

BAILEY NICOLE

High

AND HOPELESS

WORTHLESS BOYS BOOK 2

HIGH AND HOPELESS

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PLAYLIST

Fame on Fire—Without Me

A\$AP Rocky (feat. Rod Stewart, Miguel, Mark Ronson)—

Everyday

A\$AP Rocky—L\$D

Point North (feat. Kellin Quin)—Into The Dark

Slaves—Talk to a Friend

BONES—WhereTheTreesMeetTheFreeway

Ghostboi—Wishuwell

Brennan Savage, Killstation—Dreams of You

Brennan Savage—Badlands

The Devil Wears Prada—Chemical

A\$AP Rocky (feat. BONES)—Canal St.

Jalen Santoy—Foreplay

Silverstein, Aaron Gillespie—Infinite

From Ashes to New—Panic

The World Alive—Why Am I Like This?

Sublime—Badfish

Highly Suspect—Lydia

Sleep Token—The Offering

Kid Cudi—Day ‘N’ Nite (nightmare)

Kina, (feat. Snøw)—Get You The Moon

Sleep Token—Sugar

Banks Arcade—Drown

A Day To Remember—If It Means A Lot To You

Grover Washington Jr. (feat. Bill Withers)—Just the Two of
Us

Kid Cudi—Trapped In My Mind

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CONTENT WARNING

There are some themes that may be uncomfortable for some readers. Graphic language, drug and alcohol use, flashbacks involving neglect of a child, references to domestic violence, and gun violence.

This is an MM romance, so there is detailed sex between two consenting men.

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To all the people who came to realize that maybe their circumstances weren't as normal as they might've originally thought. While that was probably difficult, I bet it encouraged you to do better. To make it out.

That's something to be proud of.

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PROLOGUE

TEDDY

My fingers move of their own accord, breaking apart the sticky green buds. I look closely at the tiny little leaves crumbling onto the tray. So beautiful. The earthy smell, that only weed has, fills my nostrils. My favorite. I reach up to push my curls from my forehead, before remembering there's still trichomes on my fingertips—the little crystals that get you higher than high.

“You done yet? What's taking so long?” Asher says from his bed. His voice sounds whiny, and it grates on my good mood.

“Nearly. Just taking a moment to appreciate the buds,” I say.

“What's there to appreciate? I remember my first-time smoking weed,” he jokes, mockingly. That's Asher's problem. He's fucking hot as hell, but he's such a dick.

“You should always take pleasure in the small things, Ash. All weed could disappear from the planet tomorrow, then you'd wish you didn't take it for granted,” I say, trying to keep the mood light. I don't want to start an unnecessary argument with him. We've only been dating a couple months and it

seems the honeymoon phase is already over. It ended a long time ago apparently.

We're on two totally different wavelengths, but I stick around anyway. He keeps my mind off *him*. I shake my head self-deprecatingly and pinch the broken-up weed into a joint paper—taking extra care in making it even. Once I'm satisfied, I fold the paper over and start compacting it by rolling the paper under my thumbs.

I tuck the paper behind the weed and lick the gummy adhesive, sealing the joint in one fluid motion. Lifting it up, I take a moment to admire my handiwork. *He* always lets me roll for him— even though he rolls just as well, he lets me because he knows it's my favorite part. *Quit fucking thinking about him. You're sitting in front of your boyfriend for fuck's sake.*

“Finally,” he groans, as if it's been hours. In reality, it's probably been no longer than five minutes. I let out an annoyed sigh. I reach into my pocket and grab my lucky lighter. It's pink and has my zodiac sign on it—Pisces. I still remember what *he* said when *he* gave it to me on my birthday. “*You like that colorful shit.*” The small gift brings a smile to my face every time I see it.

I do like colorful shit. My briefs are neon yellow with ice-cream cones on them, and I'm wearing a turquoise tie-dye tank top.

I bring the joint to my mouth and light the tip, then take one long drag. Then another. And walk it over to Asher. *Puff, puff, pass.* I smoke a lot of weed, probably more than any of my friends. My paycheck from the shitty little corner store I work at mainly goes toward buying it. I can't really think of anything else I'd rather spend the money on; I don't care much

for material things. I buy new clothes when I spot something that stands out and that's about it.

