He was happy.

While I was a mess.

It’s the last time. I didn’t snoop through any more of his photos or his wall. One picture was all the proof I needed.

I was never interested in anything else with Hill View or anyone from there.

Anyone who tried to mention it, I cut them off and pushed them away.

“Asa,” Remy says, taking a seat on the bed and looking off.

“Asa?”

He smiles sadly. “The guy I have no right to love.”

“It sucks.” I take another pull of beer and take a seat next to him.

“Mine is dating a woman. He’s gay but hates that he is. He’s a big NFL star,” he grits out.

The name rings a bell. “Asa Law?” His eyes widen for a second as if he’s told me something he shouldn’t have. “Hey, it’s me,” I reassure him.



“He’s my brother’s best friend.” He shakes his head and pulls out the tags he always wears. “Gave me these before he left.”

“That’s messed up.”

“Yeah, and I still can’t take them off.”

“Are we playing trumps?” I smirk. “Because, man, I got you beat. My bully. We played with each other for the entire summer. I ended up falling for him and found out he played me harder. He’s now married and has a baby, a daughter.”

Remy whistles.

“Ruby told me tonight he still misses me.” I shake my head. “We were a lie.” It’s what hurts the most, the pain I feel of losing him when I never even had him.

“Do you think we’ll ever be free to love again?” Remy asks.

“Could we?” I mutter because that’s the truth. I didn’t know if I could love someone like I had Korbin.

“If there’s ever a time I’m ready to move on, I got your number.” Remy wiggles his brows.

I burst out laughing, and it feels good. We spent the night talking. It was easy. Remy is the guy I’d have gone for if I hadn’t already given my heart away.

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## Lyric

I remain behind at Forbidden Ink once everybody has left. After seeing my dad and Ruby off a week ago, I'd opened the envelope Old Man Carlton had arranged to be left with me. After ringing the number, it was confirmed that I had two million in my bank account.

I bought my dad a cabin by a fishing lake outside Hill View. It was always his dream, and I'd also made an account for him. He'd never have to work again if he didn't want to. I'd planned for him to meet me there this weekend where I'd hand him the keys.

I also bought myself a property, had paid next to nothing for it, and put money aside to do it up, leaving me with over seven hundred grand.

Maddox locks the door and takes a seat, glancing at me. "You're leaving?"

"What? No." I rub my hand over my hair. It's longer than I've had it before, and I was still getting used to it. I pull the check for five hundred grand out of my pocket and hand it over.

"What's this?" he asks, his brows rising.

"My mother's father died. He left me money, and I want you to have it for The Guarded."

I also received a letter, which took me three days to open. Apparently, it wasn't Mom who'd paid for me to go to Hill View private school. It was her father. He'd seen me in town

and noticed how much I looked like his dad. It wasn't enough for him to come forward and want a relationship, but apparently, enough that he took two million of my mother's inheritance and gave it to me.

A part of me wanted to rip the check up, but I knew what this money could do, how much it could help.

Maddox shakes his head. "I can't take this amount."

"Think of everything you could use it for."

"Lyric, I can't take this."

My nostrils flare as I cross my arms over my chest. "Is my money not good enough?"

"Cut the crap, Lyric. You know I think a lot of you. Once you get past your attitude, you become a decent guy."

"So, there's no problem. Take it."

He sighs, massaging his temples. "You can't give away this sort of money."

"I can because I've never had it and don't need it. I've bought my dad a cabin and set him up so he doesn't have to kill himself working at the factory. We both know you pay me well. The money I make for the T-shirts is more than I need."

He looks at me, and his lips curve, making my eyes narrow, and he leans forward. "I'll take it under two conditions." He lifts his brow.

"What?" I bite out, knowing Maddox it could be anything. We've become close in the three years I've worked with him. Every time I pushed him away, he came at me harder. He let me smart off. My attitude rolled off his back. Maddox was no pushover, and he was quick enough to call me out on my crap if I needed it. He also stopped me from falling off the edge. On the days he knew I wasn't coping well, Maddox either came over to my place with a pizza and beers, not speaking a word, just letting me know he was there if I needed him, or he took me to the streets with him where we'd feed the street kids, give them blankets and tell them about The Guarded.

"You become my partner."

His words take me off guard, and I fall into the seat opposite him, scrubbing a hand over my face. “You want me to become your partner?”

“You bring in a lot of clients. Your merch is selling. You’ve got a name for yourself. The convention proved that. Why wouldn’t I want you?”

I hate the battle of self-doubt, the unwanted thoughts hammering through my skull.

After a beat, I nod. “Okay, deal,” I breathe out. “You said two. What’s the other?”

“You see the counselor at The Guarded.”

My blood freezes as I stand. “You think I need one? I’m messed up?”

Maddox doesn’t react to my outburst as he watches me pace. “You’ve built this persona to survive. You don’t let anyone close so they can’t hurt you.”

I shake my head, knowing he’s telling the truth but hating he can see it.

“You did it to protect the boy inside. I guess there was a time you needed to, but not anymore. You need to knock down the walls. Show the world who the hell Lyric Blackmore is.”

“How do I do that? I don’t even know who he is anymore! I’m always angry.”

“I know. It’s going to hurt, and you’ll be opening wounds you’ve sewn up. I swear it will be worth it.”

I take in his words and sink into the seat. I knew what Maddox was saying was true. Most people ignore my attitude and my snarky remarks. I didn’t let people get close because I always feared they’d hurt me or leave. Hell, most of the time, both.

Korbin and his friends had fed the vulnerability by making my life hell.

They made sure I was a loner. No friends. The move made me realize it was safer to be alone. To trust no one but myself.

It set off the next series of events.

The truth, I know, started when my mother left. How could a mother abandon her child?

It's what made Korbin and his friends' words hurt deeply. Are they what she thought?

Is it what made her leave?

"Okay," I mutter, feeling more vulnerable than I have in years.

---

I stand outside the cabin, moving from one foot to the other, and see my dad pull in. We'd always been close, but lately, it was strained between us, something I intended to fix starting this weekend. For the first time in three years, I took the weekend off.

"Kid?" My dad looks at me from the bottom of the steps. His brow raises as he looks over the cabin. It's not massive, a nice three-bed. All warm wood and glass, with an extensive outdoor area and a fire pit on the outskirts of Hill View.

"Thought we could fish?" I pull out two rods.

He frowns, coming up the steps, and leans against the wooden railings, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It sounds like the perfect weekend. Me and my boy, this place, but..." His words drop away.

I put the rods down. "I've been an asshole. I'm working it out, Dad. Going to see a therapist."

His head snaps toward me. "You're going to talk to someone?"

"Yeah, I don't like who I've become. I'm tired, Dad. So damn tired of being angry all the time."

"That's good, kid, really good." The tension falls from his body. "I know they hurt you. He hurt you, your mother hurt you, and damn if I didn't mess up a few times."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “It’s easier to be angry than to feel that hurt. Until all I felt was anger.”

“It’s time to let it go, kid, to be the man I see. The man I know you are.”

“I’m trying. I swear I’m going to try.”

“Not for anyone else, for yourself. I know California has become your safe place, but Ruby’s right. You’re not okay. Your rituals are still there. You’re still letting the anxiety own you.” He holds up his hand to stop me interrupting. “I’m not saying it’s your fault. It’s a natural sense built in us all. You’ve been living in fight or flight for so long you don’t know any other way.”

“I don’t choose to be this way!” I snap.

“Hey,” he grits out. “Start listening. I know this is no quick fix. Do you think I care about your rituals? No. What I care about is you, stop damn lying to my face and telling me you’re okay! I care about you getting help to talk through everything you need to! Mental health is serious. The first move is talking and accepting you’re not damn okay.”

“I’m not okay,” I whisper as a tear leaks from my eye, rolling down my face.

He grabs me, pulling me against his chest. “I know, kid, I know.”

---

I’m outside pacing the deck when dad walks out.

“Lyric?” He frowns.

We’ve spent the weekend being lazy and fishing, starting on the right track to get our relationship as solid as it was before. But differently, I am no longer a kid.

We’re both men.

We both turn as the white van pulls in, three guys jump out, and Ruby’s car pulls behind the truck.

“I need to tell you something.”

“What’s happening?”

I take a deep breath as Ruby comes up the stairs to meet us.

“Ruby packed all our stuff and told Raymond we won’t need the trailer anymore, and I also rang the factory and quit for you.”

He stands there stock still as the words sink in. Ruby’s eyes widen. She knew about the cabin but nothing else.

“You did what?” My dad’s voice makes us both jump. “Why the hell would you think it was okay?” He shakes his head. “I can’t move to California! I don’t even like it there! How will I get a job? I have no savings.” His cheeks tint red as he paces. “Fuck, fuck.”

“Dad.” I try to interrupt his rant as he paces. “Dad.”

“This is why you got me here! To do all this behind my back!” He shakes his head. “I don’t even know what to say to you.”

His words hurt, and the attitude I hid all weekend comes forward.

“I did it because you deserve more than that tin trailer! Because, yeah, I’m a selfish bastard who wants you around for years, and the factory is killing you. I wanted to give you something back for everything you selflessly gave me.”

My words take him back as his mouth opens and slams shut.

“You don’t think I know you were lying when you said you weren’t hungry because we had no food? But I always had a meal. How you went without, so we’d make rent. Yet you gave me everything!”

Ruby lets go of his arm as he stands forward. “I’m your dad.”

“This is my way of telling you I’ve seen it all, Dad, and thank you! Thank you for sticking around and for not leaving

me. Thank you for always being there.”

He swallows and nods, his eyes glassy, and blows a breath. “I get it. I get where all this good comes from, but I’m homeless and without a job.”

Ruby pulls the sucker out of her mouth as she rolls her eyes. “Do you think Lyric would leave you homeless?” She smirks as my dad frowns, and his eyes widen as he turns, seeing the guys bring everything inside.

“What are they doing?”

I pull out the keys. “Welcome home, dad.”

He shakes his head, staring at the cabin. “It’s too much, you can’t...”

“It’s paid for in full, and your name is on the deeds.” He stumbles back as he grips the railings. Ruby smiles at us as she walks into the cabin to help the movers. I’d asked her to pick out anything dad didn’t have, including the best damn coffee machine. He wasn’t drinking that tar anymore. I’m surprised he hasn’t keeled over from it alone.

“Lyric,” he breathes out. “This is your money. You can’t.”

“There’s one more thing. Check your account.”

He frowns, grabs his phone, and I catch him as he stumbles. “How?”

“Old Man Carlton left me money.”

Dad curses.

“I bought you this place. It didn’t cost full price because it needs work, which I thought you’d enjoy doing yourself.” Leaving out the place I bought. “I’m now a partner at Forbidden Ink and gave Maddox a chunk to put into The Guarded. It’s a safe place for kids whose families have disowned them for being gay. I’ve got a bit left over. With my pay from the ink shop and the T-shirts, it’s more than enough.”

He sits down, tears falling. “This is more than we ever dared to dream.”

I take a seat next to him. “It is, but Dad, take it, please.”



His fingers clench around the keys. I watch the internal battle before he stands and pulls me into a hug. “Thank you.”

“Who wants a coffee?” Ruby leans against the door. Dad smiles and walks to her, then kisses her like he’ll never get the chance again. Ruby’s eyes are soft as they break away until they widen and land on me.

“I’m good with it,” I laugh. “You two are crap at hiding. I figured it out when you came to the convention.”

She races toward me, throwing her arms around my neck. “I was so scared you’d hate me.”

“Never. You look after him.”

“I swear. I love him.” She smiles, and an unusual blush touches her cheeks.

My dad gasps and clutches her face. “I love you, too.”

On the drive back to California, I realize I feel lighter.

Dad didn’t stop talking about the plans he had for the place. The sparkle in his eyes returned, and he looked younger than he has in years as he looked at Ruby.

I knew I wanted it.

Love of a good man, a family, a home.

I need to get my head straight first.

It is going to be a long road, but I know it’s one I need to take.



“Daddy.” I turn to see my daughter racing toward me, holding her favorite pink blanket tight in her tiny chubby fingers. I bend down, catching her in my arms as my brother smiles, walking toward us.

“Hey, my little Bumble Bee.” I smile. Her silver eyes twinkle. The only mark Bea has of mine. Everything else is Ashley, from the dark lashes to the deep pink heart-shaped mouth. Bea is her mother’s double in looks. Straight dark brown hair falls to her shoulders and with a glint of mischief in her smile.

Ash would’ve loved how much our daughter looks like her. We say goodnight to Ash and Jasper every night by blowing kisses to the stars.

Bea doesn’t understand being only three years old, but I’ve kept my promise and will continue to ensure our daughter knows all about her mom. I started a box for her, filled with things to remember Ash and Jasper, and her baby clothes.

As much as she looks like Ash, she’s not a girly girl like her mother. Nope, Bea loves nothing more than being dressed in her overalls helping me in the garage with her hair in pigtails and dirt smudged on her face. She loves old classic songs, wiggles her bottom to all the tunes, and draws on her arms to be like her Uncle Zany and Aunt Wuby.

Bea is a wild child, and I hope she never changes.

“Thanks for today,” I say, looking at Zane as he leans beside me, poking his tongue out at his niece.

“You know it’s never a problem.”

I don’t know what I would’ve done without him or Ruby. We still live at Zane’s. I passed my mechanics course and work in Hill View’s only garage for twenty miles.

“You okay?” he asks, watching me.

I put Bea down. “Go see what I’ve got in my office.” She smiles and races off, knowing there are snacks and her toys.

“Got the news today. The place is going up for sale in a few days.” Old Man Bill had it after his father passed it down. He died last week with no children to leave it to, so they were selling his estate for his widow, who wanted to move down south to be closer to her sister.

“Damn, and you ain’t got it?”

“No.” I make a good wage, but even with my grandparents’ house sale, it is far from enough.

“I’ve got—”

“No, I’ll work it out.” I cut him off. “It just means we’ll be with you a little longer.”

Zane goes to answer as a guy comes around the corner. My jaw clenches as I stand straighter, unsure if he has overheard our conversation. Why the hell is Eric Blackmore here?

Bea chooses that moment to run out of the office. She stops, seeing the new visitor, and a broad smile takes over her face, waving.

“I’m Bea.” She announces herself. with far more confidence than a three-year-old should have.

Eric squats, making me move a step. Not knowing what he’ll say and wanting to protect my daughter. His eyes rise to mine, and he shakes his head. An understanding between father to father. He won’t upset my daughter.

“Hello, I’m Eric.”

She twirls a finger in her pigtails and then points to me. “That’s my daddy. He fixes cars, and Uncle Zany draws on people,” she says, making my brother chuckle. I need to have a conversation with my daughter about stranger danger.

“Okay, trouble, let Daddy talk to the nice man.” Zane swings Bea in the air, making her laugh as she waves over her shoulder.

“Bye,” she giggles.

Eric smiles wide and waves. “Bye. Great kid. You’ve done well with her.”

I’m taken aback by his words. “I try. It’s all we can do.” And rub my neck as he nods in agreement. Eric is silent as he takes in the place. I hate how my pulse starts to pound, how I want to grab him and make him tell me where his son is and cross my arms over my chest.

“Did you need something? I’m booked for tomorrow. The rest of the week is booking fast,” I rush out, uneasy with Lyric’s dad only a few feet away. Remembering the last time we met.

“I heard Old Man Bill died,” Eric states.

“Last week,” I answer, picking some tools up and putting them away for the day as I glance at him out of the corner of my eye.

He rubs his hand over his short beard as he tilts his head. “Lyric is coming back.”

I freeze, and the gaping hole in my chest pulses. “What?” I slam my mouth shut, not letting anything else escape, making my fist clench. I take a deep breath before facing Eric.

“It’s not today. Hell, it might not be this year or next. I know my son, and he’ll be back.”

I try to push everything deep down, place the stony mask on my face, lean against the car coolly, and shrug my shoulder.

“And you felt like you needed to tell me? Why? I haven’t heard from him since he left.” *Me.* My brain roars. “Don’t care what he does. If you’re worried about him, don’t be. We’ll

avoid each other. He's been doing a great job of it so far." I lift my chin.

Eric's brows furrow, resting his finger on his chin. "Guess I shouldn't have come. Sorry."

His words irritate me, but I keep back my attitude, knowing Ruby is dating him.

Shocked the crap out of Zane and me when she told us a few weeks ago. We knew she was sneaking around with someone. Never did we expect it to be Eric Blackmore.

Every time I see her, I have to physically stop myself from asking about Lyric, which pisses me off. It's been three years of radio silence.

I've kept the same number in case he calls. All the messages I sent went undelivered. I grieved for him and went through all the stages until I accepted I'd never see him again. It was over.

"Yeah, sorry you wasted your time," I say, sounding anything but sorry.

Eric looks around the place one more time before he nods and leaves.

I grab a wrench and chuck it against the wall, pounding my fist against the workstation as my nostrils flare.

Zane comes out from the office. Worry in his eyes, which I haven't seen in ages. Since Bea, I've pulled my crap together. Hating that I'm putting it back there.

I take a deep breath. "I'm good."

"What did Eric want?" He frowns, glaring at the space where Lyric's dad has just left.

I shrug one shoulder and pick up the wrench from the floor, hesitating. "Nothing, a booking." I'm still trying to figure out why he was here. Maybe to rub salt in the wound. More likely to warn me to stay the hell away.

After Casper left, I fell into a bottomless dark pit of drinking, self-pity, and pain. I don't know what would've

happened if Zane hadn't been there.

Bea runs out, stopping my dark thoughts, and turns to my brother.

"Can you take her home? I've got to do something. I'll pick up food on the way back."

"Burger and fries and milkshake, strawbewwy." Bea jumps like a damn jack-in-the-box. I pick her up, noticing how big she's getting and kiss her temple before setting her back down.

Zane stares at me for a beat before lifting his chin. "See you in a few." He guides Bea back to his car. She waves, blowing me kisses, which I pretend to catch.

"Love you, Bumble Bee."

"Love you, Daddy, don't forget my food." She smiles, making us chuckle.

Zane glances over at me, giving me a tight smile, which I pretend not to see as I shut the shop.

Hearing his car leave, I release a deep breath and lean my forehead against the brick, trying to get a hold of my shallow breathing.

"Why now?" I close my eyes for a few seconds before walking to my car. Which only has a few hundred more miles before it breaks down for good.

Another thing I can't afford.

Instead of turning toward town, I head toward my grandparents' house. It is not mine anymore. I sold it a few weeks back, needing the money rather than letting it sit empty.

It damn well broke me, taking everything and handing over the keys. It was as if I were handing over my dreams of a family and home.

I stop down the road and walk the rest of the way, ensuring no one is around.

There isn't, but someone has been here. The wrap-around porch has been replaced. The house is painted a gorgeous

white with new black windows. A swing is now hung from the roof of the porch.

Through the windows, I can see the kitchen has been ripped out. The table I sat at was gone, most likely broken in a rubbish pile somewhere out back.

The walls are no longer my grandmother's light pink but a warm cream. They'd kept the wooden floors, and it looked like they had been sanding them.

A few weeks' worth of work had already happened. You could see the bones of the house. The ideas the owner had, and my chest warmed when I saw they weren't changing it too much.

I sat on the newly installed steps, glancing around the grounds, and took a deep breath, palms against my forehead.

Why the hell had Eric come today? To mess with my head? Because it was working.

I've tried moving on, going out with a few guys, but nothing lasted more than a few dates.

Zane said I wasn't giving them a chance. How could I date someone I knew I'd never love?

It wasn't fair.

Which just pissed me off.

How could you hate someone for breaking you? Yet, love them at the same time?

The saying is right. There is a thin line between love and hate.



“That’s the last.” I look over my shoulder as Zane puts a box down. “Damn, I didn’t know we had so much?” I rub my hand over my neck, glancing around at a sea of boxes, but I can’t help but grin.

For the last six months, things have looked up. The agent came to the shop and told me it had been bought.

His following words knocked me on my ass. The person who bought it didn’t want to be known. He saw it as an investment and had no interest in the business. He wanted to keep me on with a promotion, and I became the manager. I’d get a raise and the two-bed apartment upstairs for half the rental price, so he knew the place was taken care of. The realtor asked me to list any tools or equipment needing updating.

Instead of shaking his hand, I could have kissed the guy. Thinking he might not like that, I signed the contract and agreed.

The apartment had been bad. I used a massive chunk of my money to put in all the new floors, upgrading the kitchen and toilet. Painting and getting everything Bea and I would need to make it ours.

Zane and I had spent every free hour getting it ready and safe. Ruby even stopped by and painted. Today we were moving in.



“Daddy, come and see. Come and see my room.” Bea couldn’t stand still, and I wasn’t moving fast enough. She had to come and grab my hand to pull me over to her room.

As if I hadn’t seen it ten times already this morning.

“This is your room?” I ask as if it was the first time I’d seen it.

Bea nods. “It’s my big-girl room, look.” She runs around, pointing it out to me.

It wasn’t pink like most little girls. No, Bea had her ideas. She told us she wanted white walls with a giant rainbow over her bed, which Zane had painted in pale pastels. There’s a teepee tent in the corner, and Ruby had hung fairy lights inside with oversized cushions and her favorite pink blanket.

Her toys overflowed her white toy box that had matching pastel letters spelling out her full name. A bookcase filled with books took the wall at the end of her bed from where she chose for us to read at night.

Ruby had also seen the cool idea of hanging balls that looked like clouds from the ceiling.

She stops and turns to us, her bottom lip curling over. All three of us freeze. In the three years Bea has been in our lives, we still haven’t worked out how to stop the sharp pain in our hearts when her bottom lip curls.

I’m on my knees in front of her in seconds. “Bumble Bee, what’s the matter?”

“What if I get scared on my own? I don’t think I’m big enough.”

At Zane’s house, we shared a bedroom. I had read all the information I could on transitioning a child to their room.

Her eyes widen. “What about monsters under my bed?” She shakes her head. “I think my bed should go into your room.”

I nearly cave and tell her I’ll knock the damn wall down, but we both needed our space and would even more as she grew older.

“Hey, that’s what your night light is for. To keep you safe, and it will stay on all night.”

She thinks about it and then nods. “And the monsters?” she says, all serious.

I go into her cupboard and pull out an old cleaning spray bottle. I’d painted it green and added water too.

“Monsters hate water, and this is magic water. If you spray it, they never come.”

Her eyes widen with innocence only a child can hold. Bea grabs it out of my hands, presses the nozzle, and sprays it under her bed.

“Go away,” she shouts, bending.

Making us all laugh.

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Once we unpacked almost all the boxes, I fall on the couch, my eyes shutting, and everything aches. A little body jumps on me, making me huff.

“I want pizza, please.” Her silver eyes are large and pleading. “I’ve been good,” she adds.