It dawns on me that I should be saving money for the day my mom inevitably kicks me out. She's a loose cannon. A fucking psycho, if you will. I avoid going home as much as humanly possible, rotating between crashing at Asher's place, sometimes Ant's, and rarely Ben and Damon's. They're so in love it makes me fucking sick sometimes. Not because they shouldn't be together. No—they're perfect. But because they have everything I've always longed for. Something I'll never have.

Ash grabs my chin, turning my face to his. His touch feels foreign and cold. He hits the joint for probably the fifth time, because he has no respect, and brings his lips to mine. I part them slightly and inhale the smoke he blows into my mouth.

He deepens the kiss, and I let him take the lead. He thrusts his tongue into my mouth clumsily, our teeth clanking together, and the only thought in my head is—*Is he just letting the joint burn? What a waste.*

He trails his hand down my spine, his fingers diving straight into my jeans. They brush against my hole, and I stiffen, jolting up-right.

“Not yet, Ash,” I groan.

“You've been saying that since we got together. What the fuck's your problem?” he responds, his brows drawn in a hard line.

“I'm just not ready yet. I told you it may take some time,” I try to pacify, keeping my voice soft. He seems more annoyed by it than usual, though.

“You’ll never be ready, you’re just a prude. You’re still a virgin at nineteen.”

My face heats in embarrassment. I turn so he can’t see the red flush spreading across my skin. He’s not even lying, that’s the worst part. “Will you just quit already? I don’t want to do it, end of story. I’ll give you a blowjob.”

“You do have the softest lips I’ve ever fucking felt. Bring ‘em here, baby.” The endearment sends a chill through my spine. I fucking hate when he calls me that. But I shouldn’t. I should love it; I should want it. He’s my boyfriend, after all. I convince myself again that I’ll fall for him eventually. To give our relationship some time. There has to be someone who can make me get over *him*.

I meet his crystal blue eyes and press a kiss to his lips. “I’m sorry. Soon, I promise,” I whisper.

“It’s okay, my bad for getting frustrated. It’s just been so long since I fucked. And it makes me feel like you don’t want me.”

“I do.” *I don’t.*

I pull his sweatpants down and find him commando. The sight of his long hard dick doesn’t do much for me. It doesn’t overwhelm me with lust. I may not have had sex, but I know how it feels to fucking *need* it. I don’t feel that way with him, and it infuriates me.

I bring my lips to the head of his cock and give it my all—sucking him in slowly and pumping my fist at the base. I lick up and down his shaft and do all the things I’m supposed to do.

But the entire time, it’s not his face that I see in my head. It’s not his voice that I hear groaning my name.

In my head, I see *him*. My very straight best friend. The one I will never have. *Liam*.

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ONE

Liam

Skateboarding everywhere is a lot of fucking work. I pound my foot against the pavement to propel my board forward. It's a million degrees here in the sunshine state and sweat is pouring down my face, stinging my eyes. This is why I never wear a damn shirt.

But this is my only option. I won't be able to afford a car anytime soon; there's far more important things I need to spend my money on. Like the rent for my shitty place. I moved from my mom's hotel into a different one.

Yeah. My mom lives in a hotel, and up until last month, I lived there too. Thank fuck for Ben's dad hooking me up with this construction job; now I get paid enough to afford my very own weekly rate hotel room. South Florida can suck a dick. Nobody can afford to live down here. The mega-rich stay in a different part of town and our neighborhoods are run down, but it's still too expensive.

That's one reason my mom chose to live in a hotel. It's more affordable and she didn't have to worry about passing a credit check or none of that shit.

A grown dude like myself has no business staying in a one room hotel with his mom. It doesn't work and it made me never want to come home. So, as soon as I got my first paycheck, I found a hotel a few minutes away from hers and moved my shit in.

Hotels like this are a dime a dozen down here. They're a whole side of life that no one talks about. It makes people uncomfortable to acknowledge how poor some folks really are.

We moved to that hotel right around the time I started middle school. I didn't tell *anyone*, because I was too fucking embarrassed. I refused to take the bus home, so the other kids wouldn't see it stop in front of the chain of motels on Federal Ave. For a month straight, I walked miles a day, until I finally asked my mom to get me a skateboard.