Ruby laughs. “How do you say no?”

“I don’t,” I groan, getting up as Bea claps her hands, smiling.

“Hey, why don’t we order in?” Zane tries. Bea’s eyes widen and, I make my way to the kitchen and place eight pieces of bread on a plate, knowing her answer.

“No. Daddy’s.” Bea narrows her eyes as if her uncle has just offended me. She pulls her little plastic stool into the kitchen, which she climbs on, and removes the grated cheese from the fridge.

Bea nods once she is done and drags it beside me. I’ve already put ketchup on them. She hands me the cheese so I can open it, puts her hand in, and sprinkles it on each slice.

Once she is done, she smiles. “Cook time.”

I place them under the grill, and we watch them until they’re cooked.

Ruby looks at her plate on the coffee table we’re all sitting around. Her brow raises, and her lips curl into a smile.

“Eric makes these too. He made me one the other night...” Her words fall away, a frown between her brows as she glances at me.

“So does half the state. Stop looking into it.” I sit, hiding my face from her, knowing she’ll see the truth of where this pizza came from. It’s another connection to Lyric. I watch Bea tucking into hers, her face smudged with sauce.

“I wasn’t.” She narrows her eyes, taking a bite. Zane is already finished. He’s used to this pizza. No doubt he’ll stop and get a proper one on the way home.

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“Night, Mom. Night, Jasper.” Bea squashes her lips to the window, then turns, running and jumping into her bed. She picks what book she wants, and we both snuggle down. This is the best time of my day with a quiet house and this little moment between us. I don’t make it past three pages after moving and see she’s sleeping.

The pink blanket Ashley bought is against her face, so I slowly edge out, trying not disturb her as I twist my body in a way I didn’t think humanly possible until becoming a parent. I pull the blankets over her and kiss her forehead.

“Love you, my Bumble Bee.” I head for the door, turning the light off. Her night light sends a warm glow of stars against her wall.

I go into the living room and pick up a load of toys. I swear they breed through the night. Once I’m done, I sort the kitchen, put the dishes in the machine, then grab a beer from the fridge.

I don't pop the lid until I've checked on Bea and see she's flat out, then I fall on the couch and take a long pull, closing my eyes.

This is the time I feel most lonely. God, I miss having someone to chill with and talk about my day. Being a single father means there's so much to consider before bringing another guy into our lives, and I remember the last time I tried.

*The date had been awful.*

*We sat in a restaurant while he looked at his phone or at the door as if he wanted to escape. I go to tell him I'm leaving when a guy walks in.*

*Joseph perked up and grabbed my hand, smiling so much that all I could see were his teeth.*

*I narrowed my eyes as it clicked. He was making a show for this guy.*

*"Your ex?" The smile falls, and Joseph has the decency to look ashamed.*

*His eyes still follow the guy. "I'm sorry..." he mutters as I stand and chuck some notes on the table.*

*"I get it," I say before leaving the restaurant.*

*I walked into Zane's and grabbed a beer before going out back to the decking.*

*"How did it go?" Zane asks, a beer bottle hanging between his fingers as he sits opposite.*

*"I'm home before nine, that should tell you," I say, taking another long drink.*

*"What about the other guy, Brandon? He seemed nice."*

*"Yeah, he was nice, too nice, frustratingly nice."*

*All he was, was nice.*

*He lets out a frustrated sigh as my fingers clench around the bottle.*

*"Lyric isn't coming back. He never loved me." I speak the words for the first time.*

*Zane shakes his head. "I swear there's a guy out there for you."*

*"Damn, that sounds good." I try to smile., if only my heart could get in the same lane.*

Three years and I'm still waiting.

Lyric *freaking* Blackmore.

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*Five years since leaving Hill View...*

I couldn't make it down to Dad's for Thanksgiving as I'd promised Maddox I'd help with the boys at The Guarded. We'd cooked three massive turkeys with all the trimmings. It was the first time I'd seen some of the boy's smile, and damn, it made getting up at the ass crack of dawn worth it.

I pull up to my dad's and smile. In the two years since I'd bought dad the cabin, he had transformed it. Dad couldn't keep still and found a love for woodwork. He knocked down most of the walls making it open plan and built a custom kitchen.

I push open the door to my rental and hear the chainsaw as I head across the yard to another of dad's new projects. The Kindness Trail, where he fixes and makes small furniture that he sells for cheap or gives away to people less fortunate. He even built a shed to work in.

Dad believes that acts of kindness, even to one person, would lead to a trail of kindness.

I watch him as I lean against the door. Damn, if he doesn't look good. The pain and tiredness are gone from his eyes, and the tiny bit of weight he's put on looks good on him. He looks years younger and healthier.

Dad glances up and does a double take. His lips curve as he pulls off his safety glasses and turns the machine off.

“Hey, kid. I wasn’t expecting you for another hour. Ruby is grabbing takeout.”

Ruby and dad are still going strong. She moved in with him a few months back.

“You need to put a ring on her finger.” I raise my brow, saying the same thing I’ve said for the last year.

A blush touches his cheek as he lifts his chin. “Yeah.” He nods as he strolls over to the fridge, grabs two beers, handing me one. “How are you doing?”

I had gone to therapy; naively or stupidly, I had expected to walk in and be fixed. Yeah, shit didn’t go down that way. During the first three visits, I didn’t even speak. On the fourth, I knew I needed to start, and it all came out like I was confessing at church. Every ugly, painful, soul-breaking truth came flooding out.

I expected my soul to be cleansed. Getting it all out was better than holding it all in, right?

Wrong again.

Opening up, baring my damn soul, left me feeling vulnerable. It was as if I was bleeding out, and I couldn’t staunch the flow. My anxiety skyrocketed, and my OCD tripled. I couldn’t eat, my skull constantly hammered with unwanted thoughts, and I was so fucking tired but couldn’t sleep. My body was plugged into the main circuit board and didn’t have an off switch. My heart pounded constantly, and the tightness in my chest never eased. Every breath felt like it was going to be my last.

My mind took me to a dark place. It got to the point where I couldn’t get out of bed or leave my apartment. A fear held me by the balls and dark thoughts kept my body in constant anxiety.

Maddox didn’t know what to do and being the protective guy he is, he wouldn’t leave me alone and called in the guys at Forbidden Ink. Cade and Ajax were the two kids managing the desk when I first worked at Forbidden Ink five years ago. Cade showed real potential when we hired him six months ago

with the terms that Ajax could come in while he worked. So, Maddox made up a job position we needed, and he now manages the desk and our paperwork. They took turns staying with me, making sure I was never alone. I screamed at Maddox to leave and pushed him as hard as I could, but he never backed down, took all my attitude, and didn't leave my side through every panic attack and intrusive thought I tried to claw out of my head.

After a month, Maddox caved and called Dad. By nighttime, Dad was there, a look of pure fear on his face as he fell to his knees in front of me, stroking my hair, whispering that he couldn't lose me. Not to give up. How I had all this. He picked me up as if I was five again, fully dressed as he put me in the shower and washed me. He made me food and sat there feeding me. Dad held me close as I broke, my body shaking with sobs. He took me to every appointment, three times a week, with Jillian.

It was like being dragged to hell naked and over stones, then drop-kicked into a cactus field.

I couldn't pinpoint when the turnaround came. I didn't wake up one day and suddenly feel better. It started in small steps, taking one day at a time. Maddox suggested I go with him to the gym, and after the first few weeks, I felt the effects and understood why he liked going so much. I started to eat healthily and ditched alcohol and caffeine.

Remy came to stay with me for three weeks after I forced Dad to go back home and took over until they knew I was doing better.

I realized I'd never recover. I'll always have anxiety and little rituals, but they no longer dominate my life. They are now a part of me I've accepted and have come to be at peace with. The fear no longer holds me. I realize now I know what the episodes were. My body was using its natural defenses against an imaginary threat, and I had to reassure myself it wasn't there; ride the wave.

Going through what I did with Maddox by my side built something between us. I trust him in a way I never have



anyone else.

He's the first person I'd opened up to outside of my dad, and I told him everything that had happened in Hill View.

Maddox is a born protector. You see it in everything he does. From the boys at The Guarded to the way he dropped everything and moved into my apartment until he knew I was okay.

Maddox sat with me through my darkness. I wasn't good with words, but he knew how much it meant. He's the first person to show me not everyone leaves.

Some days, the anxiety doesn't affect me at all. Others, I can feel it nipping at my heels. My therapist Jillian showed me how to deal with triggers and situations. I don't need to push everyone away and walk around with a chip on my shoulder to protect myself.

Korbin, of course, came up. I talked about him; everything we'd been through, every ugly detail, and everything that made me smile.

I forgave him.

I wasn't blameless, and the truth of my actions made guilt eat my gut for weeks. I had taken a vulnerable time in Korbin's life, used it and exploited it. Okay, I'd never done what I set out to do and broken his heart. Instead, I'd broken my own by falling for him. That didn't make it okay.

After talking in circles with the therapist, I realized I still loved Korbin.

"Yeah, I'm okay." I gave Dad a genuine smile. He studied me for a beat before he grinned.

Ruby popped her head in the doorway, her eyes widening when she saw me. "Lyric, umm, I wasn't expecting you." She fidgets by the door.

I smirk, getting up and walking over to her. "I got here early."

"You look good. Really good." She rubs my arms.

I squeeze her, taking in her familiar vanilla scent. “I’m doing good.” Ruby pulls back and glances around me, her smile falling.

“Ruby,” Dad’s voice snaps out, his face tight as he eats the space between us.

Her lip trembles. “Sorry,” she says as a tear falls down her face. “Your dad’s probably going to hate me after this. But he’s my best friend,” she says, speaking to us both.

I glance over at my dad, who stands, his eyes on her, and a look of betrayal on his face.

“You can’t ask me not to tell him! Eric, Zane is my best friend.”

“And Lyric is my son.”

“He’s doing great!” She turns to face me, a thin line between her brows. “You are, aren’t you?”

I go to nod as dad cuts in. “What if it sends him back to that place? You didn’t see him.” His voice hitches. “I can’t risk it.”

“Zane keeps asking me! Do you know how that feels every time I see him? It breaks me.” Wrapping her arms around herself as her lip trembles.

“Ruby? What the hell is going on?” She jumps at my voice, eyes bloodshot, cheeks wet with tears. My father freezes, watching her, as his shoulders fall, and he turns away.

“Sorry,” she whispers, not looking at Dad, and steps toward me. “I know you don’t want to hear... I get it. I do... you’ve put Hill View and everyone in it behind you.” Is that what she thinks? I hightailed it out of Hill View and left everyone behind? Crap! Did I do that?

“I... I... never meant to make you feel that way.” I swallow a few times, knowing I’ve got to say the words. “I care about you, Ruby.”

“I know.” She gives me a watery smile. “You made me promise never to mention it or anyone remember?” I nod because she’s right and my stomach drops.

She chews her lips, closing her eyes. “Zane’s got cancer. He’s been asking for you for the last two weeks. I’ve tried to respect your dad’s wishes, but... it’s Zane.” She holds a hand over her mouth to hide the crying.

I nod because I understand. Ruby has no family. She grew up in the system and met Zane as a punk-ass kid. He took her under his wing and has been there for her ever since. They aren’t just best friends. They are each other’s chosen family.

This must have been hurting Ruby, trying to decide between the man she loves and her best friend.

The position I’d put her in. Fuck, that stung.

I swallow hard, kicking the floor. “Zane’s got cancer?”

“Yes. He’s in the hospital.”

I hold her shoulders. “You did the right thing. I’m so damn sorry I put you in this position.” My eyes sting.

She sucks in a shaky breath and moves around her.

“Son,” Dad calls my name.

I glance over my shoulder. “Give me five minutes.”

Ruby pales. “Lyric....”

“I’m good. I swear.” I offer her a smile, Hill View is a trigger, and I need to take five. To work through it and not act on my gut reaction, which is to run when something I think is going to or already does hurt.

They both nod as I go outside and move to the lake, taking a deep breath and sitting on the grass, not caring about its dampness.

How many times has Ruby tried to tell me something? My mind blurs through the years, recalling all the times in the beginning.

It wasn’t just Ruby. Dad had tried in the beginning, but I cut them off every damn time. Even Maddox when he asked about Hill View, I ignored him, and threw him enough attitude that he didn’t ask again. Acting like a damn pussy.

I hadn't heard anything about Hill View over the years, nothing about Korbin, Zane, or anyone.

I blocked it all out, and if anyone tried to tell me, I'd block them out, cut them out of my life for months at a time. Living off the theory, it couldn't hurt if I didn't know. It was the biggest lie I'd told myself.

Now Zane has cancer. I bury my face in my hands as guilt cramps my stomach. He has been asking for me. The guy who taught me everything, gave me a chance, and I turned my back on him.

I'm not that kid anymore. It is time to prove it.

I get up and brush off my jeans, walking back to the shed to see Ruby standing by the doorway, Dad not looking at her. Another thing I've fucked up.

"Dad, you can't be mad at Ruby. Be mad at me! I was the one acting like a damn coward."

"No." Ruby grabs my arm. "You were hurting. I get it."

"I was, but it didn't mean I needed to push you all away. I'm sorry for every damn time you tried to tell me something, and I acted like an ass." I grab her wrapping my arms around her. "We are friends, family, and I'm so damn sorry you felt you couldn't pick up the phone and tell me," I whisper against her temple before placing a kiss on her hairline.

She pulls back and gives me one of her smiles. "I still love your ass."

I drop my arms, moving so I can face them both. "I need to go back to California. Today."

Ruby licks her lips as her shoulder falls and turns away as Dad curses. I hold my hand up to stop him from speaking.

"I can't just walk away. I have a business, an apartment, and commitments, and if I'm going to come back to Hill View, I need to sort everything out."

Ruby twists toward me. She stares at me, eyes wide. "You're coming back?"

“Tell Zane I’ll be down on the weekend to see him and keep me updated.”

A sound breaks from her chest as tears race down her face, letting me know how much pain she’s been in, how much she’s hidden. Dad crosses the distance in seconds and holds her in his arms, speaking softly in her ear.

He looks at me over her head. “Proud of you, kid, and you’re right.” He grabs her face. “I’m so damn sorry. Can you forgive an old man?”

“I love you so much.” She tries to smile through the tears.

Some tension falls from my body as they walk me to the rental. “Let me know when you get home,” Dad says, holding the door.

“And if you need anything before you come back,” Ruby adds.

“I will, I swear. And, Rubes, no more hiding, okay? If I don’t listen, slap me with the truth.”

“I will.” She smiles, but I don’t miss the uncertainty of my words in her eyes.

What else don’t I know?

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## Lyric

I walk into Forbidden Ink, and Maddox glances up, stopping what he's doing when he sees me.

I look like a mess.

I stopped once, for a few hours to get some sleep and then kept driving. I hadn't even been to my apartment, and I made the seventeen-hour drive in fifteen.

I walk past the clients and into the back room where he follows.

"What happened?" Maddox asks, in that low timbre voice, his eyes narrowed. Ready to have my back.

After working together for years, for helping me pull my head out of my ass, we'd become close, some would say best friends.

"I have to go back." I pace. "Zane's got cancer. He's been asking to see me. Ruby wanted to tell me, and Dad wouldn't let her." I turn to face him. "I've acted like a damn pussy! Every time they tried to tell me anything from back home" -I rub a hand over my face— "I shut it down, didn't speak to them, and pushed them further away. Fuck, I'm a bastard."

Maddox lets me rant, waiting for me to finish. "Zane is your old boss, right?" He sits straighter. "Is it bad?"

"I don't know all the details. Zane gave me a chance that the town wouldn't. I respect the hell out of him, and if he's

asking for me....” I swallow, unable to say where my mind is going.

“Don’t go there!” Maddox snaps out. “If it was that bad, Ruby would’ve said, right?”

“I guess,” I answer, taken aback by his reaction. Maddox never raises his voice or snaps. He’s the epitome of calm and collected. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good.” He waves his hand around. “Lyric, you’re not that same guy. Give yourself a break. You’ve worked through your shit.”

I nod. I’d always be sarcastic, but I no longer pushed everyone away.

“When do you leave?” he asks.

“As soon as possible. We’ll need to arrange cover for a few weeks. Sort out all my clients and my apartment. Book tickets. It’ll be easier to fly and get a rental.”

“You are not going to do anything this late. Go home and get some sleep. You look dead on your feet.” Maddox comes over and squeezes my shoulder, giving me the reassurance I didn’t know I needed.

I rub a hand over my face and nod, knowing I’d be useless today. “Thanks, man.”

---

I jump at the sound of pounding on my door and groan. I didn’t even make it to bed, just fell on the couch, and my eyes closed before my head hit the pillow.

“Alright!” I yell as the pounding continues. I yank open the door to see Maddox, Caine, and Ajax.

The smell of cheese and herbs fills my nostrils. Usually, I’d be glad to see them all. We met at my apartment several times a week, but not tonight.

“And I thought you liked us.” Caine grins, walking past with three large boxes in his hands. Caine reminds me of myself, the way he studies everyone through narrowed eyes.

Ajax grabs my shoulder. “Maddox told us. Hope your friend is okay,” he says, his voice soft.

“Thanks.” Ajax is quiet, doesn’t speak much, and hides behind his blond bangs and oversized clothes.

Night and day. They are entirely different, but you never see them without the other.

Maddox watches me from the doorway. “You slept?”

“Got a few hours.”

“You need a shower.” I sniff my armpit, making Maddox grin. “Go get one, and I’ll stop Caine from eating all the pizza.”

I laugh. We both know Maddox would never stop Caine from eating after finding him nothing but skin and bones on the streets.

I make quick work of the shower and brush my teeth, chucking on a pair of black sweats and a tank top.

I stare at my reflection.

My muscles are defined from all the times Maddox dragged my ass to the gym. I’m nowhere near a meathead, but I look good and healthier. A full sleeve takes up my right arm and moves onto my collarbone and chest. Dark-styled stubble lines my jaw. Gone is the youthfulness. It’s all hard lines of masculinity.

My hair is longer, which I always brush back with an edgy look. My green eyes look tired, but they no longer hold that glare to keep people away. They’ve softened alongside my personality and everything about me.

Hearing the guys laughing, I move back into the living room where Maddox holds out a plate with three slices and a cold beer.

“Thanks,” I say and take a large slice.



“Ajax has sorted your appointments. The ones who want you will wait, and the others will be split between Caine and me,” Maddox says, watching me as he leans against the counter.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thanks.”

“We’ll take on your apartment until you get back,” Caine adds, grabbing two slices.

“You guys sure?”

“Yeah, giving up our room at The Guarded means they can take in some more boys, and we’re ready,” Caine says. He goes to sit next to Ajax and grabs his hand.

“We’re ready,” Ajax confirms.

“The bills are paid for the next six months. You’ll just have to find money for food.” It was a lie, but I’d make sure it was paid before I left.

“I’ve booked your flight. It leaves tomorrow night,” Maddox adds.

I feel my throat tighten as my eyes sting. They’ve sorted it all.

“Tomorrow?” The question comes out before I can stop it.

“You need more time? You wanted to see your friend?”

“I do.” I swallow as a wash of anxiety works over me. “I have to stop being a coward.”

“You’re not.” Maddox grabs my shoulder. “I’ll drop you off. All you need to do is pack and sort out the rental.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll sort out the cost.”

“Not a chance.” Maddox shakes his head. “Just promise to keep me updated, and if you need me...” He stops, blowing out a breath. “If you need anything, call.”

“I will.” And it’s the truth. I was done pretending I could handle everything on my own.

The guys eat pizza and drink beers, joking and laughing. I can’t help but wonder how I got so damn lucky.

---

I get off the flight and exit the airport as I pull my coat on. The cold Colorado air was one thing I didn't miss. I walk to the rental place. There's no line, so it takes less than ten minutes to sort out the information and get the keys. The car is a black BMW X3. It's big, but with all my luggage and not knowing how long I'm going to be here, it's the size I need.

I sit in the seat, staring through the windshield and take a deep breath.

I'm about to head to the place I swore I'd never return.

It takes about an hour to get there from Denver. I drive past the sign I haven't seen in five years.

*Welcome to Hill View.*

As I drive through the town, it makes me frown. It looks so small, but the same, as if I'd only driven out of it yesterday. The streets I used to avoid seem nothing compared to California.

It's a strange feeling. I feel like I've changed so much, and Hill View seems frozen.

As I drive past Marked, my lips curve and warmth fills my gut. I don't stop and head straight for the hospital, finding a spot easily.

It has all happened so fast that my head hasn't caught up.

I don't even know where Zane will be.

I could leave, and no one would even know I was here.

"No," I growl in the empty SUV and grab my phone. It connects to the car system, making me jump at the sound of the ring.

"Hey, everything okay?" Ruby answers.

"I'm here."

There's silence for a beat. "As in Hill View?" she gasps, as if she didn't believe I'd come.

"As in outside the hospital. I just realized I don't have a clue where to go."

She reels off all the information.

I ask the one question I haven't dared. "Ruby, how bad is he? If he's... I need to know."

"No!" she snaps. "No, Zane's not..." Her words trail off, unable to finish the sentence, as if saying the word dying will give it power. "He's in the hospital because of an infection. Do you want me to meet you? We can go in together," Ruby offers.

"No, I'm good, thanks."

"Lyric, it's good to have you home," she whispers before cutting the call.

I make my way through the crowd and realize my body doesn't itch to escape this place the way it always had. Yeah, uneasiness curls in my gut, but it isn't holding me by the balls. I don't feel the flight or fight response. Hill View is no longer crushing me.

A shiver works down my spine, making me frown as I hit the doors and look around, but I can't see anything.

Shrugging it off, I move inside. I hate hospitals, the sterile smell, and the unwelcoming appearance of it all. So clinical and depressing.

After using the elevator and walking down numerous corridors, I find the correct place and spot a nurse.

"Hey, my friend Zane Wyatt is here."

She smiles sadly. "This way, he's doing better," she says, trying to reassure me. Her eyes go a comical size. "Wait, you're Lyric Blackmore," she squeals as she looks over me. "You're hot, like ..." She cuts herself off, face flushing bright red. "I'm sorry, we were in math together, Clarissa Logan."

I remember the name. She used to sit in the class at the front, a loner.

“Mrs. Marshall, right? You used to sit in the front row.”

She nods, blushing as we stop outside a door. “This is it.” Clarissa offers a smile. I watch her walk around the corner before turning toward the door.

“Are you gonna stand outside or get your ass in here?” Zane’s voice comes from within the room, and I notice the glass window where he can see me and shake my head, smirking.

I lean against the frame, the door already open. “You look like shit.”

He did, his face was drawn, he’d lost weight, and his hair was missing in patches. But I knew guys like Zane, like me. He won’t want me to cry, bullshitting him.