Getting a bicycle was pricey, and the skateboard seemed much cooler to me back then. It took an entire day of fucking around with it in the parking lot to get the hang of skating, and it's been my main mode of transportation ever since.

That's the day I first saw Teddy. Even back then, he had crazy-ass, blond curly hair. I slipped off my board, skinned my knee, and when I looked up, I saw him sitting on a curb. He looked like a little kid, not middle-school age.

I grabbed my skateboard and went inside my cramped hotel room. There was a small possibility that he was actually a middle-schooler and I needed to make sure he didn't recognize me.

The next day, I skateboarded all the way home and it felt fucking amazing. I was free; I was only jolted off my board once or twice. But when I came to a stop in front of my hotel

room, I noticed the blond boy sitting in the same spot again. He had a backpack next to him this time.

Every day after school, for the rest of that week, he was there. And I carefully avoided him. Until Friday.

I was much more confident with my skating by the fifth day. As I flew around the corner of the parking lot quickly, I was just about to put my foot out and stop when I looked up and saw him sitting on the curb in front of my hotel room.

My foot missed the ground, and I flew off my board, landing on my palms.

“Fuck!” I exclaimed. “What are you doing in front of my room?” I asked him while brushing the gravel and dirt from my palms.

He looked terrified, which threw me off a little. His eyes were wide. “I-I’m sorry,” he stuttered. “I just thought m-maybe we c-could be friends.”

“How old are you? You look like you’re in elementary school or something.”

He pulled his lip between his teeth and looked down at the ground. “I know I’m small, but we go to the same school. I’ve seen you at the cafeteria.

Fuck. Why did I think no one else at school would live here?

“It was a stupid idea anyway.” He stood up and brushed his hands on the back of his shorts. “I’ll just leave you alone from now on.”

He turned to walk away, but I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. I finally got a close look at his face. Skin a little on the fairer side, freckles scattered across his cheeks and

nose. And thick lashes adorned the big green eyes. *They made him look like a girl*, I thought.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He gave me an unsure look. “Theodore. But my mom calls me Teddy.”

Teddy. Like a fucking teddy bear. Okay then.

“Alright, Teddy. My name’s Liam. We can be friends, I guess, but you have to promise not to tell anyone I live here.” I gave him the most serious face I could back then—which is far less intimidating than it is now. But it worked, nonetheless.

His brows drew in and he looked truly annoyed. “Why would I do that? You think I want anyone to know I live in this shithole too?”

Even back then, he had no problem with calling me out.

I swing into the parking lot of the infamous park we still frequent. I wasn’t sure if we’d still meet up here after graduating high school, but as it turns out, nothing really changed. Well, except Ben and Damon. They keep it pretty low key now. They still smoke weed, but they don’t party or anything else. And honestly, more power to them.

I skate up the concrete ramp, straight into the pavilion, and come to an abrupt stop, my chest heaving from the exertion. I take in the scene in front of me. Ant and Ben are sitting side by side, and Teddy is sitting opposite them with his boyfriend, Asher. He’s never brought him to the park before but it was bound to happen, I guess.

Just to be a dick, I walk up to Teddy, lean down, and wipe my sweaty face all over his shirt.

“What the fuck, dude? Come on,” he complains, but I know he’s not actually mad. Ant and Ben start laughing their asses off, but Asher doesn’t say shit.

A smirk lifts my lips. “Well, what the fuck is up guys? I see we’ve got a newcomer here. I don’t know if we’ve properly met,” I say with all the sarcasm I can muster. I’m feeling a little chaotic today, so why not?

“Shut up, Liam. You know this is my boyfriend, Asher.”

“Right. Been waiting for you to bring him around. It’s nice to finally meet you, bro.” I shift my gaze to him. It’s not nice at all, actually— and I bet he can tell by the crazy-ass smile on my face right now.

Teddy has told me all about this guy. I know his type; he’s only using Teddy to get in his pants. It’s obvious to me, but I don’t think it is the same for Teddy. He’s always tended to be naïve.

“And who are you?” he deadpans. My brows pull together, and my smile gets even bigger. I probably look downright sadistic at this point.

“Damn, man. You didn’t tell him about me? I thought we were best friends,” I joke, lifting my hand to my bare chest in mock offense.

“Liam’s on one today, huh,” Ben says, with a chuckle.

“When is he not?” Ant rolls his eyes.

“Whatever.” I shrug. “I come bearing gifts.” I pull the pack of cigarettes out of my pocket and grab the joint I put in there earlier today. Bringing it to my lips, I light it and puff it a couple times before handing it to Ben. Asher can be last in the rotation, because fuck that guy.

I pull a small baggy of weed and the foil packet of blunt wraps from my pocket, and set them down in front of Teddy. “Will you roll this while the joint’s going around?” I ask, lowering my voice so only he can hear. I know how much he loves to roll the weed, but it also takes him forever.

A smile lights up his whole face, showing all his teeth. “Will you stop being a dick?” he quips.

A laugh erupts from my chest. “Sure thing, buddy,” I say, and clap him on the shoulder. He stiffens immediately. What the fuck is up with him lately? I pull my hand back.

Over the past few months, I’ve noticed a lot of changes in him. Him and I have always had an easy friendship even though we’re so different. But it’s like he’s pulling away, slowly separating himself from me.

He’s in for a rude fucking awakening if he thinks that’ll actually work though. The fact is, there’s no one in this entire world who knows me like he does. None of these dudes, not my mom, no one.

And I plan to keep it that way. People are fake as fuck, but I found the only good one. He’s the purest motherfucker out there, with a heart of gold. He’s *my* best friend.

If this is because he has a boyfriend now, then I’m not worried. They won’t last—Asher’s not good enough for him, and if I have to do something about it, I will.

My thoughts are interrupted by Ant’s voice. “Why don’t you ever sit down? You always just stand there like a damn weirdo.”

Ben snickers. I realize I’m just standing at the front of the table with my arms crossed over my chest. I zoned out while watching Teddy’s slim fingers break down the weed. They

know how I am though, so I don't give them a response. They talk, just to talk. Not me, though.

"Why are you guys still surprised about anything Liam does?" Teddy says and shakes his head at them, a smile playing on his lips. They're so full; his features never stopped being feminine. His jaw is sharper now, but he doesn't grow any hair on it.

I watch his light pink tongue dart out and lick across the blunt wrap right before he seals it. Without a second thought, I reach across the table and hand him the lighter.

While he lights up, I direct my attention to Ben. "Where's Dame?"

"He's at the community college scheduling his classes for fall. I went and did mine yesterday, but y'all were working so he couldn't come with. He should be here soon though." I nod my head, acknowledging his words. Damon hadn't mentioned anything about it. Or maybe he did, and I wasn't paying attention.

"Good for y'all, man. Making shit happen. He'll have a lot on his plate with the long hours we work, though."

"Yeah, that's what I told him, but he insisted."

"I think I'm going to apply there, too." Teddy chimes in.

"Damn. Am I the only one not thinking about college yet?"

"Yup," Ant says. "Nothing wrong with that, though. You have a career already with Ben's dad. Not everyone needs to get a degree."

It's true. I'm perfectly happy with working for Luke. I earn decent money and I really like working with my hands. We install windows and doors and build fences. I can just stick my

headphones in and zone out while I work. And Luke says there may be a chance for me to run my own crew in the future—which would make me more money, but I'm not in any rush to have more responsibility.

By the time the blunt gets passed to me, it's nearly finished already. I hit it a few times, loving the way the smoke fills my lungs.

"You ready to go, baby?" Asher asks Teddy. My face screws up like I ate something sour, but I refrain from saying anything.

"Um. Yeah, I guess so," he mutters, obviously lying.

Asher stands from the bench, and I take a moment to size him up. He's clearly built, but not bigger than me. He's got that pretty boy thing going on with the swoopy hair and pastel shorts. His parents probably have money.

Teddy bids goodbye to everyone, and then to me, he says, "Bye, Liam," before walking past me.

He used to hug me. Does Asher have a problem with that? Is that what this is about? It's the only rational reason I can think of as to why he won't even look me in the eyes anymore.