A deep laugh comes from him. “Damn. I’ve missed your cocky mouth. Get in here.”

I move further into the room and sit on one of the hard plastic chairs.

“All this is dramatic. You know you could’ve picked up the phone.” I try to use humor.

“Would you have answered?” Zane’s blond brow raises.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly as shame works over me.

He looks me over, studying me. “You look good.”

“I am...” I rub my neck. “I should’ve come sooner.”

“You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

“Ruby said you wanted to speak to me?”

He nods, the laughter falls from his eyes, and his mouth turns down.

What he says next shocks the hell out of me. I’m glad I’m sitting, or I’d be on my ass.



I strap Bea into her car seat after visiting with Zane and close the door, resting my head against the cold metal, feeling both mentally and physically drained.

Zane looked awful. You could see the disease eating him from the inside out. He seems small in the hospital bed, such a change from the brother I know, who was lean with defined muscles. His face is narrow, eyes matching mine but constantly seem to be glassy with pain.

I wanted to be there when the doctors came. The prognosis was good. He still needed chemotherapy but wasn't beaten. They hope he'll make a full recovery.

I can't lose Zane. He's been my rock since we first discovered we were brothers. He's my damn glue, and I feel like I'm coming unstuck.

Blowing out a breath, I shove off the side of the car as a shiver works down my spine.

I turn and freeze, watching a figure move along the sidewalk, his face hidden by people passing. My pulse pounds as I take them in.

Jet black hair, styled, leather jacket, and tight jeans with boots. My eyes follow, and I instinctively step forward, fingers twitching beside my leg as if they want to reach out and touch him.

"Daddy." Bea's voice coming from the back of the car brings me back to reality. I scan the crowd one more time,

watching as he walks through the doors. I blow out a breath and shake my head, letting my eyes close for a few seconds. There's no way.

I yank open my door, gripping the wheel as my heart pounds, and my leg twitches to get out and run after the figure. I grit my jaw, five damn years, and I'm still searching the crowds for his face.

“Daddy, are we getting ice cream now?”

I glance in the mirror at Bea's dark hair in French braids, which took me a week to learn by watching how-to videos. She's no longer the tiny baby I brought home or the toddler. She has a little personality and becoming a young girl as she turns four this year. Soon she will be starting kindergarten. I force my lips to curve.

“Yeah, Bumble Bee, let's go.” I put the truck into reverse, shaking my head. There was no way that was Lyric.

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“I'm going to head off,” Andrew says as I finish putting the last of the tools away and pick up a rag, rubbing the oil and grease off.

“The guy still hasn't come in?”

“Nah, he said he'd be here by six. He seemed like a good guy.”

I look at my watch, seeing it's just past six. “I'll hang around for a bit.” Andrew waves over his shoulder as I walk back to the office and hear feet jogging up behind me,

“Hey, sorry I'm late...” His words fall away.

My chest tightens, and I swear to God my heart stops, the breath squeezed from my lungs. The voice is lower, grittier, but I know it as much as my own.

There's no way.

I'm frozen. I can't turn. I don't know what the hell to do.

“Damn him.” A cursed laugh falls behind me, and I spin at the noise.

Coming face to face with Lyric damn Blackmore.

His eyes widen, blinking slowly as if he was convinced it wasn't actually me until this very second.

He's taller, his dark hair longer. Even his pale skin seems to damn glow in a good way. The black hoop shines, curving his lip in the overhead lights.

The tank top is doing a poor job of hiding what lies underneath, all hard-defined muscles, and new ink curls across his collar bone.

Lyric takes me in the same way, from my blond hair, which is short, to the black smudges over my face and muscles, which have gotten bigger from all the manual work. The extra inches we'd both grown put us at the same height.

Five years, five fucking years.

The last of our youth was gone, and two guys stood facing off.

“You're here for the BMW?” I ask, treating him as if he's any other client. Like he didn't break me, like we didn't know every inch of each other.

“Yeah, it's a damn rental.” He rubs his nape, staring at the SUV before he turns back to face me. “Korbin.” He says my name, almost as a plea, with an apologetic tone.

I my jaw. How dare he come here saying my name like that. Hearing him say my name alone makes me want to run. I don't want him to still be able to affect me. I resent that he still does and has a hold on me.

“Daddy!” A beautiful voice stops me from responding as I see Bea racing toward us. Ruby's eyes widen as she approaches us, realizing what's happening.

Bea stops in front of Lyric, pulling her matching cherry sucker to Ruby's out of her mouth.

“Hello, I’m Bea.” She waves with a wide smile. She’s so damn confident and sees the world so innocently. I see him freeze from the corner of my eye, looking at me the same way before returning to my daughter. His mouth opens and shuts, nothing coming out, making Bea frown.

I cross over to her in seconds and swipe her up. “Hey there, Bumble Bee, miss me?”

“Always.” She rubs her nose against mine. “Aunt Ruby got me ice cream.” The phase where she couldn’t say her Rs has disappeared and sometimes I miss it.

“Chocolate chip?” I ask, tickling her belly, already knowing the answer. My daughter has a sweet tooth, which she plays on with Ruby’s sucker addiction.

“Yeah, two scoops,” she whispers as I walk back to my office and hear Ruby behind me.

“Come on. Lyric, come with me.” I glance over my shoulder to see him still staring at the spot my daughter was just standing in. Ruby strokes his arm, making his head snap in her direction.

I move into the office, hearing their footsteps fade and the engine start up.

Bea is already sitting at my desk coloring, her little tongue poking out as she concentrates, trying to keep in the lines.

“I’m just going to shut up shop,” I tell her. She nods, not taking her eyes off the page.

I move robotically to the door and flip the switch for them to shut and close my eyes.

Why now? Why is he back after all these years?

My gut clenches as the past flashes in front of me. How he used to look at me, touch me, and how it felt to have been loved by him. I’m not a spoiled jerk, and I’m not cold. Lyric made me feel like I deserved his love, that he wanted me, just me, without wanting me for what I could do for him.

He made me feel seen and heard.



I turn and punch the wall, grunting because he doesn't love me. It had all been a plan of revenge to break me.

One he won.

I lean my ass on the hood of the car, flexing my fingers, my knuckles already swelling, and stare at the space Lyric has just left. We aren't those same kids anymore. God, most of the time I feel older than twenty-three years.

Have so many responsibilities that half the time I feel like I'm drowning.

At the end of the day all I want to do is fall into bed and sleep.

"Daddy, I'm hungry." The dose of reality calls from the back room. It doesn't matter. He's back.

I have a daughter to think of now. One who means the whole world to me, who Lyric ignored and couldn't even force out the word 'hello' to be polite.

To speak to a damn four-year-old little girl.

Gritting my jaw, I turn back to my life now, Bea and me.

Where Lyric Blackmore doesn't exist.

I ignore the way my heart pounds. Every urge in me springs to life to find him, beat the crap out of him, and then kiss him.

Because as much as I hate what he did, I've never gotten over him.

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## Lyric

Ruby pushes me into the car as my mind is unclear, covering my face in my hand.

I would punch Zane when I saw him, cancer or not. When I told him about the stupid oil light and how it kept flashing, he suggested that garage, knowing Korbin was there.

I blow out a breath. Damn, if he doesn't look good.

Yet I didn't miss the dark circles under his eyes, the way his mouth turned down. There was no cockiness or gloating in his eyes, no half-smirk curling at his lips. It was as if he'd been fighting for so long, and the punches were still coming.

Is it the worry over Zane? They had always been close.

A part of me, bigger than I ever want to admit, wanted to soothe him, rub that line between his brows, hold him in my arms, and make him tell me what was wrong so I could fix it.

"Are you okay?" I blink as the world around me becomes focused, and I see us driving. I hadn't even realized we'd left the garage.

"I don't want to go to the cabin," I rasp. Seeing the turn to Dad's cabin. Ruby nods, a determined look in her eyes.

"I know a place." She turns the wheel, doing a U-turn in the middle of the road as her lips curve, turning us so we're on the road out of Hill View.

The more I think about Korbin's appearance, my gut clenches as a feeling of dread works through me. Something is

wrong. He didn't look like the guy with everything he wanted, he looked the opposite.

A guy who'd had it hard and wanted someone to take half the load.

What the hell had happened to him in five years?

I rub my hand over my face, clenching my teeth. Why the hell should I care? I should relish that Korbin looked like crap. Standing there, it was as if we were in some damn alternate universe. Here I am in clothes that fit me, expensive labels, ones I had designed, and there he was, in a top that was worn so much you could see his skin color. Hot. Damn yeah.

His hair wasn't styled. It was as if he had quickly shoved a razor over it to look half decent.

Maybe marrying Ashley wasn't all it was cracked up to be?

I'm surprised that Ashley allows her husband to work in a garage, not to mention Bart.

I stop my lips from curving as I can't help thinking about his dream, how it was what he wanted, and I'm proud he stood up for himself.

But wasn't marrying Ash and playing happy family also his dream? They had a beautiful daughter who seemed to love him, so why the hell did he look so lost?

"What the hell happened?" I curse under my breath. Ruby frowns as she pulls into a space. I bend my head through the window at a small building that should've been knocked down years ago.

"Don't be put off. It's the best place around for burgers," she says, pushing open her door, and I follow, seeing the parking lot is full.

"It's one of those places nobody knows about, but at the same time, everyone does."

My brows rise. "That makes sense." I grin.

“It’s always packed, yet no one I’ve ever met seems to know about it.” She shrugs like it makes perfect sense.

The smell of burgers hits me as soon as we walk in, making my stomach growl. The place looks like it did on the outside and needs a big update. My feet stick to the floor, which I’m sure used to be old black and white checks. Red faded vinyl covers the tables with silver chairs that look worn. The tables are full of people, and the food looks amazing.

“I’ll order. Go grab a table.” Ruby gestures toward the seating area.

I push through the narrow walkway to a small two-seater at the back. Squeezing myself into the small space, placing a hand on my chest. Not because of anxiety but because my heart is still pounding as if someone jump started it. A feeling flies through my veins as if I’m alive again and have been sleepwalking through the last five years. A sense as if I’ve been drowning, and now I can take my first gasp of air.

Ruby squeezes into the seat opposite me. “I didn’t know you’d be there. I would have warned you,” she says with a sad smile.

I grunt, playing with the saltshaker. “Zane said it’s the best place around.”

She can’t help how her lip twitches. “Of course he did.”

I smirk, leaning back in the chair and shake my head, typical Zane.

The waitress, a young girl, looking flustered, drops off our order of burgers and fries and dumps a pot of coffee on the table after filling our cups before she’s gone again.

I picked up a fry, moving it around my plate. “He’s the last person I expected to see today.” I thought I’d have more time to prepare. I grunt at my thoughts. Would I have ever been ready? Today was like ripping a Band-Aid off.

Ruby nods. “I guess he’s thinking the same.”

“I’m surprised that Ashley lets him work there.” I shove the burger into my mouth, cursing myself silently for asking

the question. I don't want to hear how happy they are, how Ash brings him lunch.

Ruby drops her food and wipes her hand on the napkin, not looking at me.

She won't hold my eyes, and it makes me put my own down. "Rubes?"

"You told me to hit you with a slap of reality to never hide anything." She finally looks at me. "Lyric, are you sure? Are you sure you want to know?"

The way she says it, I already know I'm not going to like it. I wipe my hand on the napkin and nod, unable to say the words.

She shakes her head. "No, you tell me. I need to hear you say it."

My gut screams to keep my mouth shut and keep my head buried in the sand. That it doesn't matter what has happened.

"Tell me."

She takes a shaky breath, biting her lip. "Ashley and Jasper were in a car crash. They were able to save Beatrix, Bea." Her lips curve at saying Korbin's daughter's name as her eyes glass. "But not Ashley or Jasper. They died at the scene."

I suck in a deep breath, taking in her words. God, I never thought... No wonder Korbin looks like a mess. He's lost his wife. As much as I didn't like Ash and Jasper, I never once wished that for them.

"We weren't... but God, that's awful." I run a hand through my hair, taking it all in. They were so damn young.

Ruby nods. "It was. Korbin became a single dad overnight with no clue what to do, only a kid himself, but God, he's so good with her." She says it with pride.

I nod and remember how Bea ran up to me at the garage. She was the cutest little thing, but I couldn't get past the silver eyes so much like her dad's. My eyes widened, realizing I hadn't spoken to her.

“Damn, I didn’t mean to ignore her back at the garage. I was shocked. I was taken aback. Her eyes are so much like Korbin’s.”

Ruby grabs my hand, giving me a gentle smile. “I know.”

I lift my chin in thanks because no matter whose daughter she is, I’d never hurt a child. Then I ask the one question I need to know.

“Was Korbin in the crash?”

“No, he’d come to an understanding with Ashley about the baby, but they weren’t speaking at the time.” She offers me a tight smile, making my brows slam down. I’m more confused than ever.

“What? But they were engaged? Korbin and Ashley.”

Ruby plays with the napkin, tearing it into little pieces as her eyes rise to mine. “Korbin didn’t get engaged to Ashley.”

I feel the blood drain from me. “Jasper told me... Bart did too. You heard what he said, right?” My voice rises as Ruby nods. The pain of that day rolls over me. Ruby grabs my hand as if she expects me to bolt, and half of me is ready to forget everything I promised, jump in my car and head back to California.

I know what she is going to say will change everything.

“The day Jasper saw you, he was pissed. He was in love with Ash and heard the news of the engagement. He wanted someone else to hurt, and you were it.” She takes a breath. “Ash told Korbin she was pregnant, and he agreed to be there but nothing else. He walked away from everything, the money, family, and Ash,” she finishes.

It didn’t make sense. “Why?” All the truth I’d held onto over the five years is suddenly crumbling around me.

A tear falls down her cheek which she wipes away quickly, her eyes never leaving mine. “Because he loved you.” Those words hit me as if they are physical, and my body jerks.

I push through the tables and out the door, bending over, gasping, and trying to catch my breath.

“Lyric.” I hear Ruby’s voice through the white noise.

“No, you’re lying,” I gasp.

She shakes her head, tears racing down her face. “I tried to tell you. I tried over and over, and you’d never listen to me! Korbin made mistakes. He went about it all wrong. But he wasn’t playing you. He loved you and went crazy when you left.”

“Shut up, shut up,” I roar, feeling every part of me starting to unwind like a ball of yarn.

I close my eyes for a few seconds, taking a deep breath through my nose, then stand as I feel my heart start to pound. A feeling I haven’t felt in nearly a year assaults me; a panic attack.

“You’re wrong.”

Ruby lifts her chin, standing firm. “I’m not.”

I feel my lip tremble and bite it hard, and I wipe angrily at the tear that hits my cheek. My therapist taught me it’s okay to feel all my emotions. It’s still taking time to rewire my brain that it is okay for men to break down and not hold those emotions in and feel physical pain from keeping them in. My body tenses as I curse for showing Ruby my weakness when she throws her body at mine, holding me tight as if I’ll break apart, and I feel my muscles relax. This is Ruby, my friend, and my family. She’s not going to use my weakness against me. My fist tightens at my side.

“You have to be,” I whisper. “I need to get out of here,” I say in a raw voice, my throat hurting.

Ruby nods and walks me to the car. I feel numb, my brain trying to take in all the information as I sink into the seat, running my hand through my hair, wanting to pull it all out.

Feeling raw, I glare out the window. “Take me home.” I know she doesn’t understand. I’ve never called Dad’s home, even though I have a bedroom there. “I bought Korbin’s grandparent’s house three years ago.” If she’s shocked, she doesn’t say.

I close my eyes as my brain throbs, and my heart breaks wide open. Everything in me wants to fight Ruby's words. All my old instincts wish to break the surface. My brain is hardwired to not believe what she's saying.

But my fucking soul aches for them to be the truth.

That Korbin had chosen me.

We weren't a lie. It was real.

Maybe it was me who broke us.

We pull up the dusty road, and the house comes into view. My stomach tightens the way it does every time I see it. The outside is freshly painted white with black windows.

She pulls around the back and turns the car off.

I jump out and look at the garage. Memories of Korbin and me flash before my eyes, moving to the last time I was there, wrecking his pawpaw's Dodge. I still have the scars on my hands from the glass that sliced my skin. I can almost feel them now cutting even deeper into my skin.

Ruby follows me into the house. I grab two drinks of water from the fridge as she looks around, taking in the place.

I made the living and dining room open plan but left everything else as it was. Replaced the old stone fireplace with a light stone and carried it up the walls. Added a thick warm mantelpiece that matched the wood in the ceiling and beams which I also carried throughout.

I'd kept the original wooden floors and brought them back to life. I added a massive corner cream couch with hints of tan leather and different shades with warm wood accessories.

The kitchen I had to replace and was now an open concept with an oversized island which was able to fit eight people easily. The stool seats matched the tan from the living room with a rustic feel. All white with hints of navy and stainless steel accessories. My favorite part was the sliding barn door to the pantry and another where I could shut off the living room if I wanted.



“When did you do all this?” Ruby spins in awe, and warmth fills my chest. She was the first to see it, and I’m nervous about her thoughts.

“I bought it at the same time as Dad’s cabin. I’ve been coming down when I can since.” I hand her a bottle of water, taking a gulp of my own.

She laughs. “Damn, Lyric, is there anything you can’t do?”

I lean against the counter, tossing the bottle in the air and catching it. “Stop running away like a damn coward.”

The smile falls from her eyes as they soften. “You messed up big time.” I nod because I did it on so many different levels. She strokes my arm. “I think you needed to leave, to escape this place, but look at what you’ve achieved, what you’ve done over the last few years.”

My fingers clench around the bottle, making it crinkle. “Yeah, I was having the time of my damn life while he was....” I swallow hard. “Even hating him, I never wanted that.”

“I know, but you can’t change it. You can’t go back and redo everything. But can you move forward.”

“Too much has happened. We’re not those kids anymore.”

“No, but you can try to move on. You’ve both got a common interest in Zane. He needs you both.”

Zane did need us. He had a long road of recovery ahead of him, and yesterday he asked me to run Marked, telling me he trusted no one else. Ruby had told him about the convention and how I’d gained a name for myself.

“I’m going to take his offer.” I already knew I would, but now I was more determined.

Ruby lets out a breath of relief. “You are? He said he would ask.”

“Yeah.”

She rubs my arm. “Are you okay?”

I open my mouth to lie. "I'm not sure. It's a lot to take in." Therapy taught me a lot about myself. I acted off my gut instinct to run. I needed to stop and think it over before I did anything. "Do you mind giving me some time?"

Ruby looks as if she wants to say something but nods. "Call me if you need anything."

I nod as she leaves and move to sit at the table, running my fingers over the scratches. I'd saved Korbin's old table and extended it to fit ten people.

I catch my teeth on the hoop in my lip.

Korbin and I weren't anything to each other anymore.

Strangers who once knew each other. God dammit. I am lying to myself. That summer, Korbin became my everything, but it didn't change the ending.

Did it hurt? Hell yeah.

But it was the truth.

We were never meant for happily ever after. Two screwed-up teens who clung to the false taste of happiness.

I knew I needed to speak to Korbin.



Saturday was Bea's favorite day as she helped me in the garage. For Christmas, Ruby had bought her overalls to match mine. I didn't work in the main shop. I wasn't stupid enough to have my four-year-old around the dangerous stuff.

It's the day I do all the paperwork, and Bea sits next to me with her coloring book and pencils, pretending to copy me, her hair in pigtails, which I'd become a pro at now.

Andrew stuck his head in the door. "The BMW guy is here. Should I send him back?"

Lyric, he was talking about Lyric. Before I could reply, he walked through the door with a white box in his hand.

"A little birdie told me someone likes chocolate cupcakes, and I need help eating them."

His words make me wonder what the hell he's talking about as an excited yell comes from beside me.

"Me, me. I do." Bea jumps in her seat before she races around the desk and stands in front of Lyric. "Me, Me!" she shouts, holding her hand in the air. I stand as Lyric squats down and lifts the lid showing a box full of chocolate cupcakes.

As much as I want to yell at my daughter not to take one, her tears are my kryptonite, and I know taking away a cupcake is a sure way for a complete meltdown to happen.

My teeth grit at the sight of Lyric smiling. It's not the fake smirk, but a natural smile showing his teeth as Bea's eyes widen, a smile on her face as she reaches into the box.

"Thank you." Bea smiles and raises the cake to her mouth spreading chocolate over her face and making Lyric laugh just like I used to.

The sound grips my guts and twists them. "You're welcome, little one. I'm sorry about yesterday. I hadn't had my dinner, and it makes me grumpy."

She lets out a little giggle. "Daddy gets grumpy too when he's hungry."

"I bet," Lyric agrees with a wink as he rises and holds the box out to Andrew, who grins and takes one before he shoves it in his mouth and disappears back out front.

Lyric looks at me for the first time and holds the box. I grit my jaw to stop everything I want to say from coming out in front of my daughter. A version of myself I never want her to see.

"No." It still comes out with a bite.

"They are your favorites too." The little voice comes next to me.

Lyric recovers quickly and closes the lid on the box. "It's okay your daddy can have some later." He puts the box on my desk.

I get up and yank his keys off the hook, throwing them at him with force that I know hurts as he catches them. "Car is done."

He pulls out a card from his pocket and hands it over. I swipe it through the machine too hard that I've got to do it again. I rip the receipt off, handing it back to him.

"Have a good trip back," I grit out, making his eyes widen.

He glances at me, shrugging his shoulder. "I'm here for a while," he says as if wanting me to know this information. Or maybe to taunt me because he would be around for a while.

“I thought you couldn’t wait to get out of this place.”

His eyes slide to my daughter before looking back at me. “That was true...” He cuts himself off and lifts his chin. “I’ll see you around.” Waving to Bea, who smiles like he’s her new favorite person, before walking away.

Always walking away.

“Andrew,” I call after a beat.

He shoves his head in the door. “Yeah.”

“Watch her and close the door. Don’t open it, no matter what you hear,” I grit out as I push past him, making his eyes widen.

Lyric is leaning against his rental as if he is expecting me. I stride straight to him and slam my fist into his face, sending it sideways. He looks back at me, wiping blood from his lip. I cross my arms, waiting for his lips to curl and the attitude I know is ready to burst free, to roll off him, those greens to thin, but none of it happens.

“You deserved that,” I hiss, feeling like I’ve got to defend myself as my gut curls at the reality that I actually hit him. My fingers twitch to run my thumb over the mark, kiss it better, and apologize.

His eyes soften as his mouth pulls down. “I didn’t know until last night.”

“Know what?” I seethe, gritting my teeth so hard that I feel them move under the pressure as I struggle to contain the way my body shakes.

“Every ugly detail. I didn’t know Jasper lied, and I’m sorry about Ashley, them both.”