Asher grabs his hand as they walk away and leans into his ear to whisper something, but he doesn't know I can hear him. "That's Liam? He's kind of a dick."

"What was that?" I ask. *Please repeat yourself.*

"What?" he says, turning around to look at me.

I smile back at him, a big one, too. "Pretty sure you just tried to talk shit about me to my best friend, right in front of me."

He puffs out his chest a little, standing straighter. Teddy tries to pull his hand out of his, but I notice Asher squeeze it tighter, not letting him go. “He’s my boyfriend and I can say whatever the fuck I want to him.”

I’m barely listening to his whiny-ass voice, because I just saw Teddy wince.

The smile drops from my face. “Let go of him,” I grit, really hoping he can tell I’m not fucking around.

“What?”

Is this motherfucker deaf?

Without a second thought, I cross the short distance between us, cock back my fist and slam it into his face. The loud crack echoes through the empty pavilion as his head twists back and he falls on his ass.

Teddy’s jaw is pretty much on the floor and all the color has drained from his face.

“What the fuck?” Asher shrills from the floor, holding his cheek.

At that exact moment, Damon stalks into the pavilion. “What’s going on?” he questions. Ben goes to him, probably to explain what the fuck just happened.

“Go,” I bite out, looking Asher directly into the eyes. I pull out my cigarettes and walk back to the table to grab my lighter.

He’s won’t do shit—not with all of us here, so I’m not really worried about turning my back on him.

He stands up clumsily. “Let’s go, Teddy. Now.”

Teddy’s still open-mouthed, but he’s looking at me. *Finally.* I pull the cigarette from my mouth, holding it between

my fingers as I gesture at him.

“He’s not going anywhere with you, my dude,” I mutter sarcastically.

He scoffs and storms off like the bitch that he is. “Fucking psycho,” he mumbles as a last-ditch effort.

That shit is in one ear and out the other for me. I know what I am.

“You good now? Finally got it all out?” Ant questions, a knowing smirk on his face.

“All good here.”

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TWO

TEDDY

I should've known this would happen. I know his tolerance for bullshit is zero, but I didn't expect him to straight up punch Asher the first time they meet. It escalated so quickly, I didn't even have time to process it. Liam was on edge, that was for sure.

He had that smile on his face though, the one that makes him look like a vicious animal. It's so big, it splits his face in half, flashing those exceptionally sharp canines of his. So, I'm not crazy to think that.

He always gets that way before beating someone's ass—which has happened more times than I can count.

Even now, he's standing there chitchatting with Ant like nothing happened. I let out a sigh and head back to the table. "Can you at least give me a cigarette, since you just decided to make my life a whole lot harder."

I drop my head into my hands, massaging my temples.

"You're better off without him, Teddy. That dude's a fucking prick," he says, indifferent as ever. He doesn't have any emotions, I swear. I stare at him blankly as he pulls a

cigarette out and lights it with the tip of his own cigarette before passing it to me.

This entire afternoon has been shitty. I didn't really want to bring Asher, but when I told him where I was going, he claimed he wanted to meet my friends. Everything was going well enough—although I could tell Ant and Ben weren't vibing with him, but they were at least nice.

Then Liam rolls in looking like every wet dream I've had since high school. His shirt was off, and all his rich brown, tattoo-covered skin was on full display. His muscular chest glistened with sweat that I wanted to *lick*.

So, I've been trying my hardest to avoid looking at him all together, because when I do, heat rushes to my groin.

I just can't help it. I can't even control my body's reaction to him anymore. And I couldn't risk Asher thinking something was going on between him and I; he's controlling enough as it is. What I don't need is someone telling me I can't hang out with or talk to my best friend anymore. Even though I've been avoiding him of my own volition.

"Care to elaborate on that, Teddy?" Liam asks, lifting a perfectly thick eyebrow at me in question.

"No." Damn it. I'm pouting.

"Are you seriously pouting right now?"

"Listen. I don't want to stay at my mom's house, okay? He was letting me stay with him. Now I'm fucked. *And* my stuff is still at his house." That's only half of my problem. "Why did you even do that? It wasn't necessary."