“Don’t.” I cut him off. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t care what you have to say. Do what you do best and go. Forget about us.”

His eyes narrow. “You think I forgot about everyone? You think I drove away and got hit on the damn head and suddenly forgot about Ruby, Zane... You!” He grunts. “It would’ve been easier if I had.”

I take a step closer, getting in his face. “Shut up. You decided we didn’t fight. You decided we didn’t get pissed at each other. You decided there was no talking through, no fixing it. You decided to leave.”

He tugs on his hoop, making my body pay attention and hate that it does as he stares at the ground, a small line between his brows, before glancing back at me. “We both fucked up, Korbin. We were both teens messed up by this place. It never would have worked.”

“Because it was just your revenge plan. What was it? Make him fall, and then break his fucking heart? Make him feel the pain. Break him,” I growl, poking his chest. “You won. That make you feel better, huh, Lyric? That make you feel better! You fucking won!” I roar, letting all the pain of the last five years out.

“No.” He shakes his head. “You know... I...” His words fall away as he scrubs a hand over his face.

“Stay the hell away from my daughter and me.”

I turn to go back when his fingers curl around my arm. “I fell for you, Korbin, and I never got back up.”

I shake his arm off, and my lips curl, baring my teeth. “I hate you.”

His eyes never leave mine. “No, you don’t. You want to, but you don’t.”

I suck in a gasp as he repeats the words, I said to him five years ago. He doesn’t wait for my response as he jumps in the car and drives away.

“And you’re still running,” I mutter, walking around the corner and sitting on the steps, dropping my head in my hands. I can’t keep doing this. I’m drowning, and Lyric being back is breaking me all over again.

“Daddy!” I hear her cry, and my head rises to see Bea racing toward me.

“Sorry, man, she got upset and wanted to see you.” I wave Andrew off as Bea stops in front of me. She frowns, looking at

me before hurling her small body at mine and wrapping those tiny arms around my neck. I inhale her still baby smell and hold her close.

“I don’t like chocolate cupcakes anymore either.” Her voice cracks, and my stomach twists. I never want to take away something from her she enjoys, replacing good with bad.

“What?” I ask, making my voice softer, looking at her with fake surprise. “Who’s going to help eat the ones in the box?”

She bites her lips. “I think I can.” Her answer makes me smile.

“What about if I get us a glass of milk too?”

“I think that’s a good idea.” She reaches for my hand, and I pretend she’s pulled me up.

If only all problems could be sorted with a chocolate cupcake.

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## Lyric

“That’s my brother’s handy work?”

I rub my hand across my jaw, wincing as I nod. “Yeah, I’ll survive. Could’ve been worse. He could’ve kicked me in the balls.”

Zane lets out a barking laugh, holding his side as I smile. Both of us remember when I did that same thing to Korbin.

He lifts his chin to the chair and watches me until I sit. “He came for you the day you left. Went nuts and made me take him to your trailer where your dad handed him his ass. Korbin didn’t believe you were gone. He kept saying some stuff about getting pissed, talking it through.” A line appears between his brow as if it still didn’t make sense, but I knew because they were the words I had thrown at Korbin. The ones he spat at me back in the garage.

We fight.

We get pissed.

We talk it through.

We fix it.

“He didn’t believe it until he saw the car. I don’t know what it was but after that... He shut down and went to a dark place.”

I blow out a breath. We’d built that car together. It was symbolic of us taking all our broken parts and putting them back together. When I smashed it, I physically and



metaphorically broke us apart. It's something I still feel guilty about. It was his pawpaw's car.

"Ruby told me and gave me the Cliff Notes yesterday." I let out a hard breath and shake my head. "Every time someone tried to tell me anything about this place, I cut them off. Shut them out. Acted like a damn coward. I didn't know about Ash and Jasper, any of it."

"I guessed." He nods. "You're not a bad person, Lyric. I could see you were hurting. It's also the reason I never reached out."

"You should kick me in the balls. You gave me a chance in this town. I still respect you. I might not have reached out, but I thought of you."

Zane offers me a strained smile as he tries to get comfy on the bed, closing his eyes for a beat as pain coats his features. His eyes are glassy when they open.

"I get it, and as much as it hurt my brother, still does, you needed to go and find yourself."

I rub a hand over my face and lean my elbow on my knees. "Ruby said something similar," I say, studying the floor, bowing my head.

"Hey," he snaps, making me look up at him, "We could all see what this place had done to you. Even Korbin, not that he'd ever admit it."

"It took a long time to fix all the crap inside my head."

He tilts his head. "And now?"

I hold his eyes and smile. "I'm good."

Zane's lips curve. "That's damn good to hear. Have you thought about my offer?"

I lean back in the chair, scratching my jaw, leaving him hanging for a moment. The dick deserves it after ambushing me and sending me to the garage knowing Korbin was there.

"I'll get the keys off Ruby tomorrow and open Monday."

Guilt washes my through stomach as I watch the stress fall from him as he leans back into the pillows, letting out a breath. “Thanks, man, and your boss will be okay?”

“My business partner.” I smile, as Zane’s eyes widen, and he smiles back.

“Yeah?”

“Maddox asked me two years ago, and yeah, he’s cool. We’ve become close. You concentrate on getting better.”

“Close?” His eyes narrow. “As in he’s your guy?”

“What... No! He’s a good-looking dude, I guess.” I tilt my head. “Maddox is hard to describe. He’s been there for me.” I shrug. “My best friend.”

Zane nods. “This Maddox sounds like a good guy. I’m glad you have someone watching out for you.”

I smack his arm and get up. “I’ll see you soon, okay.”

“Wait.” He grabs my wrist, stopping me. He stretches over the bed. Pain covers his face as he pulls open the drawer and fishes out something.

“I usually go over on a Saturday and get them food.” He offers me a tight smile as my pulse starts to pound. “Korbin is not that rich kid anymore. Bart disowned him, and his mom moved down to the coast. He’s struggling. He tries to hide it, but Korbin is barely hanging on.” He hands me a single key, which I take.

My fist curls around the metal even as the words come out of my mouth. “I’m the last person Korbin wants to see.”

“True, but what he wants and needs are two different things. He’ll fight you. You need to fight back. Because no matter what crap he chucks at you, it’s still you. He’s never got over you.”

“I know the feeling.” I hear the crack in my voice.

Zane studies me, his lips pressed together as he tilts his head. “Korbin comes as a package deal. It’s not just him you’ll have to look out for. My niece is a part of him... If you can’t

do that then this conversation never needs to happen again, and you can give me the key back.”

I shove the metal into my pocket as if someone is going to steal it. After a beat, I ask, “What’s their favorite food?”

Zane’s mouth curves, reaching his eyes, even with the tiredness and pain it shines through. “My niece loves Italian, spaghetti. And, Lyric.”

I move across the room when he calls out my name, making me glance over my shoulder. “You can’t run away this time. You can’t get them to let you in and abandon them.”

I turn to face him, holding his eyes, so he can see the truth in mine. “I swear I’m done running.”

His smile returns. “Welcome home, Lyric.”

“Thanks, man.” My lips curve as his words settles something inside me.

---

I swallow hard, walking up the steps beside the garage to the apartment Korbin rents with Bea.

Blowing out a breath, I study the door, not knowing what will happen once I go in.

I shove the key in the lock and push open the door. Korbin turns, glancing over his shoulder, a smile on his face. It falls when he spots me and jumps up off the couch.

“What the hell are you doing here?” He tries to keep his voice down, but the threat laces his words.

“Isn’t it Saturday night?”

His brows slam down. “Yeah, so?”

“I brought the food.” I hold up the bags, and move toward the kitchen, hiding the breath I blow out and how sweaty my palms are.

“My damn brother,” he growls. “You’ve been to see Zane.”

“I’m opening the shop on Monday. So, I won’t be around during the day as much.”

When he doesn’t speak, I look over my shoulder, seeing his eyes narrow. “Around?” he spits, his face turning red. “You haven’t been here for the last five damn years.”

I turn and lean against the counter. “We’ll talk about that. First food. I heard you get grumpy when you haven’t eaten.” I smirk as he curses and pulls his hair like a damn madman.

The bedroom door opens, and Bea looks out. I frown when there’s no smile, and she solemnly walks up beside her dad with a little scowl matching her father’s. Damn, if it isn’t the cutest thing. They both pout as I squat down to her level, having to fight a smile.

“A little birdie told me you love Italian.”

She tilts her head, licking her lips, and nods, moving a step closer. “It’s my second favorite.” She holds up two fingers.

“Your second?”

She leans in. “Chocolate is my first,” she whispers, making me laugh.

Korbin grunts. “That little birdie needs to keep its beak shut.”

“Oh, someone’s grumpy! I think we better feed Daddy quickly.” Bea can’t help the little giggle as she jumps on the seat, ready and waiting.

“You’ll have to show me where your plates are?” I speak to the room, pulling out the trays. Korbin moves beside me and reaches over. His scent surrounds me, making me hold my breath so I don’t turn and bury my face in his neck. He grabs two plates and cups. I roll my eyes and get an extra of each to Korbin’s disbelief.

“I’m starving.” I pull off my leather jacket, hearing Korbin suck in a breath behind me. I look to see his eyes taking me in, and damn if it doesn’t make me shiver.

His eyes catch mine, narrowing as I wink, making him blush before he tries to hide it with a scowl.

“Go sit down.” I turn around, hiding my smirk, as he listens, and I dish out all the food onto plates, leaving the sides in the trays.

I place their plates in front of them and put down all the sides containing garlic bread, dough balls, and salad as both their eyes widen. Okay, I may have gone overboard, not knowing what they like.

I grab my plate and sit down and start digging in. Bea peers at her dad who stares at his plate. I kick him under the table, making him frown, and I nod toward Bea.

He smiles at her as I’ve never seen before. It is soft with a curve to his lip, the emotion matching the one in his eyes.

“What are you waiting for, Bumble Bee?”

He starts digging in, and she picks up her fork and starts sucking it through her lips, sending sauce across her face. I can’t help how my lips lift. Damn, she’s adorable. Bea is Ashley’s double, beautiful, but Korbin is there too, in her expression and those silver eyes that capture anyone they land on. The perfect mix of the two.

Korbin tries to hold back but eats like he’s starving and something in my gut twists. Thinking of the night he bought pizza, and I tried to hold back but ended up eating twice as much as he did. I remember that embarrassment but was too hungry to stop myself.

Bea breaks the silence. “Do you know my daddy?”

It takes me a beat to answer. “I used to. We went to school together.” I relax in my chair.

“Were you friends?” she asks innocently, and Korbin’s body tenses.

“I’m not a stranger.” Thinking of the best way to approach her question and of how stranger danger was drummed into us all as kids.

Korbin grunts. “Wouldn’t stop her. She tried bringing the homeless man outside of Target home with us. Bea speaks to anyone.” He shakes his head but smiles at her.

“He looked hungry,” Bea says, defending herself.

“Maybe next time you can buy him a sandwich?” Her eyes light up, and she nods and smiles, her face full of sauce.

Bea fills the awkward silence with her questions and stories for the rest of the meal.

I gather the empty plates. “Sit,” I say to Korbin as he goes to move. He scowls back as he sits back down, crossing his arms over his chest.

I grab the still-warm apple pie and some clean plates. Bea sits straighter as I place hers in front of her, and she digs in, not waiting for Korbin. The girl’s got a serious sweet tooth.

“Thanks,” Korbin grunts and doesn’t wait.

Once we’re all finished, things get even more awkward. Silence covers the apartment as I move to the kitchen to clean up.

I hear Korbin’s voice come behind me. “You can leave now,” he whispers, his hot breath blowing in my ear.

“I’ll finish this up first. Just carry on.” I hold strong.

“It wasn’t a request,” he growls.

I turn, not realizing how close we are. Our faces are inches apart. Korbin seems shocked as well, his eyes dropping to my lips. They rise back to meet mine, and he flinches, taking a step back. “I can’t have you here.”

“Get used to it.” Our harsh breathing meets and surrounds us.

“You left.”

“I did.” I lift my chin, acknowledging the hurt and not hiding behind excuses.

His eyes flick over to his daughter playing in the living room. “And I’m expected to accept you back in my life so damn easily?”

“No,” I answer honestly. “There’s stuff we need to discuss. But you’re not ready to listen. I will keep turning up until you

are.”

His eyes narrow as his mouth twists, not believing a word I’m saying, and he turns, going to the living room and picking up Bea. I hear the water turn on and take a deep breath as I clean up the kitchen and sweep the floor. I move to the living room and pick up all the toys. Once the place looks clean, I turn and face the door, hearing Bea’s giggle and knowing Korbin is using the door to hide behind.

I let myself out quietly, deciding not to push too much tonight.

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As I pull out of my house, I see Dad’s truck. He jumps out as I do.

“Hey, what are you doing here? Everything okay?” He nods, staring at the house. “Ruby told you?”

He stays silent as I let us in, and he takes in the place. I mess around in the kitchen, making Dad a mug of coffee as I grab water and place the mug on the island.

“Damn, kid,” he whispers, his eyes fixed on the living room. “You did all this?”

A blush stains my cheeks as I draw patterns on the island’s marble, unable to hold his eyes. “What I could do, yeah. You’re not pissed?” I wince, realizing how it looks.

“That you hid this place? Came back to town and didn’t bother coming home at the same time?”

“Yeah, that.” Feeling like the biggest ass.

“No, it’s something you obviously felt you needed to do.”

“It wasn’t about not coming home, Dad. Rebuilding this place, it was like....” I run my hand through my hair. “Rebuilding myself.”

He lifts his chin. “Thanks for helping me to understand. Where have you been tonight?” He takes his mug and blows

the steam away.

“To tell Zane I’ll take his offer.”

“Offer?”

“Yeah, nearly put me on my ass when he asked. His recovery will take time. With the shop closed, he’s losing money and clients. Zane wants me to take over for a while.”

“What about your shop in California?”

“I’ve messaged Maddox. He understands and has told me to take as much time as I need. He’s been messaging nonstop asking about Zane.”

“He’s a good guy.” Dad and Maddox had become close when I was going through my worst stage of recovery.

“And to eat with Korbin and Bea.”

His brows disappear into his hairline. “Korbin invited you over?”

“No.” I laugh. “He hates me.”

“I don’t think you should go around again.”

I shrug, giving a half-truth. “I told Zane I’d help out.”

“Bull, you’re going over because you feel guilty. I get it. You messed up, and you’re owning it. Lyric, there’s a little girl involved now who will get used to you being around. Get attached. My woman loves that little girl. You hurt her, and you’ll wish you’d never come back.”

I cross my arms over my chest, moving behind the island to put it between us. “You think I’d hurt a child?” I grit out.

“You know that’s not what I’m saying. You and Korbin didn’t work out well last time, and everyone felt it. Ruby had to hide things from you which made her sick. You didn’t reach out to Zane and cut off the guy you respected, and you didn’t come home, barely called me.”

“I know what I did,” I snap. “Walked away like a damn pussy. I’m just like her!”



“Who the hell are you talking...” Dad’s words fall away as he takes a step closer and holds my shoulders. “God, boy, is that what you think?”

I shrug. I’d talked about my mom with my therapist, how she’d left and how the conversations between us got shorter and shorter until they no longer existed.

He grabs my nape. “You are nothing like her. Bethany was selfish and spoiled.”

I grunt. “And I’m that different?”

“Hell yeah, you are because you came back. You’ve come to face it all, and I know what that’s taken. Because, Lyric, I’ve always seen the man standing before me. Through all the dark times, all the running, and maybe you were selfish, but I knew that great guy was still underneath it all, buried beneath a bunch of hurt and confusion. You are good enough for this town, Korbin, and any man who may come into your life. Because, kid, you’ve got a heart bigger than most people I know. You love hard and hurt deeply.”

“That’s what you think?” I say, unable to keep the hitch out of my voice.

“No, it’s what I know. You went through hell to get where you are and that shows a strength built in the very damn core of you. You could’ve quit therapy when it got rough. You could’ve said fuck you to the world, but instead you fought your demons, and I couldn’t be damn prouder of you, boy.”

He pulls me into a hug, and I wrap my arms around him.

That little boy I hid deep in my soul, who was scared, hurt, and felt he never had a place. The one who pushed everyone away to protect himself, even the ones who never hurt me, crept closer to the surface.

I pull back. “I’m done running, Dad. Korbin needs a friend right now, and that little girl... I’d never hurt her. I’m going to make sure they’re both okay.”

He smiles. “I think you might be what they both need. But, Lyric, use your head and heart in this. There are too many people who can get hurt.”

“I swear it.”



I groan, rubbing a hand over my face. I feel like I've slept for hours, yet every damn muscle aches. I blink, seeing the sun shining through the windows, and I shoot up, jerking on my sweats. Bea always gets up at the crack of dawn.

My heart hammers at how quiet it is, and I yank the door open. The scene in front of me makes me freeze.

Lyric is coloring with Bea, both their heads together and talking in hushed whispers. They turn at the sound of the door, and Bea smiles and jumps down, racing across our small living room. On instinct, I grab her, and she rubs her nose against mine.

“Morning, Daddy.”

“Morning, Bumble Bee.”

I glare over her head to see Lyric watching us, a strange look on his face before a soft smile curls his lips.

We both stare.

“Daddy is awake. Can we eat?”

Lyric laughs, getting off his chair. “Yeah, get your butt back here.” Bea doesn't need to be asked twice and wiggles until I put her down, racing over to him.

The smell of bacon hits my nose. Bacon, I know we don't have. My face heats up, knowing he's been shopping for us.

As I walk past, I ruffle my daughter's hair and grab a cup to make myself a coffee, not the cheap instant one but a brand I can't afford.

I growl under my breath. "What are you doing?"

"Making breakfast?" Lyric says as if it's normal to be at my apartment.

"I can see that. I mean, what are you doing here?"

"I told you I'd be back." He tips the pancake mix into the frying pan and swirls it around before glancing at me. It's then I realize he hasn't just changed physically. There's no harshness in his eyes. They aren't narrow and waiting for someone to say something. There's no snarl curling his lips. He seems at peace, comfortable in his skin.

As much as I want that. I hate it too. Another reminder that he's moved on and can quit me while I'm still addicted.

I blink from my thoughts as he hands me a plate full of pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

Breakfast. I can't remember the last time I ate it. Bea usually has cereal, but I go without to ensure it lasts a little longer.

My pay at the garage is good, but I have an apartment to pay for even if the rent is cheap. There are bills, groceries to buy, and a four-year-old child who is constantly growing and needing something.

A hand curls around my bicep. "Hey, it's just..." Lyric shakes his head as if rethinking his words. "It's payback for all the times you got me pizza and coffee, and don't forget the price of the car show tickets and"—his cheeks warm—"the hotel, so don't overthink it."

I suck in a breath. How does Lyric know what I'm thinking? I grit my jaw. He's always been able to read me in a way no one else can.

I move over to the table on autopilot and sit down. I can't even offer to pay him back. I don't have that kind of spare cash to waste on luxuries.

Bea is tucking into her pancakes, her bacon is already eaten.

Lyric takes the extra seat, and our thighs touch with how small the table is. It's not big enough for two grown men.

He digs in and talks to my daughter as if they've always been in each other's lives, and I hate how my chest warms and all my muscles seem to relax.

"What time does Bea go to bed?" Lyric's quiet voice slams me back to reality.

"Eight?" I answer as if I'm unsure.

"I'll be by just after. We need to talk. I've got to go and see Dad and look around the shop. Don't forget I'm opening it tomorrow."

I lean back. "Why are you telling me?" I say, crossing my arms.

"I'm telling you I'll be back, and I'll keep telling you until you believe me." He holds my eyes and starts picking up all the empty plates. I sit still as he moves around my kitchen.

A part of me wants to believe him, that Lyric is here to stay. He's back in Hill View. That he came back for me.

Even if he is telling the truth, what does that mean for us? Does he think we can just pick up where we left off?

Loving Lyric made me vulnerable. When he walked away, the hurt nearly destroyed me.

Could I open myself up to him again? To the possibility of feeling that way again?

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I take a sip of my beer. Ruby had rung to ask if she could have Bea overnight. She wanted to give Lyric and me space to talk.

That's not happening, so I left before seven and sat my ass in a bar, so no one could find me.

Hell, maybe I'll get a blow job and forget all about Lyric fucking Blackmore.

I grunt and let out a laugh. Five years, and he's still inside my head. I still miss him and can't move on.

Looking at the clock on the wall, I see it's gone ten and decide that should be long enough for Lyric to have gotten the message and be gone.

Leaving the bar, I groan, thinking of the walk home. My muscles ache, and all I want is a shower and to fall into bed. God, when did I get so old? No, twenty-three isn't over the hill. To most, you're still in your damn prime, but all I feel lately is worn out.

Facing the steps to my apartment, it looks like a damn mountain. I let out a sigh seeing no Lyric. At the same time, my stomach clenches alongside my jaw that he's not here.

"Yeah, that lasted as long as I expected," I growl into the night.

I go up the steps as my fingers curl into a fist because half of me wants to go to his dad's cabin and knock on the door and call him out for not waiting or doing exactly what I knew he would. Irrational? Hell yeah.

I shove the key in my door, turn on the light and then drop them as I spot Lyric sitting at the table, leaning back, his brow raised.

"What the hell!" I growl, slamming the door. "You were never this stupid before! Me not being here should have clued you in. I don't want to talk! I don't want anything to do with you." He sits there and takes all of my anger. Which pisses me off more.

"Fine, you wanna talk." I grab a seat and pull it out. "Talk, then you can get the hell out of here."

He leans forward. "Are you going to listen? Or keep having a tantrum that rivals one of Bea's?" His lip curves. "She's amazing, by the way."

My chest warms, but I keep my mouth shut.

“I’m sorry—”

I stand at his words, sending the chair flying behind me. “For what! Not talking it through? Not fixing it? Leaving? The plan to break me? Which one are you fucking sorry for?”

“Yes, I set out to break your heart. I wanted to make you suffer and hurt you the way I was.” He runs his fingers through his hair, chewing on the corner of his lip, but doesn’t take his eyes off mine. “It was wrong. I’m not making excuses, but all I felt was this anger like it was alive, and you were the *damn* gasoline.”

“I apologized. I let you kick me in the damn balls! What did you want from me? I thought what we had was real! I fell in—I slam my lips together, not finishing my sentence.

“What you and your friends did, didn’t just hurt me, Korbin. It messed me up. The names you called me, the things you did. People don’t just get over that stuff. You probably can’t remember half of what you said.” He’s right, I don’t. “I remember it all.”

“I know I hurt you. I apologized.”

“You did, and so have I? Does that make your pain suddenly go away? Make it all better? Can we be friends now? Jump back into bed?”