His mouth is set in a hard line. "I don't like how he treats you, grabbing your wrist like that. Blatantly disrespecting me.

He's been grating on my nerves since I got here. So, what the fuck did you expect me to do?"

Instead of responding to the crazy shit he just said, I focus my gaze on the other guys. They're sitting at a different table letting us talk this shit out. Liam's always been protective of me. People gave me a lot of shit growing up until they found out he wouldn't tolerate it. But before that, I was shit out of luck.

I don't need him to protect me like that anymore, though. I don't *want* him to. It gives me false hope. I know he's only overly protective of me because he's crazy for the people he loves—which is basically his mom and me. He cares about the other guys, but it's different between him and I, always has been. We were friends first, since sixth grade. Nearly ten years. But I've spent the last five of them wanting him in a different way, and I'm almost at my breaking point.

"I admit that Asher isn't great. Okay, I know. But you didn't have to do that to him. I wish you hadn't, because I really don't want to go home tonight."

A chill raises the hair on my arms when I think about seeing my mom.

"Why are you stressing? You know you can come stay with me. You don't even need to ask." He says like it's the simplest thing in the world, but it's really not.

I can't even remember the last time we were alone together because I've made it a point not to. I can't risk him figuring me out, and it's been getting more and more difficult to hide my reactions to him.

I shake my head at him. "I'll just go home, it's not a big deal."

His face twists up. “You’d rather go home than stay a night at my place? I’m fed up with this shit. You need to tell me what’s going on. I know you’re hiding shit from me.” He bolts up from the table. “Let’s go. You’re not going back there, and you’re not going to Asher’s house either.”

He grabs his cigarettes from his pocket and lights one up. “We’re heading back to my place,” he informs the guys. Everyone says goodbye, but I notice Ben is looking at me with concern. He’s the only person I’ve ever told that I’m secretly in love with Liam, my best friend. I nod at him to reassure him I’m fine, even though I’m not.

“My longboard is at Asher’s house,” I tell him, feeling like an idiot.

“Alright, I’ll walk with you. You wouldn’t know since you haven’t come over, but it’s not that far from here.”

It’s then that I realize he’s hurt. I didn’t think me not coming around bothered him so much. Great. Now I feel even shittier. He just punched a guy in my honor, and I haven’t even gone to his new place because I’m afraid I’ll pop a boner.

He’s still shirtless as usual. Liam almost never wears a shirt because he sweats so much, but he keeps one on him most of the time, in case he needs to go inside a store or something. He started getting tattooed back in high school, so now his torso, arms, and hands are covered in swirls of black ink.

His skinny jeans ride low on his hips showing his black briefs. He always wears black ones—never any colors or fun patterns like I wear.

He’s got his dreadlocks loose today, flowing at his shoulder blades.

I stop ogling him, which is much harder than it should be. I could stare at him forever, I always have. Since the day I watched as he tried to teach himself how to skate, my eyes have been stuck on him. No one else. At first, I thought I was so fixated on him because I never had a real friend before. Especially not one as *cool* as him. He was everything I wanted to be—brave, tall and strong, and no one fucked with him.

Sometime around high school, I started noticing other things about him. Like how his arms started to bulge with muscle definition and the network of veins wrapping around them. His firm stomach became defined with a six pack, and his jaw got impossibly wider and sharper.

I noticed these changes in a lot of boys while growing up, but they didn't affect me like Liam's did. Then again, I wasn't sleeping next to them most nights, like I was with him. I didn't get to see them fresh out of the shower with a towel slung low on their hips.

The walk to the hotel is tense and quiet. Liam's pissed—more so than usual. He always has a mildly annoyed composure, but this feels different. I guess I've never really been the reason for his disdain until now.

By the time, the bright red neon Motel sign comes into view, my stomach is in knots; I feel sick. He guides us to his room which is on the first floor, right behind the staircase that leads to the upper level. There's a single plastic chair sitting outside his window and an ashtray on the sill.

He unlocks the door and steps inside. Immediately, his scent envelops me as I follow in after him. Heat rushes to my groin, and it only serves to make me feel worse.

The room is simple, like any hotel room. There's only one bed, though, but there's a small couch next to the window. The

room is spotless—not a piece of dirty laundry in sight, which doesn't surprise me. Even though he grew up in a hotel room, his mom still made him do chores. She treated it like a home.

He opens the fridge and pulls out two bottles of water, tossing me one. I twist the cap and drink, thankful for something to keep my shaky hands busy.

“I'm gonna take a quick shower. You can go next if you want,” he grumbles, going straight for the bathroom. When he shuts the door, the ringing in my ears reaches a deafening level.

I hear the shower turn on as I take a seat on the old couch. He has a blanket covering the whole thing, just like his mom always did. I grab a different blanket that's folded up on the arm of the couch and cover myself up. These rooms are freezing cold because of the huge A/C units. I turn on the TV to drown out the sound of the shower, because images of water sliding down his collarbones and chest keep assaulting my mind. I rub my eyes aggressively. *Quit being a perv, Teddy. Come on.*

In no time at all, I hear the shower cut off. My heartbeat picks up in my chest, slamming against my ribs. *Don't look. Just don't look.*

The door opens and my eyes dart to him. Fuck me. I nearly whimper at the sight of him, and I know my cheeks are red. I quickly look away and pull the blanket up higher to my chin, focusing my gaze on the TV. I hear him open the closet door and his towel falls to the floor.

Does it not bother him at all to be naked around a gay man? Of course not, because he trusts me to not be a perv. I don't look. The image of his round, firm ass, and huge, thick cock are engraved in my memory anyway. He's the only one I

think of when I jack off, and it's been that way forever. Which is why I don't do it often, rarely, in fact. It makes me feel like the shittiest friend on Earth.

"You gonna get a shower?" he asks, his deep voice rumbling through me. He's dressed now—wearing gray sweatpants and black socks, as usual. Even simple gray sweats look like the hottest thing I've ever fucking seen on him.

"No, I'm good." No way.

"You know damn well you're not sleeping in my bed dirty," he says with a pointed look.

"I was just going to sleep on the couch anyways," I mumble through the blanket. His brows pull inward.

"Why would you do that? The couch is too small; there's plenty of room on the bed."

He's right, too. Even my small frame can't sleep on this couch comfortably, but I don't care.

"Doesn't it bother you? To s- sleep next to me now?" He knows what I'm talking about.

He scoffs. "It never bothered me before I knew you were gay, so why would it matter now?"

I clear my throat. "No reason. You're right, I guess." I stand up and make quick work of folding the blanket. He shakes his head and crosses the room to step outside. Probably to smoke a cigarette. I let out a relieved sigh, as if I've been holding my breath this entire time. Not even an hour alone with him and I'm exhausted.

I move across the room and my eyes catch on the folded outfit he left on the bed for me. Warmth curls in my gut as I lift it up. I knew some of my clothes were at his mom's house,

but I didn't realize he brought them here. My black joggers and light pink tie-dye t-shirt. I lift the soft fabric to my nose and inhale; they smell just like him. A barely contained groan slips from my lips.

The bathroom smells like cleaning products and his soap. I strip down and eye myself in the mirror. I'm scrawny and thin; I have some muscle definition but not like Liam's ripped form.

Even if he was into guys, he wouldn't be into me. He could do way better. It fucking hurts. I always hurt.

I take an ice-cold shower as quickly as possible. When I pull back the curtain, I'm assaulted by the freezing air, so I hastily dry off and get dressed.

My lips are probably blue at this point, so I rush from the bathroom to the front door. Liam's sitting on the chair scrolling through his phone with the song "Everyday" by A\$AP Rocky blasting through. The air is warm and humid even though the sun's down. It's dark except for the single orange, fluorescent light above us. I wrap my arms around myself and wait for him to say something.

He lifts his dark brown eyes, surveying me from my bare feet up. A shiver runs through my body and I avert my gaze.

The way he's sitting there with his legs spread wide makes me want to sit on the floor between them and rest my head on his thigh.

I've always been affectionate with my friends, but never with Liam. He doesn't really like anyone touching him, but he would always let me. So, I made sure to respect his boundaries, so he wouldn't get uncomfortable. I don't touch him anymore though—no hugs or anything. It just too painful being that close to him.