Damn, he’s right. Words break you, but words can’t repair what they’ve damaged. They’re a starting point, a beginning, but not everything.

I pick the chair up and sit, crossing my arms as he continues.

“My plan didn’t work, you got under my skin, and I liked the guy I’d gotten to know. It was all real after a few weeks. I fell for you, Korbin.” He holds my eyes as he says each word. “So, yeah, when Jasper came at me spouting all that crap and then hearing Bart, I ran. I couldn’t stay in a town where the guy I’d fallen for married his high-school girlfriend, had a baby, and played happy family while I could barely breathe.”

“She was never my girlfriend. There’s only one relationship I’ve had, and it was all fake,” I spit.

“That’s bull, and you know it, Korbin. I couldn’t fake all that. Damn, I’m an artist, not an actor. You know what I felt was real, that I love you.”

I did, as much as I’m pissed and hurt. I know Lyric felt something for me. I don’t miss him saying love and not loved, either. I hate the flare of warmth in my chest.

I shrug. “That’s it?”

He shakes his head. “No, I also didn’t know what happened. Whenever anyone tried to tell me about you, this place, I’d cut them off. Shut them out. I learned about Ashley and Jasper and Bea when I returned to town.”

“And what? If you had known, you would’ve come back?”

Lyric licks his lips. “Honestly? I don’t know. I was pretty messed up back then. There were times when I sat in my dad’s truck for hours, wanting to come back and beg you not to marry Ashley and to pick me. Other times I hated you so much my body felt like it had exploded.”

“I did pick you!” I roar. “I walked away from everyone. For you! I told Ash I’d help her with the baby, but it was you!”

“I didn’t know!” Lyric roared back.

“Because you ran away, left me! You. Left. Me!” I yell back just as loud. I rip my phone out of my pocket and chuck it at him. “Look! Look at all the messages I sent you! How I fucking begged you to come back. I was scared, a new dad, and I’d just lost Ash and Jasper!” My voice quietens. “I just wanted you to come back and tell me it would be okay, to hold me.

“I left because this place was killing me! I needed to leave to survive, to find out who the hell I was. I was scared! So God damn frightened I’d never feel like me again. Do you know what it feels like to hate yourself? If I had stayed, I wouldn’t have survived this town, these people, you.”

His words hit my chest, curling around my heart. I knew Lyric was suffering with something that I didn’t always understand. I saw all the signs but ignored them because of the truth they brought. I was a part of the reason he felt that way.



“Korbin, what do you think would’ve happened if I’d stayed? We would play happy family?” He shakes his head. “We were two messed up kids broken before we destroyed each other! We were never going to make it. Too much was already against us.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Why did you never tell me about the engagement? Why didn’t you tell me how much your dad pressed for it? About the baby?”

“I was trying to protect you and sort it all out.”

“No, you were trying to keep it from me because you didn’t trust in us. You knew we weren’t strong enough to survive.”

I hate what he says makes sense and is true, but I can’t let go of the anger. “So, all this is my fault?”

“I’m saying we’re both to blame and at the same time, neither of us are.” He shakes his head as if trying to find the words. He gets up and moves closer to me until we are a breath apart. “I’m sorry, Korbin, so damn sorry you’ve had to go through so much.” He reaches up and runs his fingers across my jaw. “I want to help. I’m here now.”

“You want to help?” I spit.

“Yeah.”

“Get on your knees.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“You heard. Get on your knees.”

He watches me for a moment and falls to his knees. I touch him for the first time in five years, running my fingers across his jaw.

He’s panting, peering up at me with those damn green eyes. They no longer hide his emotions. They now shine brightly. Excitement and fear.

“You can get up and leave? Are you going to leave, Lyric?”

A dare. His eyes narrow. “No,” he bites out. “Give it to me,” he dares back, and a flash of teenager Lyric comes out to play.

I bite back the angry words I want to chuck at him, hiding how my fingers shake as I pull down my zipper and shove my jeans to my thighs, the denim sitting below my balls.

“When we were together, you only got on your knees once. Why?” I ask squeezing my cock, stroking the growing thickness.

“Because I refused to be on my knees for you as much as I wanted to taste you, to feel how heavy you were against my tongue. My pride wouldn’t let me.”

“And here you are, on your knees.”

“It’s better to lose my pride than you.”

“You already have.”

“Have I?”

I don’t answer, watching the movement of his tongue as it swipes his bottom lip, the way his white teeth catch his hoop. It’s like a damn wet dream.

I want to give in, tell him I get him and understand everything he’s said. The feeling is worse than a kick in the balls because it all makes sense. I get him.

I want to yank his hair until he’s standing in front of me, make him swear to never leave, take him into the bedroom, and fuck him until he swears he’ll never run again. Chain him to the damn bedpost if I have to.

But I can’t.

I’m not ready to forgive him, to let Lyric back into my life without a fight.

I jerk as long fingers touch the back of my hand where it’s squeezing my cock. I let him pull it away and replace it with his. He stares at my hard dick, the head glistening. It twitches as he shuffles forward on his knees.

“Fuck,” I curse as his hot mouth swallows the tip, his tongue coming into the mix as he grabs the back of my thighs.

He takes me to the back of his throat, sucking on me like he’s hungry for me, like I’m his favorite damn sucker. My head falls back as he pays special attention to the head, adding a little teeth. Groans I’ve been trying to keep hidden tear from my mouth.

My eyes snap open, hearing a slick sound, and see Lyric jerking himself off. The sight of his dick in his hand, fucking his fist with mine in his mouth is too much. My thighs shake, and that fuzzy feeling spreads up my spine and down my cock as my balls draw up and my stomach clenches. I latch onto Lyric’s hair, and my fingers dig into his soft strands as I come with a groan. It feels like forever, and Lyric doesn’t stop sucking until I’m too sensitive.

Panting hard, I yank up my jeans, unable to look at him with my emotions too close to the surface. I stride across the apartment into my room and sit on my bed, dropping my head in my hands.

“Well, that’s never happened before,” he says from my doorway. It’s the same thing he said that first night.

“Don’t. I can’t...” A sound breaks from my chest, and all the emotions I’ve been pushing down come out, tearing me wide open. I feel a strong arm come around me and bring me into a solid chest. The scent, so familiar yet achingly strange, wraps around me.

Lyric runs his lips over my temple. “It’s okay.”

I shake my head because nothing is okay. “I’m so tired. I’m trying and trying, but it’s all falling apart. I work more hours to pay for everything and miss out on seeing Bea. Everything I do is for her. But if I cut my hours, then I can’t afford the bills. Zane... I can’t lose him. He’s all I’ve got!”

I turn to face Lyric, wetness covering my cheeks. “I want to forgive you, but I’m not ready,” I whisper against his mouth, sliding my lips across his, barely touching.

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## Lyric

Once Korbin has fallen asleep, I slip out of his room, knowing he won't want me to stay. I see his phone, picking it up and searching it until I find my name, smirking at the old nickname. I spend an hour reading all the messages he'd sent me. Begging for me to come back, apologizing, and promising he'd fix it if I'd just answer his call. Angry ones, drunken ones, photos of Bea.

Then the last one was sent last year, telling me he hates me. Hates that it's a lie because he still loves me.

I lean forward, putting his phone on the coffee table and scrubbing my hand over my face, feeling my wet cheeks. It's a damn mess. All of it.

Where do we go from here? Could we?

I stare at his bedroom door.

Do I love him?

Yeah, I do. Just like Korbin, I've been unable to shake him. Fuck, I don't just love him. I'm in love with him!

I'm not naive enough to think we can pick up where we left off. We need to get to know each other. I know the only way to prove it to Korbin is through action. Telling him won't work.

As much as I can see the damage and hurt I've caused Korbin, I don't regret leaving. It was the best for both of us.

That doesn't mean it wasn't the biggest mistake of my life, especially the way I did it.

Feeling restless, I clean the apartment from top to bottom. It isn't dirty, it's well lived-in, and I had to keep busy. Stop myself from going back to Korbin's room.

It's basic and a little bare. I can tell all the furniture is second-hand. The only color comes from Bea's drawings hung proudly around the place.

I take stock of his food and write a list of what he needs. I know I should go home. Tomorrow I'm back working at Zane's, but I can't make myself leave.

Sinking onto the couch, I grab a blanket and lie down, staring at Korbin's door. As pink starts to paint the sky, I close my eyes.

It feels like I've only gotten an hour before my alarm goes off. I groan, getting up and running my hand through my hair. I walk to the toilet and take a piss and rinse my mouth with mouthwash.

I check the time and see it's seven. Korbin will be up soon to open the garage and start breakfast, and I see nothing apart from cereal.

I grab my keys and slip out the door, quickly going to the drive-through and grabbing coffee and breakfast burritos.

Jogging back up the steps, I open the door to see Korbin glaring at the blanket on the couch. He spins to me as I close the door.

"Just went to get breakfast." I hold up the bag then set it on the table.

"You stayed here last night?" He frowns, looking back at the blanket.

"I sat down, and next thing, it's morning," I lie and shake my head, blowing out a breath as I take out the breakfast. "That was a lie. I didn't want to leave." His eyes widen as his lips part. "Here?" I hold out a coffee. He takes it and groans.

“Haven’t had one of these in…” The line between his brow deepens. “Five years.”

“Eat this before going to work. You’ve lost weight.” After a minute, he takes it but doesn’t open it.

“You’re leaving.”

“I’ve got to get home to shower. I start work at Zane’s today and won’t be done until late.”

I watch the muscle in his jaw tighten as he shrugs and drops the burrito on the table before striding out and slamming the door.

“Stupid bullheaded man.” I swipe the burrito off the table, making sure to lock up behind me, and jog back down the steps.

The garage is already open, and I see the guy from the other day.

“Where is he?” I ask, smirking.

The poor guy rubs his neck, glancing at me then Korbin’s office door. “Out back, but he’s not in the best mood. Maybe you should come back.”

I smile, leaning against a car they’re working on. “Trust me, I can handle him.” I hold my hand out to introduce myself. “I’m Lyric, by the way. You’ll be seeing me around.”

He wipes his hand on his overalls and shakes it. “Andrew,” he says, offering me a smile.

“When you’ve stopped flirting with my staff.” Korbin’s is voice is a whip in the air. Andrew drops my hand like fire, and a blush covers his cheeks.

I roll my eyes and turn toward Korbin. “The only man I’m interested in left without taking his breakfast with him.”

He freezes, and his mouth falls open. I cross the space between us. “Come on, grumpy, let’s feed you, then I’ll get going.” I pat his chest.

“You did that on purpose.” He slams the office door and narrows his eyes. “Out there with Andrew.” Korbin feels the

need to point at the door.

“I’m done caring what this town thinks of me.” I shrug and unwrap his breakfast. “Sit,” I say, sinking onto the chair and taking a mouthful of my own. He lets out a loud sigh as he sits his ass down.

“I can’t remember you being this annoying.” Korbin grunts.

I choke on the bite I’ve taken. “That’s a lie.”

Korbin tries to hide how his lip curves with a big bite, but I see the laughter in his eyes.

“Damn, I’m stuffed.” I rub my stomach and clear up the empty wrappers, dumping them in the trash. I lean against Korbin’s desk, looking down at him as he busies himself with paperwork, refusing to look at me.

I grab his chin. “I’m going to work. I’ll see you later.” I wait for my words to sink in even though he doesn’t respond, and I lean in, preparing him for what I’m about to do. I touch my lips to the corner of his. “Last night... it was amazing to taste you.” I move my palm around to his nape. “But I’m not letting you use sex as a punishment. Next time we do anything, it will be because you want this... us.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, staring at me with wide eyes. I don’t wait for him to answer, waving goodbye to Andrew as I leave.

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It’s been non-stop all day as one client leaves and the next is waiting. My fingers and my back ache, but I’m pumped. It’s good to be back here. Daryl, Zane’s apprentice, came in to introduce himself and will be starting back tomorrow. I’ve also arranged for some guest artists to come in for a few days for the next month to try and pump money back in.

The doorbell goes off, making me peer up to see my dad.

“Give me a second,” I say to the guy with a wolf head on his chest. The outline is nearly done.

“Yeah, sure, man.” He lets out a relieved breath. Some people take to ink better than others, but he isn’t one. Ever since I put my gun on his skin, he’s been flinching. I swear two tears have leaked from his eyes.

I lift my chin to Dad and go into the back room. “What’s wrong?” He can’t hide the worry in his eyes,

“Andrew just called Ruby. Korbin hurt himself this morning. They had to get an ambulance,” he rushes out, watching me.

What’s happened? He was fine when I left him this morning. My thoughts race as I rub my nape. My eyes widen as I grab Dad’s arm. “Where is Bea?”

“She’s with Ruby.”

I let out a breath as panic starts to swirl around me, and my body itches to run and find Korbin. Ignoring the irrational thoughts, I calm down.

“Okay, give me two minutes to close the shop.”

“I’ll be in the car.”

I grab his arm. “Thanks for coming to tell me.”

“You’re right. That boy and little girl need you.” He smiles, squeezing my shoulder. “I hope he knows how lucky he is.”

I walk over to my client. “Sorry, I need to leave because of a family emergency.”

He lets out a relieved breath as he sits up. “Sure, man. I hope everything turns out okay.”

“Me too,” I say, wrapping up his ink. “Keep it covered for two hours.” I hand him a leaflet on how to take care of it. “The rest of your sitting is free. I’ll get you booked in as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, man.” He nods, and within ten minutes, I’ve got the shop closed, and we’re pulling into a space outside the



hospital. I race through the doors, seeing Bea sitting on Ruby's lap, both with suckers in their mouths.

“Any news?”

Ruby shakes her head, tears glassing her eyes. I crouch down until I'm facing Bea. “Hey, little one, you wanna get some soda?”

She nods, jumps off Ruby's lap, and holds her hand for me to take.

I wrap mine around hers. It is so tiny, and she trusts me.

Everyone is right. It's more than Korbin and me. This beautiful, smart, sassy girl is in the center of us.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't freaking out knowing that it's not only Korbin's but Bea's heart I've got to hold. She turns her face toward me and smiles, and I know right at that very second, they're mine.

Not just Korbin but Bea too. I'll do anything for either of them. Even if Korbin and I don't work out all the crap between us. I'll make sure I stay in both of their lives.

“Son, you, okay?”

I glance up, realizing I haven't moved. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.” I smile and walk Bea over to the vending machine.

We grab a few packs of chips and chocolate because, of course, it's her favorite, and soda for everyone.

As we return, a doctor comes out the doors. “Mr. Rose's, family?”

“Yes, that's us.” Ruby stands, but Dad reaches out when she looks like she's going to faint. She waves him off with a roll of her eyes. Dad picks up Bea and walks her away slightly. I frown until I realize he doesn't want her to hear what the doctor is saying.

“Mr. Rose's pain is under control. We're taking him to have an MRI to see what's causing the problem.”

“What happened? What do you think it could be? Are we allowed to see him?” I rush out, wiping my sweaty palms on

my jeans.

“From what Mr. Dawson said—”

“Andrew,” Ruby jumps in, seeing the confusion on my face.

“And what we’ve been able to get out of Mr. Rose, he was lifting a box and collapsed under the weight. I think, and I’m rarely mistaken, it’s a herniated or prolapsed disc. You may know it as a slipped disc where the disc bulges out of where it is supposed to be and pushes on the nerves close by. Mr. Rose will be in a lot of pain for the next few days. It will ease, but it could take weeks to fully recover. We can give him painkillers and some muscle relaxants.”

“Can we see him?” I need to see for myself that he’s okay,

“Yes, as soon as he’s back.”

“Thank you.” Ruby smiles as the doctor walks off.

“Has anyone told Zane?” I ask, knowing he will want to know.

Ruby shakes her head. “I was waiting to see what the doctors said.”

“Are you okay watching Bea? I’ll go up,” she says as my dad links their fingers.

“Course he is.”

“Yeah.” I smile and fall into the seat next to Bea. “Hey, little one, fancy hanging out with just me for a while?” She seems to think about it before nodding and returning to the coloring book Ruby must’ve brought with her.

“Here’s her bag. Anything she might need is in here. You know where Zane’s room is...” My dad cuts her off with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“He’s got it.”

Ruby looks up at him and at me. “Yeah.” Her smile widens. She leans down and kisses Bea before walking over to the elevator.

I notice how quiet Bea is, she is usually full of energy, and I guess she's worried about her daddy. I want to reassure her and make her smile. "Can I color?" I ask.

Bea glances up at me, tilting her head. "You like to color?"

"Yup, it's my favorite."

"My Uncle Zane colors too, but he uses a gun." Her eyes widen. "It gives people tattoos."

I can't help smiling. "I do too. I'm working in Uncle Zane's shop. I did a long time ago, too. That's how I know your Aunt Ruby and Uncle Zane."

"Really?" she gasps, hanging on my every word.

I nod. "And you know Eric?"

She grins. "I like him. Eric sneaks me chocolate when Aunt Ruby says no," she giggles behind her hand.

I can't help laughing with her. "He's my dad."

Bea turns toward me and picks up a bright pink pen. "You can help."

And I feel like I've won something with her reply. Not wanting to lose it, I roll my sleeves up.

"Hey, I got an idea. Why don't you draw tattoos on my arm?"

Her eyes widen as she scrambles onto her knees to get closer. "Really?" she asks in awe. We might have another little artist on our hands with Bea.

"Yup." I start using the pink pen against my skin and draw a flower. "See, like this." Her little pink tongue comes out as she studies my arm and uses a green color to start drawing.

Half an hour later, I have six stick-looking figures up my arms. "That's Daddy." She points to the tallest one. "Uncle Zane, Aunt Ruby," she giggles, pointing to the big sucker in Ruby's hand.

"Who are these two?" I ask, tilting my head and seeing them both smiling.

“That’s you and me, silly,” she answers, rolling her eyes as if she didn’t just make my heart swell and eyes glass. Unable to speak, I add a drawing of my own.

“Aww, it’s a puppy.” Bea claps and smiles, so definitely a dog person.

“What should we call him?”

“Rainbow,” she says, with the seriousness of a four-year-old.

“Rainbow, it is.” I smile.

“They are some interesting tattoos.” I glance to see Zane in a wheelchair, my dad pushing him. Damn, seeing him in that thing brings home how sick he is.

Ruby drops in the seat next to me and growls, “He wouldn’t stay put.”

“Uncle Zane!” Bea yells, scrambling off the chair so fast I have to stop her from falling. Damn kid’s going to give me a heart attack.

She races over to Zane but stops dead beside him. With gentleness I didn’t know a four-year-old could understand, she tries to hug him over the side of the chair. I watch Zane grimace in pain as he tries to return it.

I get up and lift her, so Bea can wrap her arms around his neck, and he can hug her back.

Zane looks away as he grits out, “Thanks.” I know this has got to be hard for him. Damn, he’s only twenty-eight. He’s always been physically fit. He was the most independent person I know.

“The doctor is back,” my dad’s voice has me turning as Bea wraps her arms around my neck.

“Mr. Rose is back, and it’s, as suspected, a herniated disc. You can come back and see him.”

I go to put Bea down, but she clings to me, causing me to laugh. “Come on, little spider monkey.” She rests her head on my shoulder, going quiet again.

Dad and Zane go ahead as Ruby places her hand on my back. “I think you’ve stolen my best friend.” She winks and catches up with the doctor.

I smile, feeling like I’ve got someone’s approval.

Korbin is pale, sweat around his temples, as he looks up and catches me with his daughter walking through the door.

He stares at Bea’s arms wrapped around my neck. He turns away, but not before I miss the way his lip trembles. I know Korbin would hate his daughter to see him cry, knowing it would upset her.

“Missed me that much? You could have just called. No need for all the dramatics.” I smirk as everyone else laughs.

Korbin’s head snaps back to mine, blinking the emotion away. He grunts, trying to fight the way his lip tries to curl.

“Daddy.” Bea tries to wiggle from my arms, and I hold her out to Korbin. He moves and hisses from the pain, falling back to the pillow and closing his eyes.

“Daddy?” Bea’s lip trembles. I watch as everyone in the room freezes as a fat tear falls down her cheek.

Korbin curses and tries to sit up. I gently push him back down. “I got you.” He goes to shake his head but stays still and nods.

“Hey, little one.” I turn Bea’s face to mine. “Daddy hurt his back at work. I’ll hold you so you can hug him, just like you did with Uncle Zane.”

She nods. “Okay, I’ll be careful.” She leans over while I hold her, rubbing her nose against his.

“Daddy’s hurt.” Her voice trembles.

“I’m okay, Bumble Bee. The doctor said I can come home.” He kisses her forehead, and I pull her back. A silent thank you in his eyes.

Ruby runs out of the room, Dad following her and nearly smacking into the doctor.

“Korbin said he can go home?” Zane frowns, peering at the doctor.

“He’ll have to take it easy until the pain eases. Mr. Rose told me he’s a single parent and will need help for the next few weeks.”

“He lives in an apartment. There are stairs. Will that be, okay?”

We all turn as Dad and Ruby come back in. Ruby looks pale and is shaking but gives us a bright smile.

“If Korbin had somewhere else to stay for a while, it would be better for his recovery.”

“I would ask you to come to stay with us.” My dad speaks up first. “But...” He links his fingers with Ruby, who smiles at us all, a tear falling down her cheek.

“We’ve just found out I’m pregnant.”

The room falls quiet.

I gasp. “Pregnant?” She nods, biting her lip. “Damn.” I smile and turn to Bea. “Hear that little one. Ruby has a baby in her tummy. You’ll have a friend to play with.”

“She’s going to be my best friend.”

I walk over and kiss Ruby on her temple. “You’ll be an amazing mother.”

She sucks in a shuddering breath and rubs my arm. “Thank you.”

“Congratulations.” Zane smiles. “About time we got some good news.”

I walk over to Dad and grab him in an awkward hug while still holding Bea. “The baby’s got the best dad.”

His eyes glass. “Thanks, kid.” He pats my back, holding me a little longer. “You’re okay with it?” he asks, pulling back to look at me.

“Hell yeah! I get a baby brother or sister to spoil rotten.” Making Ruby laugh as my dad’s mouth opens. Ruby nudges

him.

“Let him have his fun.” She says, shoving a blueberry sucker in her mouth as she hands one to Bea.

“Congratulations to you both. I owe you a few date nights.” He grins, making my stomach drop as I turn my eyes to the wall. I have no right to be pissed at Korbin for going on dates.

“I can stay at yours,” Korbin says.

I smile, lifting my head to see he’s talking to Zane. I try to hide my disappointment, keeping a smile on my face, but the whole room catches it, apart from Korbin. Ruby moves over and rubs my back.

“That solves the stairs problem, but what about helping with Bea?”

“Ms. Pearl, she’s always saying she can watch Bea more,” he says stubbornly.

“And what about the nights? And everything else Ms. Pearl won’t be there for?” Zane argues, pinching his nose, his knuckles turning white as he grips the handles of the wheelchair.

“You really do need some help,” the doctor interrupts.

Zane glances at me out of the corner of his eye. I turn to Korbin. “You’re both staying with me.”

“Have you got chocolate?” Bea asks, her little brow rising.

“Yes,” I laugh, tickling her belly as she squirms, smiling around the sucker.

“You heard Eric. We’ll be okay at Zane’s.”

“I’m not staying with Dad. You and Bea are coming home with me.” I say, leaving no room for him to argue.



“Ready to bust out of this place?” Lyric smirks as he fastens the belt and closes the door behind me.

I grit my teeth as the vibration of the car door goes through me. They had to get a wheelchair to help me. Eric pushed, and Lyric and Ruby walked behind.

The nurse came to collect Zane while sorting out my medication. I didn’t miss how she flirted with Lyric, batting her damn eyes, trying to get his attention. I narrowed my eyes at her, but she still didn’t get the message until I snapped at her to get out.

That made Lyric and my brother’s brows rise into their hairlines. Lyric seemed to know what I was thinking and smirked.

He strutted across the room until he leaned over me, placing another one of those damn kisses on the corner of my lips, and I was in too much pain to pull away. Well, that’s what I’m going with.

It’s his damn fault I’m in this mess. All I could think about was how he sucked my cock last night. What it felt like waking up and seeing him walk through the door. How he made sure I ate, and then that damn kiss. I wasn’t paying attention to the weight of the box, so I unloaded it and collapsed under its weight.

He jumps in, starts the car, and pulls out of the space. “Ruby will bring Bea back in the morning.” Eric and Ruby



said they would take Bea tonight to give me time to settle in.

I nod, still pissed they all forced me into this. I saw the look Zane gave Lyric before he spoke up.

“Just drop me home,” I say, laying my head against the headrest and closing my eyes, wanting this day to be over. I’m not even going to think about the money I’ll lose and the medical bills, none of which I can afford.

“You need help.”

“I needed your help five years ago,” I spit, opening my eyes and watching him glare at me. He turns back to the road, and a small line appears between his brows as his knuckles turn white against the wheel.

“My place is big enough for you and Bea,” he carries on as if I’m not taking cheap shots.

Anything I was going to say falls away. With the direction we are going, my gut clenches, and my pulse pounds so hard it rings in my ears as we pull up a familiar dusty road.

“Is this some sick joke!” I seethe, gritting my teeth as my fingers curl around the handle, ready to jump the hell out.

Lyric glances at me as if sensing my uneasiness. “No, it’s where I’m staying.”

I suck in a breath, not knowing what to say. Why did Lyric choose here?

My grandparent’s home, the one I was forced to sell.

I’d never seen the owner, but it didn’t surprise me. A lot of people bought a property in Hill View that they rented out.

The ranch house comes into view. I haven’t been back to it for three years.

We pull around the back, and a warm light pours outside. The whole bottom half of the house has been changed to glass. I can’t take my eyes off it. It looks so damn good.

“I’ll help you out.” Lyric jumps out, and I’m glad for a second to breathe. Lifting my hand, I rub the tight ball in my chest.

The door opens, and Lyric peers at me. “Come on... take it easy.” I try not to lean into his touch. A strong arm wraps around me. “I’ve got you.” Lyric’s breath flutters across my ear and jaw.

I let out a breath as my feet touch solid ground and shrug his hold off me, cursing as I do. Lyric runs ahead to open the door. I take in the place, the glass windows letting me see the new open plan. It looks so different yet feels so familiar.

Lyric holds the door open, and the warmth hits me straight away.

I freeze as my eyes flick around the kitchen. It has a rustic look mixed with modern touches such as the newly built island and soft tan leather stools. The mix of both styles shouldn’t go but they do.

Lyric throws his keys down and comes to my side. His touch makes me jerk. “Just helping you into the living room,” he sighs. I grit my jaw and nod. Preparing myself for his arm to come around my waist, my muscles tense at his touch.

The old fireplace has been restored, and the new stone carried up the wall, big beams taking up the roof space, matching the floor. A massive corner couch big enough to fit fifteen takes one-quarter. My chest hurts seeing the same style chair as my Pawpaw’s but clearly new in his spot, making me turn my head away.

The mixture of different woods warms the place. It looks masculine, warm, and cozy.

Like a home.

“Do you want to sit in here or go lie down?”

All this is too much.

Lyric being back in town, the house, being here with him.

“I need to lie down.” Get away from you, this place, but leave the words unsaid.

He helps me into the hallway. I stop, glaring at the door where Lyric lost his virginity, and so did I in a different way. I

let him take me, see me, in a way no one ever had before or since.

Where we spent the best times of our relationship, hidden under the covers and not just for the sex but the conversations. Our dreams and hopes never left that room.

Where we said I love you.

“I’m not staying here!” I bite out before I can stop myself and take a step back, jarring my back. Lyric’s arms wrap around me as I blink, trying not to pass out.

I hear a door open as he guides me into a dark room, my back hits a soft mattress as my vision starts to clear. I hiss, closing my eyes, trying to catch my breath.

Lyric moves away, and a light comes on. “You look like crap,” he states and moves toward the bed, me and undoes my laces, pulling off my boots and socks. “I’m going to take off your jeans.” My eyes widen at his comment, my head trying to play catch up. A gruff sound comes out of him. “So you can sleep better.”

I watch as he moves to my buttons, slowly popping one at a time as if he’s teasing me. My dick swells as last night flashes through my mind. I suck in a breath as he puts his hands around my back, trying to slowly pull them down. His face is so close I can feel his breath against my mouth as he leans over me.

My pulse pounds under my skin, my chest rising and falling as Lyric looks me in the eyes.

*Kiss me.*

*Tell me it will be okay.*

*Love me again.*

It’s all there on the tip of my tongue, but I bite my lip to stop the words from falling out uncontrollably. He works my jeans down my legs until I’m lying in my boxers and T-shirt.

“I’ll get your pain meds and something for you to eat and drink first.”

A big flat screen comes to life on the wall opposite, and he passes me the remote.

I watch as he leaves, letting out a breath. It takes me a minute to look around. The bed is a king with the softest damn blankets in a navy color that surround me. Matching dark furniture takes up most of the room without overpowering it. Soft fabric like the throw, rug, and curtains remove the harshness of the room. Like the kitchen and living area, it mixes modern and old, cozy, with masculine hints. I let out another sigh as my muscles start to relax.

I must've dozed off because the next thing I know, Lyric appears, holding a tray. The smells wrap around me, making my stomach growl. He places it on the table beside the bed and helps me sit up, moving the cushions until he can see the pain fade from my eyes, even after telling him I'm fine three times. He hands me the tray that holds a bowl of thick tomato soup and two grilled cheese sandwiches, making my mouth water.

"Do you need help?" he asks, leaning against the wall, watching me, biting that damn bottom lip.

"I can feed myself." Not touching the food but glaring at the TV.

"Okay, shout if you need anything." He pushes off the wall and pauses by the door, his back to me. The urge to ask him to stay is on my lips, but my damn pride won't let it free.

The door closing brings me back to reality.

I look down at the soup, grab the spoon, and moan at the taste. It is not out of a can. I don't know where or how Lyric got it, but it's fresh, and the Italian herbs slide across my tongue. I grab the grilled cheese sandwich, and the melted cheese string makes my mouth water.

Dipping it into the soup, I take a massive bite. It's been a long time since I've tasted food this good.

I drop my spoon as I think of my old life. It rarely happens anymore.

I don't miss that life, not really.

Yeah, it is easier with money. God damn, that's a lie. Life would be much better without worrying about how much pay I'll have left, living paycheck to paycheck.

But I wouldn't swap my life for my old one.

All that money, it didn't bring any of us any happiness.

My mom is doing better and dating a guy who seems nice. You can see old ghosts still haunt her. She lost everything in the divorce. Not only had my father been feeding her addiction, but he'd also gotten her to sign everything over to him.

Talking of my father, my mom was right. He got one of his mistresses pregnant. He claimed this one, and Tiffany and their son now live in my old house. I've only caught glimpses of the boy, Grayson.

No, I would not swap this life for anything. How it feels every day waking up to my daughter. Where I can be true to myself.

All that's missing is someone to share it with. Someone to call when I have something good to share, to come home to, and who knows when I've had a bad day. My fist clenches because that person was always and still is Lyric.

But it's still the kid who left five years ago, not the guy who, damn, is even hotter.

In my mind, he is still scowling, not open with his emotions. A snarl at his lips, not the soft curve.

The guy who wore cheap clothes and never ate shop pizza.

Not the healthy guy who dresses in designer clothes that fit his body as if they were made for him.

The softness of his face has changed to a defined structure.

My mind can't connect the two, but my heart recognizes him.

The last time I jumped in, I was reckless. I didn't care about anything other than Lyric and, in truth, only about how he made me feel. Fuck, I was selfish. It was all about me.

This time, I need to use my head around Lyric. I need to let go of the past and forgive him.

Forgive myself.

Because it's holding me in this dark limbo.

And we both need to be set free.

---



## Lyric

I swipe my finger across my phone so as not to disturb Korbin.

“How’s it going there?” Maddox asks as soon as the phone connects.

“No, hello?” I smirk, making a coffee for Korbin.

A grunt comes from the phone. “How’s the guy, Zane?”

“He’s okay. It’s going to be a long recovery. I’ll be here longer than I thought.”

Truth is, I don’t know how I’m going to leave. I need to find a way to make it all work.

“Take all the time. We’ve got everything here under control. And you’re sure your friend is good?”

“I saw him yesterday. He looks like shit, but yeah,” I answer. This is Maddox, he has never met Zane, yet his concern comes through the phone.

“Have you heard from Remy?” he asks, changing the subject. Remy and I are still close, friends only, but we check in and see each other regularly.

“Nah, I need to shoot him a message.”

“Yeah, it might be a good idea. Last I heard, he’s dating Jett Black.”

“The rockstar?” I frown, Remy has an addictive personality, and if the rumors are true, Jett Black is terrible

news. "I'll call him."

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as a shiver goes through me. I glance over my shoulder to see Korbin come into the kitchen.

"Take care. If you need anything, call me. I mean it, Lyric."

"Thanks, man," I answer before disconnecting the call.

"I was going to wake you when the coffee was made. Are you okay walking around?" I grip the sideboard to stop myself from going to him.

"The doctor said not to stay in bed." Korbin sits on a stool, wincing as he does, and I hand him the mug, grabbing a bottle of water for myself.

"You're not having one?" he asks, blowing the steam off. I shake my head.

"Don't drink it anymore."

Korbin's eyes widen. "You used to love it."

"Still do, but it doesn't love me." He frowns at my answer. I lean against the island. "Caffeine can mimic an anxiety attack, causing palpitations, so I quit it."

Blond brows rise. "I didn't know." He stares into his mug.

A silence falls over us as he glances around. "It looks good," he says, speaking to the room.

"I like it," I say, taking my own look, and a sense of pride works through me.

His eyes glance to mine. "It's different but the same. It's messing with my head." He rubs his temples.

"The owner wanted to keep what he could. This place is solid." I feel my brows come down as I follow the veins in the marble. Why didn't I just refer to myself as the owner? Why didn't I tell him this is my place?

"Thanks for the clothes," he says, looking down at the design. It has an old tattoo-style heart wrapped in razor wire,



blood dripping off the points. “I’ve seen these all over the internet.” He smirks. “Always wanted one.” He shrugs, leaving out he couldn’t afford it.

My T-shirts weren’t considered expensive but were in the higher price range. I frown, remembering myself as a kid. I would have loved to own one. It would have been the type of T-shirt I’d have wanted. That’s why I designed them. I need to make them more cost-friendly or bring out a cheaper range besides the original.

“Heard some hot shot artist from California makes them, designs them himself.”

“Yeah, I heard the same.” Again, why am I lying? Feeling awkward, I grab my keys. “I’ve got to go to the shop. I’ll pick up Bea on the way home.” I go to kiss Korbin, but he freezes. I cover the disappointment with a smile. “I’ll see you later.”

“Lyric.” I freeze, knowing what it means, the tone of his voice, the gentle way he says my name.

This is the goodbye we never got.

“Yeah,” I say to the door.

“You said we could be friends?”

I let my eyes fall shut before taking a deep breath and glancing over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I want to try and be your friend. We both need to let go of the past to be able to move on, let go.” *Of us*, I hear his unsaid words.

I force a smile on my face. Korbin frowns, staring at my mouth. “Friends. I think we can do that.”

His eyes flick to mine as he lifts his chin. “Friends.”

I jog to my truck and close my eyes, resting my head on the cold metal, my fingers flexing next to me. “Fuck it!” This isn’t how I’m going to say goodbye, not without a fight. I pull my phone out.

“Hey, Lyric?”

“Daryl, can you go open the shop? I need to do something, and it might take a while. If the client can’t wait, re-book them with a discount.”

“Yeah, I heard about Korbin. How’s he doing?”

“He’s okay. I’ll be in as soon as I can.” I hang up and turn to look at the house. This is it. Make or break.

I push through the door. Korbin twists, cursing and grabbing his side. “Lyric?”

“I lied but swore to myself if I was going to try this again”—I motion between us— “I wasn’t going to hide the good, the bad, the ugly whether you want to hear it or not.”

Those blond brows snap down as he crosses his arms. “What did you lie about?”

“All of it.”

His brow pulls deeper as he rubs his temples. “Lyric, what the hell are you trying to say.”

I take a deep breath, walk over to the island, and sit next to him.

“You like this place?”

He grunts, tilting his head. “Haven’t we just had this conversation?”

I look him straight in the eyes. “I own this place. I’m the one who bought it from you. I’m the one who kept that table.” I point to it. “Because it still had your groove in it. I up cycled your pawpaw’s chair because it belongs in that spot. All of this was me. The house is mine.”

Korbin’s brows fly into his hairline, and he looks around again. “You did all this? You’ve been back for a week?” His eyes narrow as he glares. “I came here three years ago. Work had just started.”

I nod, biting my lip and rubbing my nape. “I came back on weekends or any chance I got. I couldn’t hire someone to do it.”

I watch his nostrils flare, stabbing his finger into my chest. “You’ve been coming back here for three years!” A menacing tone coats his words.

“I wasn’t ready, Korbin, to come back to you, this town. I don’t know... Maybe I knew there would be a day I’d come back and wanted this place ready for when I did.” I clasp my hands over my head before scrubbing my face. “Building this place was like fixing myself. Little by little. I know you don’t get it, but it was something I needed to do.”

Korbin looks away, the muscles in his jaw moving beneath his skin. “Why?”

“I saw it for sale, and I couldn’t bear anyone else having it. It was ours.” I risk a glance at him. He watches me, arms still crossed.

“Is that all you lied about?” he bites out.

“The hotshot artist from California who makes those tops. Do you know what the brand is called?”

He frowns as if trying to remember, and his eyes widen. “Casper. You!”

“Yeah, it’s my brand, my designs. I’m the artist from California. I’m also a partner in a shop called Forbidden Ink. The guy on the phone earlier is Maddox with whom I’m in business with. The shop helps LGBTQ + kids off the streets and gives them a safe place.”

Korbin blows out. “You did all that?”

I shrug. “Old Man Carlton died and left me two million. I bought Dad his cabin and set him up with an account, so he’ll never have to work again. I bought this place and swallowed a chunk doing it up. I gave Maddox half a million to help with the kids.” I lean forward. “The shop brings me a good wage. I suppose you can say I’ve made a name for myself. The T-shirts set me up nicely. I didn’t expect them to take off like they did.” I grab my phone and bring up my online banking.

Korbin’s eyes widen at the numbers on my screen. “Why are you telling and showing me this?”

“Because I don’t want to be friends. I want more... to be your best friend. We weren’t ready for each other before, but we are now. We can have a second chance.”

“And you think it will work? Can we get past everything we’ve put each other through? A second chance feels like I’m handing you a gun and asking you not to shoot me for a second time.”

“I think we have a chance if we’re brutally honest. No hiding, even when we know it’s going to hurt.”

Korbin looks me in the eyes, his lip turned down. “I don’t know if I can go through it again.”

“You’re the love of my life, Korbin. I never stopped loving you through all the anger, hate, and pain. There were times I hated myself for loving you. It’s always been you. Will always be you.” I let my words sink in. “I want our shot at real.” I lean over and kiss the corner of his mouth. “I’m asking you to love me, Korbin. Love me again,” I whisper against his mouth. A shudder going through him.

His lips touch mine, soft and slow, and his fingers come to my shoulders, not sure if it’s to push me away or pull me closer. We break apart, breathing heavily, as he leans his forehead against mine, holding my nape. “No lies.”

I can’t speak, so I nod as Korbin’s eyes close. “I’ve never gotten over you and hated myself for loving you and not being able to let go. Now you’re asking me to love you. Trust you. The last time that happened, it nearly destroyed me. You’re right. We’re not those same kids anymore... I’m sorry... I don’t...”

He pulls back, and I feel it as if it’s physical. I run my knuckles down his cheekbone. “I get it. I do. And respect what you’re saying. I swear I’ll drop it. We can try to be friends.”

Korbin captures his bottom lip between his teeth and nods.

I smile weakly, getting up. “I’ll see you later.”

“We can go home,” he says, staring across the room.

“Friends help friends out. It’s only for a couple of days. I’ll pick up Bea and grab something to eat on the way home later. Give me a call if you need anything. I’ve programmed my number into your phone.”

I do the one thing I swore I’d never do and walk away, even if it isn’t my choice.



“You are going to stay with Eric and Aunt Ruby for the night.” I crouch down, wincing as I do. The pain in my back is as bearable as a toothache. Since Bea was little, Friday nights have been hers and Ruby’s girl time.

I see Eric’s truck pull up, and so does Bea. She runs to the door, opens it, and goes straight for Eric, who scoops her up and twirls her around. I meet them by the truck as Eric buckles her in. He stands back, so I can lean in, and we rub our noses. “Be good, Bumble Bee.”

“Love you, Daddy.”

“All the flowers in the world.” I say, making her giggle.

I close the door, seeing Eric standing by his. “What happened between you and my son?”

I rub a hand over my nape, looking down at the ground and kicking the dirt. “What has he told you?”

“That it’s not what you want, and he respects you and will drop it.” His words hit me physically, and I have to refrain from flinching.

It’s been over a week since I told Lyric I didn’t want any more than a friendship. Seven days of him treating me like a buddy. There are no lingering looks, flirty smirks, or him getting into my space. No kisses, no anything but damn friendship. Seven days of watching him with my daughter, playing, laughing. Seven days of Lyric coming home to us and sitting with him around the dinner table.

I shrug, leaning against his truck. “We’re not those kids anymore.”

“No, you’re not,” Eric grunts. “And if you were, I would’ve told Lyric to stay the hell away,” He leans against the side of the truck to face me directly and places a hand on my shoulder. “Korbin, none of you were ready for the relationship you wanted back then. You hurt my son in a way that left its mark.” He holds his hands up to stop me from replying. “You can say you had your reasons. But to Lyric, those words hurt, leaving their scars.”

“I was a kid!” I seethe, trying to keep my voice down, so Bea doesn’t overhear. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I’m sorry. I’ve apologized. He literally kicked me in the damn balls!”

Eric tries to hide how his lip twitches at the thought of his son kicking me in the balls before he tilts his head. “Wasn’t Lyric a kid when he ran? Hasn’t he apologized? Does it make it all better for you?”

I scowl, glaring at the house. “Your son said something very similar.”

“He’s a bright kid.” Eric grins. “Look, Korbin, I’m not here to tell you to give my son a chance. Only you can decide that.”

“Why do I feel you’ve got more to say?”

“Lyric went through intense therapy. It put him in a dark place. I had to go to California. We all took turns watching over him. But he stuck at it. He went to hell and back.” Eric pauses as his voice hitches. I knew Lyric had been to therapy. He spoke about it openly, but how Eric describes it makes my stomach drop, hating not knowing what he went through. “I’ve never been more scared in my life. During that time, I fell to my damn knees and prayed to gods I don’t believe in not to take my son.”

I suck in a breath. The thought of Lyric not in this world steals the air from my lungs, my throat constricts, robbing my words as Eric squeezes my shoulder.

“He’s okay now, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. Lyric is not that kid anymore, and I think you know it.” He stares at me and raises his brow. Eric’s right. Lyric isn’t that same kid, don’t get me wrong, he still carries that edgy attitude and has a smart mouth, but he’s no longer closed off, a constant guard around him, and he’s open with his emotions even if it means he gets hurt.

“I saw the mess you were in when my son left. I get it. When Bethany, Lyric’s mom, left, I disappeared there for a while too. Lyric can’t remember, and that kid is what brought me back. Kept me on the damn tightrope I was walking for years. He was my balance.” His whole face softens as his eyes flick to Bea, who’s fallen asleep.

“Ruby, that girl showed me what love is. She’s my second chance. I was scared to take that leap again, to trust someone with my heart, but some things are worth it.”

God, I want that, but what if we mess it up again? I can’t handle losing Lyric twice, “How do I know?”

He laughs. “You don’t. But the question is, will you regret it if you don’t try? Will you always think of what could’ve been? Will you be happy if another guy moves in here? Seeing my son with another guy? Stand there as he gets married to a guy who could’ve been you?”

I feel the color drain from me as my heart squeezes.

Eric’s lips curve as he lifts his chin. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Tell him you’re scared, take it slow, but don’t let this chance slip you by. You deserve happiness and love, son,” he finishes and gets in his truck.

I return to the house, detached, Eric’s words building inside me until I feel like I’m choking on them.

“Fuck! What have I done!” I grab my phone and pull up my contacts.

*Korbin: What time are you back?*

The reply comes instantly.



*Lyric: Just wrapping up the last tattoo, so in about an hour. Everything okay?*

*Korbin: Yeah, don't pick me up food. I've ordered takeout.*

The next message takes a while.

*Lyric: Okay.*

Okay? I stare at those four letters.

Not overthinking, I pull up the takeout menu from Louie's, the same pizza we had on our first date. I didn't buy them anymore, but tonight was special.

Tonight, I'm telling Lyric fuck the friendship. I'm done being a pussy.

I'm going to kick him in the nuts and then kiss him like I've been dying to for the last week.

---

The pizza arrived five minutes ago, and I hear Lyric's car pull in as I put it on the table, the same place we sat five years ago. I run my finger over my old groove. How had I not noticed it?

I've had a shower, gotten another one of Lyric's tops on with my sweats, and even dug out my old cap, placing it on backward.

Lyric walks in, seeming lost in his thoughts as he doesn't even notice me. My eyes follow him as he dumps his keys down and takes a deep breath.

"Hey."

He spins at my voice. "Shit! You scared the crap out of me!" He frowns, tilting his head. "Where's Bea?" His eyes search the living room.

"Your dad and Ruby took her for the night." His eyes flick to the table and back to me.

"Are you expecting someone?" His voice is tight, those eyes narrowing, and damn if that lip doesn't curl. My lip

curves, making his thin. “You think it’s funny? Bringing someone to our house! I know we said... fuck...” He runs his hands through his hair. “I can’t do this.” He drops a bag I didn’t see he was holding and turns for outside.

“Shit!” I curse and try to get up, causing my back to twinge. “fuck!” I bend over the table, grabbing it as pain races through me.

I feel fingers touching my shoulder. “What the hell are you trying to do!” Lyric snarls. He must have heard and seen me through the glass. Not the damn sexiest thing to do when trying to win your guy back.

“Come after you!” I breathe through the pain, and I glare at him. “Why did you buy takeout? I told you I was ordering?”

Lyric’s brows shoot into his hairline, “You said don’t pick you up food. You’ve ordered.”

“Yeah?”

“I thought you meant for you. Wait, this is for me?”

“For us. You’re not eating it all like last time.” I smirk, facing the table, frowning as his eyes run over the pizza boxes, even the same sodas.

“Korbin?”

I gesture to his seat. “Sit down. We’ve got to talk.” I take my own, and he does the same.

“This looks like...” He shakes his head.

“Our first date,” I finish.

“It’s all the same.” He blinks. “What are you saying?”

I open my mouth as my phone starts to go off, I’d ignore it, but something makes me look at the screen. “It’s the hospital.” I slide my finger across. “Hello?”

“Korbin, it’s Amy. Zane fell ill this afternoon and it’s gotten worse. He’s had a seizure. The doctors need to see you.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Lyric’s eyes widen at my voice, and he jumps up and grabs his keys, not knowing what’s happening but ready to leave.

I end the call and stare at my phone.

“Korbin? What happened?”

I blink to see Lyric crouching in front of me. “Zane’s had a seizure. They need me to go in.”

“Let’s go.” He helps me up, and I’m not sure if it’s my back or the call, but I feel in a daze. Seizures are bad. Is he okay? Does this mean the cancer has spread?

“Korbin, he’s going... He’s in the right place.” Lyric’s voice pushes the daze away. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, burying my head in his neck and taking a deep breath, which feels like the first one in five years. He takes a second to wrap his arms around me and presses his mouth against my temple. “I’m here.”

We get in the car and get to the hospital in record-breaking time. Amy comes around the desk to meet me. “They’ve taken him down for a PET.”

I swallow twice before being able to speak the words. “To see if the cancer has spread.”

“Yes.” Amy nods. “Zane had a fever. He’s caught an infection. The spike could have caused the seizure. No need to put worry out there until we know.” She pats my hand.

I lead Lyric to Zane’s room and sit beside his bed, staring at it, empty.

“How many times have you done this?”

I scrub my hand over my face. “Too many. In the beginning, Zane was okay, the meds knocked him out and made him tired, but you couldn’t tell he was sick. Then the treatment started, and we handled it at home, but once he gets an infection, it can be life-threatening with his immune system so shit.” I laugh, leaning my elbows on my knees, and rubbing my thumb over my lip. “You would think you’d get used to it, this place. That sterile smell and the depressing colors.”

Lyric laces his fingers through mine. “No more doing things alone. I’m here.”

I squeeze his fingers with mine.

Lyric sorts through his emails. I should let his hand go, he looks awkward as crap trying to do it all with one hand, but as I move, he tightens his grip and puts his hand on his thigh.

“Sorry, I was meant to go back to California. I’ve sent Maddox a message explaining what’s up, and we’ll rearrange.”

“You are going back to California?” I yank my hand away, and the tension I lost comes back.

“For the weekend, to check on things. I was leaving Saturday morning and coming back Sunday night.” He pulls up his flight details.

I shake my head. “Sorry,” I say, glancing at the floor.

Lyric grips my chin, lifting my head to face him. “Don’t apologize. I know you need time. I’ll give it to you. I’ll keep proving I’m not going to run.”

“What if you get fed up?”

“I won’t. You’re not questioning me because you’re some creeper. If it’s what you need, I’ll give you that. For now.”

I cup his face. “I want that second chance. If you—” He cuts me off with a soft peck.

“About time.” He smiles against my mouth. “I love you, Korbin.”

We’re interrupted by a cough to see Amy, and a shot of fear goes through me. Lyric and I were never out. Ashley told the town I was gay, but no one’s ever seen me with a guy.

It falls away when he links our fingers and stands, holding out his other one. “Hello, I’m Lyric.”

Amy blushes. “Amy.” She smiles and peers at me. “I’m glad you’ve got someone looking after you. I don’t need to worry about you anymore,” she laughs. “Zane is awake and on his way back.”

We hear a groan. “Why did you call him?”

“Because I’m your contact and your brother! You had a seizure. I think that’s something I should be told.”

Zane pinches his nose. “See, I mean, he’s twenty-three and he’s going to keel over from a heart attack the way he stresses,” Zane jokes, then his eyes land on Lyric and our hands interlocked. “About damn time.” He smirks, looking at Lyric. “He finally kicked you in the balls?”

Lyric shakes his head, smirking. “No, but the offer is still there. Though I’ll have to take my piercing out first.”

I choke, and so does Amy, the poor girl’s face turns bright red.

“What, you’ve got...” Zane asks with mock shock.

Lyric throws his head back and laughs. “My dick pierced, yeah.” They’re both grinning.

“Are we missing something?” I feel left out of the joke.

“I’ll tell you later.” Lyric still smiles, and damn if it doesn’t warm my chest. Lyric with a snarl on his face was hot. But this Lyric... is breathtaking. His phone starts ringing. He must know the tone because he frowns, looking at the screen. “I’ll be back.” He lets my hand go, and I instinctively grab his wrist. He turns towards me and strokes my arm. “It’s Maddox. I can take it in here if you want.”

“No, go take it.” I hesitate for a second before placing a hard peck on his mouth, shocking the crap out of him. He smiles, walks to the door and leans against it. Damn, he’s gorgeous.

“Hey, what’s up... Cool down, man! Yeah... he had a seizure... We’re waiting on the doctor... Yeah... Okay. I swear it. Damn it, man.”

“Who’s he talking to?” Zane frowns from his bed. He glares at Amy who ignores him as she tucks him in.

“Maddox, the guy he owns the shop back in California with.”

Zane's brows rise. "Why the hell is he asking about me?"

I shrug, seeing Lyric frowning at his phone as he comes back over.

"Is everything okay? Do you need to go back?"

"No, he's fine. He freaked out about Zane." He still looks puzzled.

"Me?" Zane frowns deeper.

"Maddox is overprotective. He cares about people."

"Even ones he doesn't know?" Zane grunts.

Lyric nods. "Yeah if you knew him, you'd understand, but this is extreme even for him. I'm going to text the guys and see if he's not telling me something." His finger works over his phone as the doctor walks in. Fear coats my insides as I bite my thumbnail when I feel the reassurance of Lyric's hand on my back.

"The scans are clear. The cancer hasn't progressed. The treatment is working. We've even seen a slight improvement."

"Then why the seizure?" I ask, needing to know, so we can avoid it in the future.

"Take the win, brother." Zane rolls his eyes, falling onto his pillow, looking exhausted, his skin ashy gray. There's still a distant look to him.

The doctor smiles at me, then says, "Zane had a fever. When it spiked, it brought on the seizure. It is not uncommon in adults but is more commonly seen in children. He still has a low-grade fever but seems to be coming out the other side."

"See," Zane grunts, closing his eyes.

Ignoring my idiot brother, I continue, "Is he going to be okay?"

"Yes," the doctor reassures me with a soft smile. "He'll be weaker for a few days, but he's strong."

We get home gone around twelve, and both drop on seats at the table and start eating the cold pizza.

“I’m too tired to eat it.” Lyric drops it, yawning.

I nod, dropping my slice. “Let’s go to bed.”

He places his head on his arms and waves his hand. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I get up and move behind him, rubbing his shoulders. “Please tell me you’re joking. All I want to do is share a bed again, hold you all night.”

His head springs back, and he nearly knocks me out. “You mean together? As in the same bed?”

I’d laugh if I wasn’t so damn tired and achy. “Yeah, that’s the plan.”

Lyric jumps up and twists to face me, taking my mouth in a kiss with a long slow stroke of his tongue until we’re pressed against each other.

“We’re really doing this?”

“Yes,” I pant. “We need to take it slow, especially around Bea.”

“We go at whatever speed you need as long as it’s together.”

“I’ve loved you and hated you, Lyric Blackmore.”

“Right back at you, Korbin *freaking* Rose.” I retake his mouth. “This time I want to just love you.”

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I wake up feeling hot, pinned to the bed. As my senses come into play, I feel warm breath against my neck and warm skin against my own and blink my eyes open. Unable to stop my lips from curving at seeing Korbin with his arm over my chest, head buried in my neck, and his leg over mine. I run my fingertips over his bare back, unable to believe we are both here together.

“It’s too early.” His words vibrate against my skin as he tries to bury himself closer. Suddenly he jerks back, trying to blink the sleep away. Fuck, he is so gorgeous. He’s still the hottest damn guy I’ve ever seen, more so with that sleepy look, his lips still swollen from kissing last night.

He blinks. “I’m not dreaming.”

“Ouch, what the hell!” He frowns, rubbing his hip where I pinched him.

“Proving this isn’t a dream.” I roll onto my side, leaning on my elbow. “Do you still want this? Us?”

He answers by kissing me. “I want to wake up like this every morning. I want to watch you come through the door every night to Bea and me. I want to go to sleep with you every night. I want a future with you. So, yes. I want this, you.”

“Korbin.” I lean up and kiss his lips. “I love you and Bea. I want to give you everything you want and so much more.”



I move my hand down his chest, running my fingers over the dips and curves of his muscles. His breath hitches as I dip my fingertips beneath his boxers, watching his eyes grow darker.

“Are you ready for more?” I tease, but I will stop right now if I’m going too fast.

“Yes. Fuck! I’ve been waiting for five years.” He groans as I run light strokes over the head of his cock, spreading his precum. I move down to the base, wrapping my fist tight, and start working it in long strokes. Korbin’s head falls back. “Fuck,” he curses and pulls away. “Together,” he says. Our dicks rubbing as we both jerked off was always Korbin’s favorite thing to do.

I pull my cock out. Smirking as his eyes widen. “You weren’t lying?” he gasps, running his finger across the silver balls.

“It’s called a Jacob’s ladder.” I hiss as his finger runs over the six bars beneath my skin, causing precum to leak.

“I’m going to ask questions... Later,” he breathes out as we both lie down. I wrap my hand around both our cocks and start working them. Korbin groans as he plays with the heads, making us both moan. Our eyes never leave each other as my stomach clenches.

“Baby, I’m so fucking close.”

“I’m there with you. Together,” he hisses, our hands working faster.

“Fuck,” I curse as the orgasm rips through me. Korbin curses a second behind me as we both come together.

“What a way to wake up.” Korbin grins and places a peck on my lips that soon turns into a deep kiss and only stops when our lungs ache for air.

“Shower?” I ask. He grins and slaps my ass. A rich laugh falls from him as I yelp. I watch as his brows pinch together as he gets up, getting distracted by his hard body and perfect ass. I meet him in the bathroom and wrap my arms around him,

nipping his neck before licking the pain away, causing him to groan and turn in my arms.

“You’re gorgeous,” I whisper, looking into those silvers, like molten steel. They’re smiling at me.

“Have you seen yourself, Lyric Blackmore.” He turns me to the mirror. I gasp at our reflection. Korbin rests his chin on my shoulder, his arms wrapping around my waist. “Remember when we watched Junkyard Boys?” I nod, unable to speak from the image reflecting in front of me. It was sexual and beautiful. I want to grab my pad and draw it. “You asked what color bodywork I want.”

“You said green.”

“I did because green is my favorite color. Olive green.” He smiles. “The exact same color as your eyes because they’re incredible. How they hold all different shades with hints of gold.” He kisses my shoulder. “Your skin, it’s so soft, yet hard. I can’t get enough of it, the taste.” He licks a line across my shoulder, making me shudder. Korbin moves his hand up my chest. “This body is a damn work of art, and this”—he grabs my hard cock— “it’s fucking magic.” We both smirk. “I could spend days looking at you, but this”—he moves his hand back to my chest and lays his hand over my heart— “is what I love the most. I can’t promise I’ll never hurt you. It’s not realistic. But I swear to hold it and keep it safe. You can trust me with it, Casper.”

My heart stops at the old nickname before pounding back to life with a kiss on my shoulder from Korbin.

“I need you, Korbin, please.”

“What do you want?” he soothes me, running his fingers over my skin.

“I need you inside me. I need to feel you.”

His lips part as he stares through the mirror. “Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yes.” He shudders and turns away, hiding his face. “Have you...?”

“No.”

His head snaps back to mine.” Never?”

“I’ve used toys, my fingers, but no one else.”

“Fuck,” he curses. “Lube, we need lube.”

I scramble with the drawer in front of me, pull out a bottle and pass it back. Korbin’s fingers shake as he grabs it and pops the lid.

“Spread your legs.” His voice is low, and I’m barely able to hear him.

Korbin spreads my cheeks, and cold liquid drops between them, making me hiss. It turns to a moan as he uses his finger to spread it around my hole, which twitches under his touch.

“You look...” His words fall away as he looks through the mirror. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I nod, holding onto the cabinet. “Your back?” I ask, remembering him wince.

“Fine.” He kisses my neck, and I feel his finger press against me before he works it in. “You okay?”

“More,” I moan as my dick twitches. He listens, adding another finger, fucking me with them. “Shit, fuck,” I pant as he runs his finger over that sweet spot, making him smile.

“Babe, now. I need you, please.” He must see something in my face as he removes his fingers and lines himself up, his other arm wrapping around my waist.

Our eyes connect in the mirror, my legs shaking, and my breathing barely exists.

There’s a reason I’ve never gone further with any guy, and this is it.

It is Korbin, only ever him.

“Casper,” he whispers against my shoulder before he kisses it as if knowing what this moment means.

Korbin turns my head, his mouth sealing over mine as his cock presses against my hole.

Both of us panting and our breaths mixing as he starts to push in. My eyes want to fall shut, but I can't take them off the boy I hated and the man I love.

My body stops resisting as he slides in. It stings, making me hiss and Korbin stops. I move my hand up to his jaw. "I'm okay. I want this."

He kisses me again as he sinks in another inch. "You feel so fucking good," he groans against my mouth. "Fuck, Casper. Too much," he grits out, sinking further.

Pain still lingers as he starts moving with shallow strokes. I can see how much he is holding back, the strain on his face as he tries to be gentle.

His fullness is too much, overwhelming, yet at the same time not enough.

"Casper, relax for me, baby." His hand comes around my chest and pulls on the hoop in my nipple. "Just a little more." My eyes widen. He isn't all the way?

Korbin kisses my neck and shoulder, simultaneously pulling on the hoop. "That's it, baby, I'm in," he pants, pulling out and thrusting back in. The pain gives way to pleasure, causing moans to fall from my lips. "Fuck!" I curse, my fingers digging into the cabinet as my head falls back. Korbin takes advantage of how my neck's arched, sucking the skin, nipping, and biting as his thrusts become harder, longer.

He hits that sweet spot, making me yell as sweat pours over us.

"I'm going to come."

"No," Korbin snaps out. "I'm going to come inside you, mark you as mine."

"Yes," I pant.

"Then you're going to fuck me and spray my insides, mark *me*." I groan at his dirty words. "You want that, Casper? To make me yours again."

Garbled words fall from me. I can't answer because a pleasure I didn't know was possible runs through my veins to

every nerve ending.

He grabs my shoulders, his hips thrusting. As I look at the mirror, our eyes connect, his lashes flutter, his lips slightly part, and pure pleasure coats his features as he roars my name.

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I hand Korbin a coffee, and he leans over and kisses my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“More than okay. You?” I ask, taking a big gulp of water. I don’t know which I prefer, Korbin fucking me or being back inside him. Both were heaven.

“Yeah.” He takes my lips in a long kiss leading to several more. “Damn, I want you again,” he says, adjusting himself.

I laugh, but it drops at seeing the outline of his thick cock in his sweats and lick my lips.

The laughter falls from Korbin’s eyes as he places his cup down and takes my bottle, placing it on the side. “We need to talk.”

I try to push down the anxiety that rushes across my skin.

“When we were apart...” He rubs his neck, and my stomach drops. I knew it was possible he’d have been with other guys. I had no right to be jealous, to be upset. We’d broken up. But damn if it doesn’t hurt. The urge to run is there, so instead I wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m not going to lie and say it doesn’t bother me, but we never thought we’d be standing here.”

His eyes widen. “What! No, I never...”

“You didn’t?”

“No, did you?” He swallows and tries to hold my eyes.

“No. I already told you. There were guys, we messed around but never more than PG.”

He blows out a breath, and a smile wider than I've seen covers his face. "Thank fuck," he laughs, going to kiss me, but his phone rings stopping him. He groans, pulling it out. "It's Andrew. I've got to take this. Then we'll go to the hospital."

"Yeah, I'll check in on Daryl and ring dad, tell him what's happened, and we can grab Bea after?"

"That sounds perfect." He leans in, giving me a hard kiss before sliding his finger across his phone. I grab my water, watching as he walks outside. The tension from his body is gone. He's lighter, and his lips curl into a smile, which isn't forced. The tiredness is gone from his eyes.

Korbin looks at peace, happy.

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We walk into the hospital hand in hand. I'd told Korbin we weren't hiding this time. Without blinking, he agreed.

"Who are you?" I turn to see Korbin frown and glance into the room, my brow disappearing into my hairline.

"Maddox?" What the hell is Maddox doing here in Hill View? At the hospital? In Zane's room?

Korbin tilts his head. "That's Maddox? Your business partner?" He moves closer to me.

Maddox turns toward our voices. He looks like he hasn't slept in weeks. His usually bright blue eyes are dull, full of fear and sadness. His skin looks paler, his cheeks drawn.

Maddox gets up. Korbin's fingers tighten around mine, and he narrows his eyes, telling him to back off.

"What's happened?" I ask.

Maddox's nostrils flare as he leans into my space. "You told me you'd keep me updated," he seethes.

Korbin steps forward, putting a hand in front of him and telling Maddox to back off.

"Hey, the two of you, back down!" They both shoot me a glare but listen.

"What did you think we'd done to Lyric?" Korbin bites out.

Maddox's lips curl, baring his teeth. "Do I need to answer that question?"

Korbin's muscles tighten as he glares at Maddox. "That's uncalled for, and you know it." I search his features, but they're locked down as usual. "Talk to me, man. This is far-fetched even for your over-protectiveness."

He opens his mouth as Zane groans, making us all turn. He seems to be dreaming, tossing in bed. A croaky voice comes from him as sweat pours down his temples.

"Rian."

Maddox pushes me out of the way and leans over Zane. I see his mouth moving but can't hear what he's saying.

Zane stops moving, his eyes fluttering. "Rian?"

Maddox runs a finger down Zane's cheekbone. "What mess have you gotten yourself into this time," he says, his voice hitching.

"Wait! Do you two know each other?"

Zane seems to come more awake at my voice. His brows slam down when he glances to the side. "Rian?" The name comes out on a pained whisper.

"I'm here." Maddox tries to smile.

I see it written across them. "Oh shit!" I glance at Korbin, whose eyes are still narrowed on Maddox.

"What are you doing here?" Zane grits out, and I see him pull the sheet over himself as if trying to hide how cancer has attacked his body, and the weight he's lost. His cheeks turn bright red, and he turns from Maddox. "Get out," he hisses. "Get out," he roars, making the machines he's connected to go mental.

Korbin goes for Maddox. I stand in his way, making those eyes thinner. "Move," he grits out.

I place my hands on his chest. "He's my best friend. Let me get him out of here." Korbin shoots Maddox a look that would have a lesser man shaking. He doesn't answer but nods.



“I’m not leaving,” Maddox says from behind me, his voice like steel.

“Zane is sick. He doesn’t need this. Come on, we’ll go just outside the door, okay.”

He faces Zane, looking torn, and steps back to the bed. “I’m not leaving. You don’t want me here. I’ll sit outside. You get me kicked out. I’ll wait outside the damn hospital.”

“You couldn’t handle...” His words drop away, and Maddox flinches as if knowing where this is going. “What makes you think you can handle this!”

“That’s not fair.” I’d never heard Maddox talk quietly. A tear slips down his cheek. “That was my fault.”

Zane shakes his head, “No, it wasn’t.” He grits his teeth. “You dealt with it. Went to prison because of it.”

“It wasn’t enough.” Maddox shakes his head and walks out the door. Zane’s gaze follows him until he leaves and closes his eyes, not before a tear leaks from the corner of his eye.

“Take care of your brother. I’ll be right back.” I lean in to kiss Korbin, who wraps his arms around my waist, leaning his head against mine.

“Something bad happened.” I nod because you can feel it in the room, how some things can suck life away. This secret is dark and full of pain.

“I’ll be back.” I place a soft peck on his mouth.

I find Maddox sitting outside the room on the floor, leaning his head against the wall. I sit beside him and nudge him with my knee, “Rian?”

He grunts. “I don’t use that name anymore.” He opens his eyes and looks at me. “You’re pissed I didn’t say anything?”

“You know all my crap, but...” I shake my head. “No, I’m not.”

He blows out a breath. “They say let your pain out. It can help.” He laughs, and it’s filled with an edge. “How many times have you heard me tell the kids at The Guarded the same

damn thing? It's bullshit. Some things should never see the light of day. No one else needs them in their head."

"I'm here if you need to talk. I promise to listen. Sometimes letting out that pain is a way to heal." I smirk. "Hell, I'm living proof of it."

He shakes his head. "What if you don't deserve to heal?"

I don't believe him. I know Maddox and what he's done to help those kids, me. He's not the type of guy to hurt someone, not to the depths he's talking about, but I know he doesn't believe it.

"How do you know each other?"

Maddox stares off as if lost in the past. "Two fifteen-year-old kids who bonded over shitty parents. Bart didn't want to know Zane, and I lay awake wishing mine didn't."

"You come from Hill View?" It's the only thing that makes sense.

"Nah." He grins, looking at me. "Radley."

My brows shoot up. "Damn, our biggest rivals." Radley and Hill View weren't only school rivals, but it spilled over to the streets. It ended when a guy called Ashton died.

"You and Zane, how did you make that work?"

Maddox grins. "We pretended we hated each other. I was big even back then and had a reputation for being a hothead." He itches his short beard. "Zane, as you know, came from the trailer park, and had a reputation of his own. No one suspected with us going for each other." He smiles. "What they didn't know at the time was we were going for each other in a completely different way." He stares ahead, his mouth curving for a few seconds before it falls, and he buries his face in his hands, blowing out a hard breath.

"Do I start calling you Rian?"

Maddox's head shoots back, glaring. "No! That boy is dead, six feet under. Has been for ten years."

A shadow falls over us. “Amy gave Zane something to help him sleep,” Korbin growls.

Maddox glances at him. “I would never hurt him, not the way you’re thinking.”

“Didn’t look that way! My brother couldn’t even look at you,” Korbin snarls. I stand, moving next to Korbin and interlocking our fingers.

Maddox rises. “Because he’s vulnerable and doesn’t want me to see him.” He runs a hand over his face. “Weak.” He lets the words drop, looking at the floor.

Korbin frowns, turning toward his brother’s room as if he can see Maddox’s anguish.

I hope I’m doing the right thing. “You need to sleep. Korbin’s got an apartment he’s not using. Use it to put your head down, shower, then come back.”

Maddox rubs his neck. “I’m not sure your boyfriend wants me anywhere near his place.”

I glance at Korbin, who’s scowling. He glances at me and takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what went on between you and my brother”—he pulls me tighter— “but I trust Casper. We’re back together.”

Maddox’s brow rises. He glances between us and holds his hand up. “No need for the warning. Lyric is my family, and thanks.” Maddox lifts his chin and walks ahead, not explaining what happened between Zane and him.

---

Korbin hasn’t spoken since I showed Maddox around the apartment. While I did, Korbin rang Ruby. Dad said they would keep Bea another night and bring her home in the morning after hearing that Zane had a bad night, and once Ruby stopped cursing Korbin for not telling her.

“Did you know?” I break the silence and place my hand on Korbin’s thigh.

His fingers clench around the wheel, turning his knuckles white. “That he’s gay?” He shakes his head, and a frown pulls between his brows. “But I’m not shocked.” He lets out a breath. “Zane’s never told me, but last year he had another infection and fever and started calling for Rian, Maddox, whomever the hell he is.” He glances at me. “The way he said it was like a damn plea. I knew there was something about it.”

I squeeze his leg. “Maddox isn’t a bad guy.”

“I don’t know what type of guy he is. Fuck, Casper. Have you ever seen Zane cry? He’s the strongest man I know.”

“I know, and I’m sorry I’ve put you in a difficult position. Maddox is the type of guy who walks the streets feeding kids all night. He built The Guarded to protect those same kids. He’s a protector. I don’t know what happened, but Maddox would never hurt someone, not the way you’re thinking.”

“Zane said he went to prison. That a good guy to you?”

“Zane doesn’t seem pissed at him. He seems sad.”

“Broken,” Korbin adds. “And that’s what scares me. What the hell could be so bad it broke my brother? Whatever it is, Maddox is a part of that memory, of that time.” He glances at me. “I hope to God you’re right about him, Casper.”

I am.

Now to battle the next thing. “I’ve got to go back to California. If Maddox and I are both here, no one is running the shop.”

“I knew this was coming. When are you leaving?”

“Soon as I sort a flight, but Korbin, I’m coming back. I swear it.” He places a hand over mine and squeezes but doesn’t say anything.



It's been a week since I kissed Lyric bye at the airport for three days, which he had to extend, and he isn't sure when he'll be back. He's waiting for someone called Draven to head to California to take over the shop.

Maddox hasn't left.

Zane won't let him in the room, so he sits outside. My brother also won't tell me what happened, but he eased my mind when he told me that he was a good guy and not to give him a hard time.

Which leaves me more confused about what the hell happened between them.

I also learned Maddox was there for Lyric. How he'd stayed beside him. I wasn't fond of knowing how close he was to my guy. The man looked like a damn marble statue. He was that damn good-looking.

I couldn't stay pissed at him and made sure the guy at least ate and had a place to sleep and shower.

"I'm off," Andrew says, popping his head in the office. The guy needs a damn raise after all the crap he's had to deal with over the last few weeks. First my injury and now my foul mood.

"Thanks for today. I'll lock up when I'm done."

He waves and leaves. I check the time. Ruby will be bringing Bea home in an hour, and I don't want to sit in the

empty house without my daughter or my guy.

I must get lost in my notes because there's a noise, and I glance up to see Lyric leaning against the door frame.

I blink at him. "What are you doing here? Please tell me this is real."

He pushes off the door and walks around my desk, leaning beside me. "I missed you and Bea, like really missed you, as in never wanting to be apart again."

I lift my chin because I feel the same, but it isn't realistic. "We have to get used to it. Your businesses are there. You've got a life there."

Lyric shakes his head, "My life is with you. Draven can handle the shop, and that's what emails are for. The movers will be here tomorrow with all of my stuff. I'm not going to say I'll never have to go back, but it'll be just for a night or two, and you both are coming with me."

"Are you sure?" I breathe. All week I'd been thinking about how this would work, how Lyric could split his time between Hill View and California. I'd never tell him to walk away from it all.

"A week feels like a damn lifetime. We are still learning each other again. Our relationship is still new, and we need to be together to give it the best chance."

"What if Bea and I move to California? I could find some type of work."

His lips part as he blinks. "You'd do that?"

I nod. "If it means you coming home to us every night, sleeping beside you."

He sucks in a shuddering breath. "Korbin... I know you're staying at the house but let's make it official, move in with me. Marry me."

The air gets taken from my lungs as Lyric goes down on one knee, producing a black box. "What?"

“Marry me. I picked the ring out while I was in California. This wasn’t the plan, but hell to the plan.” He licks his lips, still down on his knee.

“Are you serious?”

“You are it for me. Marry me. It doesn’t have to be soon, next year—”

I cut off his rambling and grab his face, kissing him. “Yes. Fuck, yes. Yes,” I say between soft kisses. “Yes.”

He pulls back with a smile that lights him up and grabs my left hand, sliding a black and platinum ring on my finger. “This is my promise. Whenever you’re ready to marry me, I’ll be waiting.”

I make a mental note to go ring shopping this week. I’m also putting a ring on his finger, so everyone knows he’s mine. I smile, looking into those green eyes. “How soon can we do it?”

“Hold that thought. There’s someone else we need to ask.”

Lyric is pacing back and forth as we wait for Ruby and Eric to bring back Bea. I would laugh if I didn’t feel so sorry for the guy. He’s totally stressed. I wrap my hands around him. After watching them together, it is evident that Bea loves Lyric and so I tell him. “Hey, she loves you.”

He opens his mouth, which slams shut as Ruby, Bea, and Eric walk through the door. Bea runs straight for us.

“Lyric, your back.” She hurls herself at him, and he lets out a breath as he kisses her head.

“I missed you, little one.”

“Me too, lots, like this much.” She stretches her arms wide, making us all smile.

Lyric pushes her away slightly. Already on his knees, Lyric pulls out a little pink box. “Beatrix Rose, I love your daddy, but there’s someone else I love just as much. Do you know who that could be?”

Her eyes stare at the box, and she bites her lip, looking at Lyric. “I think so. Is it me?”

Lyric nods, fighting back the emotion. I rub his back, letting him know it’s okay, and I’m here.

“Yes, little one, and I hope you will say yes and let me be a part of your family. So, it will be Daddy, you, and me.” He opens the box, and a tiny gold ring sits on the cushion with three different colored stones. “I promise to look out for you, to protect you. I promise to color with you, and most of all, I promise to love you with all my heart forever.”

“Do you promise to make pancakes too?” Bea asks, making Ruby giggle through her tears.

“I do,” Lyric laughs.

Bea looks at me, then back at Lyric. “I love you too, Papa.” I suck in a breath as she wraps her arms around his neck. Lyric stares at me over her with tears running down his face.

“God, you kill me, little one,” he says and kisses her hair. As the door opens, we all turn to see Zane and Maddox.

“Have we missed it?” Zane asks. I hold back my shock as he lets Maddox guide him to a chair.

“You knew?” I asked my brother.

“I went to ask his permission, and there’s no one better to ask than Zane.”

Zane swallows as his eyes glass. “Congrats, guys.” He turns to Lyric. “And I meant what I said. You look after them.”

“I swear it.” Lyric lifts his chin, standing in front of me. He blocks everyone else out. “Are you ready to love me forever?”

“Yes,” I whisper against his mouth, holding his face, my ring staring back at me.

Cheers break out behind us, and everyone soon swipes us up in hugs and congratulations.

Eric holds his hand out, I take it, and he hugs me. “Welcome to the family, son.”



I choke out a thank you.

“I need you and Lyric to meet me at the garage in half an hour,” Eric says.

“Okay.” I frown as we watch him walk off.

“What was that about?”

“I have no idea.” Lyric shrugs.

I walk over to Zane and sit next to him at the table. “How did you break out? Amy finally caved to your blackmail?”

My brother grins, shaking his head.

“He’s got to go back. He has an hour,” Maddox answers, surprising me as Zane lets him.

“I should be out next week. Docs reckon the infection is gone.”

My smile widens. Damn, this day couldn’t get better.

“You can come and stay here.” I should have asked Lyric first, but all the doubt disappears when he kisses my temple.

“I agree.”

“No need. I’ll be moving into Zane’s. Draven has the shop under control. I’m good for a couple of weeks.”

“And you’re okay with this?” I ask.

Zane looks at me and leans across the table, holding my eyes. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop it. Rian wasn’t the one who hurt me. He saved me.”

It takes me a second to remember Rian is Maddox, and Zane is the only one who can call him that.

“I was too late. I should’ve been there earlier.” Maddox curses and the weight of his words fall around us.

There are questions I need to ask. But now isn’t the right time. As if Zane can see my inner thoughts, he lets out a breath and a relieved smile.

Lyric grabs my wrist. “What...? Is this...?” He runs his finger over my tattoo.

“The car number plate. It was us. Rebuilt and broken.”

He turns away. “I’m so sorry. It was your pawpaw’s car, and....”

I grab his chin. “Hey, it’s over,” I reassure him. I loved that car, but I love Casper so much more.

Lyric stands, reaching for my hand. “We better get to the garage to see what Dad wants, then we’ll order pizza.”

“No!” Bea calls out. “Daddy’s Pizza. It’s the best.” She smiles, coming to stand by us.

Lyric frowns, looking at me. He knows I’m not the best cook.

“Your pizza,” I explain, feeling my cheeks burn.

I watch as the realization hits him. “You made Bea my dad’s pizza?”

“It’s cheap, and you’re right, it’s the best damn pizza.”

Lyric chucks his head back and laughs. “Korbin freaking Rose, I love you.”

---

We pull up outside the garage to see Eric standing by the doors, looking slightly uncomfortable as he paces.

“Dad?” Lyric calls, jumping out of the SUV.

I walk around the hood, standing by Lyric, who clasps my hand.

Eric glances at us and runs his hands through his hair. “I don’t know... Shit... Look at the sign.”

We both look to see a brand-new black sign with the words “Blackmore & Sons.”

“You bought the garage?” Lyric blinks. “You don’t know anything about cars.”

I stare at the sign. It looks damn good, and old memories of Eric coming to look around the garage come back to me.

“You bought the garage five years ago.” He looks at me. “The day you came in.”

Eric lifts his chin. “I saw myself in you. Life had handed you a shit hand, and I had the money and opportunity to help.”

“Dad.” Lyric breaks the distance between them. “Thank you for looking out for him.”

His father hugs him before stepping away and handing me a piece of paper. “And now it’s yours, son.”

“Son?” I choke the word out.

He pulls me into a hug. “Get used to it, kid. You’re a part of the family, always. Nothing you can do will make us turn our back on you. Also, Zane’s medical bills are paid. Maddox and I covered them.

A sob breaks free from my chest. “This is too much.”

He grips my nape, holding my eyes. “It’s what you deserve. I’ve seen the books. You’ve tripled the old income. You can change the sign. I’ve had that one for five years,” he laughs.

“No.” I shake my head. “That looks damn good.”

---

“I can’t believe your dad bought the garage and gave it to me.” I sit on the bed. What a day. Bea called Lyric papa, we got engaged, Eric gave me the garage, Zane’s been discharged from the hospital, we made our family pizza, and finally, I get to fall into bed with Casper.

“It feels like it’s all a dream,” I whisper. “I’m scared I’m going to wake up and all this, you, will be gone.”

“If it is, this is me telling you I’m coming back. I’ll always come back. Lyric grabs the edge of my tank top and pulls it over my head. “You’re so damn hot.”

I’ve heard that all my life, but nothing comes close to when Casper says it and with the way his eyes take me in as if

he can't tear them away.

I stand and remove his top, running my fingers across his broad shoulders, down his chest, and across his abs. Lyric shivers as I play with the waistband of his briefs.

"I want to make love to you," I whisper. "Show you what you do to me."

"Yes," he growls as I drop to my knees and inhale that masculine scent that drives me crazy and causes my mouth to water.

Wrapping my hand around his shaft, his dick is stunning, thick, and long. My cock swells, already anticipating the pleasure it knows is coming.

Casper spreads his legs further for me to move closer as I start to stroke him, my fingers running across the silver balls in his cock, causing him to hiss in pleasure.

"Baby," he grits out as I work it in long strokes. Unable to tease either of us anymore, I wrap my lips around the head, giving it special attention with the way I play with it.

"Baby, so good," he cries out as I take him to the back of my throat. His fingers run across my jawbone, outlining my lips, as I blink up at him, seeing the pure lust and love in his eyes.

I move my hand to his balls, lightly tugging, hearing that hitch of breath. He parts his legs, lifting his ass and making me smirk around his cock.

Five years ago, Casper loved everything we'd done, but he doesn't hold back this time.

All his walls are down, and the thorns around his heart have fallen away.

I swear to hold it forever.

I lift my fingers, and Casper moans as he sucks them, groaning as I pull them away. His eyes flutter as I start to tease his hole.

I pop off his dick and say, "On all fours." He scrambles with his sweats, kicking them the rest of the way off, looking over his shoulder at me.

I pull my dick out and stroke myself, his eyes watch my every movement. Casper thinks I'm going to fuck him. I am... but not yet.

I bend down and pull his cheeks apart, remembering how good this was.

"What are you doing"?

"I'm going to eat you out, feast on this ass, then make love to you."

His lips part. "Baby." It's a plea. I run my hand over his back, feeling how his body shakes.

With the first swipe of my tongue against him, Casper yells, "Fuck!"

"Shhh, you'll wake Bea."

He shoots me a look before bringing his arm in front of him and biting down, making me laugh before taking another long lick, teasing his hole with the tip of my tongue, fucking him with it. A pre-show of what my dick will soon be doing.

"Baby, stop... Too much... I'm going to come."

I pull back, seeing his hole twitch, glistening with my saliva. "Fuck, you want to see this... Damn." I stroke my dick. "Flip onto your back."

Once he's in position, I crawl over him, looking down. "I love you," I whisper, guiding my cock to where we both want it. He hisses as I enter him, but the pain soon transforms into pure pleasure as his back arches and he gasps and moans when I hit that spot repeatedly.

"Baby, I need..." he cries, shaking.

"Together," I grit out, and grab his hands, linking our fingers and thrusting into his body. "So damn tight and hot. Fuck, too good."

Tingles trace up my spine as my thighs shake and sweat glistens our skin.

“Now.” I thrust my hips to hit that sweet spot. “Lyric!” I roar.

He’s right beside me, his cum, covering both of us.

“I love you.” I kiss his cheeks. “I love you.” Another kiss. “I love you.”

We kiss lazily until our lips are raw, and our eyes can barely stay open.

He lifts my hand, kisses my ring, and curls his body around mine. Minutes later, the soft sound of his breathing draws me into sleep.

---



## Lyric

I stare at myself in the mirror, looking over my features, at the ones Korbin told me he loves.

And realize it no longer hurts to look at myself.

A tear falls down my cheek as I let the boy deep in my soul out of his prison and feel the last thorns fall from my heart.

Hearing Bea laugh and the voices of my friends and family.

I was *wanted*.

I was *Loved*.

I was *worthy* of them.

I no longer hated myself because it isn't just Korbin and us I'd given a second chance. It's me.

I'd fallen back in love with the guy I was.

"Hey, you okay?"

I turn to look at Korbin leaning against the counter. "Yeah." I wrap my arm around his neck, placing a soft kiss on his lips. "More than okay."

He smiles, a hint of fear in his eyes.

I run my fingers across his jaw. "This was my idea. You don't need to have it done too."

Korbin shakes his head. “We’re doing this together.” He nods as if he’s trying to convince himself.

Korbin links our fingers as we walk into the living area, seeing Dad playing with Bea, who’s started calling him pawpaw since the engagement.

Ruby is leaning against the wall, a soft smile on her lips and a hand on her growing belly as she watches them. The light catches the diamond of her engagement ring.

Yes, Dad finally proposed, and they are getting married next year after the baby is born.

The house is constantly filled with noise and love. It’s become what Korbin always wanted. A family home and what I’d always seen as *my* home.

Bea sees us and races over. Korbin lifts her in the air, and they rub noses. He will hate it when she grows out of this phase. I hope it doesn’t happen for years. Bea is changing so much all the time.

“See you later, Daddy.” She jumps toward me, and I catch her as she holds my face. She started doing it after seeing Korbin do the same. “See you later, Papa.”

Those words choke me every time I hear them.

“Love you, little one.” She smiles and wiggles to be put down, returning to Dad who’s coloring with her. She loves her colors. The girl will someday be an artist and rule the damn town with confidence.

“Nervous?” Ruby grins at Korbin.

“Leave him alone.” I laugh as he tries not to pout.

“He can always back out.” Like a pussy, she leaves unsaid, making me smirk.

Korbin let her pierce his nipples as a surprise. Apparently, my husband isn’t a fan of pain and ended up with only one nipple done.

“Shut up, monster-in-law.” Korbin smirks, causing Ruby’s eyes to narrow.



Ruby would become my stepmom, but we all agreed we're carrying on as we have been. It made everything less complicated. But Korbin couldn't help with the mom jokes at any opportunity.

"I hope it hurts." She smiles sweetly.

"That's harsh." Korbin frowns, making me laugh. "I've already got one." He tips his chin out.

"That baby one doesn't count." She smirks back before walking over to join dad and Bea.

"Your brother told me once to never to piss her off after watching how she put the needle through his dick... fair warning." I wink, making his eyes widen.

---

I push the door open to Marked. Zane looks up. He's not back to work yet but wanted to come in today, saying he would be the one to ink his brother.

"You okay?" he asks Korbin, trying to hold back a smirk.

"Fine," Korbin grits out, yanking off his top and lying on the bench.

Maddox shakes his head, trying to hold his own back as I walk over and take mine off.

Two hours later, Maddox wipes the ink away. On the left side of my chest is a heart with thorns protecting it. Korbin's name looks like it's been carved into the heart.

"Man," I gasp. It's incredible; from the colors to the shading, easily his best work yet.

A hiss of breath comes from beside me, and I look in the mirror to see Korbin as he lifts his fingers but then drops them, knowing he can't touch it.

"It's beautiful."

"The thorns are for protection. I'll always protect your heart." He kisses my bare shoulder.

My eyes drop to his chest as I study the ink in the same place as mine. Two hands holding a bright red heart with Lyric in the middle.

“Baby...”

He cups my jaw. “I’ll always hold your heart.”

I grin. “You’re never getting rid of me.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want to, plus we’ve sealed it with ink.” Korbin’s lips meet mine, and a cough breaks us apart to see Zane leaning against the wall.

“Your honeymoon doesn’t start for a few months yet.” His lips curve as Maddox busies himself with cleaning his station.

We get dressed, unable to take our eyes off each other, as a deep roar fills the air. I grab Korbin’s hand, taking him outside as a Dodge Charger pulls up beside us.

He looks between me and the car. “Is this?”

“I found the man who bought it, explained our story, and he sold it back to me.”

Andrew gets out and smiles. “He’s a damn sweet ride.”

“She’s a girl,” Korbin says but hasn’t taken his eyes off the car.

Andrew tosses him the keys, which he catches, and turns to me.

“Ready to take it for a ride?”

I smirk and jump in the passenger seat as Korbin gets in. Shaking his head, he puts the keys in and closes his eyes as the engines come to life.

“Thank you for giving me a family, a place in the world. For loving me and for coming back.”

“I’ll always come back to you. Always.”

Not many people get a second chance. Damn, some never even get a first.

So, what do you do if you are lucky enough to get one?

You learn from your mistakes and grow from the pain. You fight for it, take it, and spend the rest of your life making sure you don't waste it.

We both have been broken.

We'd hurt each other.

We hated and loved.

We'd survived heartache, scars, and tears.

It all started as a revenge plan, and we ended up finding our real love.

Now, it is our time.

To get our beautiful beginning.

The End...

**Coming soon**

**Maddox and Zane's story**

**Join my readers group for more updates**

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## **From from the author**

This book is the reason I fell back in love with writing.

It's not a secret I was a dark romance author, and I loved the darkness woven within a story, making the villain find his happy ending.

Maybe it's the romantic in me, that thinks everyone (fictional) is deserving of love, how I love the underdog winning, making an unlovable character loveable.

After a very hard year last year, I stopped writing. I could no longer write those scenes and was at a loss.

When Lyric came to me originally, the story was only written in his POV, but the more I wrote the more Korbin found his voice. He told me to trust him, that he wasn't the ass he acted.

So, one day, I stared at a blank screen trying to find the courage to press those damn buttons.

Trust me, us authors put our blood, sweat and tears into our work, and leave a little bit of ourselves ingrained in words.

From someone who suffers from anxiety and self-doubt, I knew my biggest enemy was me, so I shut up the voices and started to write. Before I knew it, a chapter was written.

With nerves, I sent it over to some trusted people in the author community, who instantly asked for more. They literally worked with me chapter to chapter. Sometimes while I was writing, they'd jump on just to give me encouragement.

I knew Lyric and Korbin would end up together but had to grow on their own to come back full circle.

I really hope you enjoyed their journey of self-discovery and, most importantly, falling in love with themselves.

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To you, **my readers**. Thank you for picking my book, for giving it chance, for all of you who have reached out to tell me how much you loved the story.

Thank you for taking a chance on me.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Quinn Riley is from a small town, nestled in the Welsh Valleys. She lives with her daughters and husband, and two rescue dogs. She comes from a very big, loud family and loves their craziness.

When she not adulting, she loves spending free time with her granddaughter who's just one years old.

Here are three facts about Quinn.

She's skydived twice.

She wants to travel the whole of Italy.

Soon as she gets in, she puts on her pajamas and fluffy socks.

You can find her hanging out at her readers group-

[Quinn Riley's Reader Group](#)