“So, what’s really going on, T?” he asks, using his nickname for me.

I’ve been mulling over how I’d answer this question in my head, but nothing comes out.

He sucks his teeth and shakes his head. “What did I do?”

I rear my head back. “What? Nothing. You haven’t done anything. I’m just—”

“Just what, T. Tell me why you don’t chill with me anymore. Why you don’t call or text. You flinched when I touched your shoulder today. What the fuck’s that about?”

I rub my hands up and down my arms, holding myself tighter. Fuck. I didn’t think he noticed that. I can’t tell him the real reason. He won’t just miraculously turn gay. No, I already know how it’ll go down and it’s not good.

I need to come up with *something*. “I wanted to give you space, you know. After dropping the ‘I’m gay’ bomb on you, I felt like you needed it.”

It’s somewhat true. He took it well, too well.

His forehead wrinkles in confusion. “I told you it doesn’t bother me, and I wasn’t lying.” He’s getting worked up, I can tell. He grabs a cigarette, places it between his full lips and cups his hand around the tip while lighting it. My eyes catch on the thick rings adorning his fingers.

He hands me the cigarette, but when I put my hand out to grab it, he grabs my wrist, pulling me closer to him. His grip is firm, almost painful.

“Look at me,” he grits out, tone even but demanding as ever. I do. I look down into his almost black eyes, and I see

pain. They're a reflection of my own. My lip trembles one time before I pull it between my teeth, so he won't notice.

"I do not care who you fuck or who you love, Teddy. I mean that. If you're still my best friend—my number one fucking person—I don't care what you do."

His jaw is set. The intensity in every line in his face is staggering. "You're still the same Teddy. Nothing has to change between us. You don't get to just ghost me and not tell me why."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. There's just so much happening at once right now, it's hard to handle." My eyes begin to burn, so I blink them rapidly. It's been lonely without him.

"Well, maybe if you actually talked to me, I could've helped. You don't have to deal with it all on your own."

I do have to deal with this alone, though. This is one thing he *can't* help me with. On cue, the first tear falls.

He stands up abruptly and pulls me into his arms, hugging me tightly. He's so much bigger than me, it feels like I'm cocooned in his warmth. I finally allow myself to relax against him again, burying my head into the base of his neck. *Just this once.* I inhale his clean scent and squeeze my eyes tight. Before he was my secret love, he was my best friend. I've missed that more than I realized.

I break the hug first—his touch was making me too comfortable. I'm drained and my eyes are heavy.

"Finish the cigarette and come back inside," he tells me before heading back in.

I collapse into the plastic chair and take a deep drag. I want to feel the smoke squeeze my lungs. Looking across the

parking lot, I notice the palm fronds are tinted with red from the neon motel sign. They sway in the wind since we're so close to the beach. The city life is bustling, cars flying down the busy street, but I still feel at peace.

I stub the cigarette out in the ashtray and brace myself for what's about to happen next.

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THREE

Liam

The door opens and Teddy walks inside. It's a relief to have him back with me again. He's the only person who brings these weak fucking feelings out of me. I can't even help it; I gave up trying a long time ago.

He needs me as much as I need him, though. So, this push and pull relationship may never end. His curls are dry now and he looks nervous, not meeting my gaze as he approaches the bed. He pulls back the covers and curls into a ball facing away from me.

I don't know why that makes me feel like there's still an invisible line in the sand between us, but it bothers me. Nothing he said outside made me feel any better. Something's not making sense, but I can't pinpoint what. If he thinks I'll ditch him for being gay after all these years, then he doesn't know me at all.

I reach out and turn off the lamp on the old wooden nightstand before relaxing onto my pillow. Teddy's still not asleep, I can tell by his quick breaths.

I sigh and rub my palm across my face. "Come here," I tell him.

His breath hitches as my voice interrupts the quiet room.

“It’s okay. I’m fine,” he whispers, his voice floating.

“Just come here.” I don’t tell him that *I’m* the one who’s not okay, but maybe he can hear it in the way my words sound forced from my throat.

After a few tense moments, he finally rolls over and moves closer to me, resting his head on my chest. He wraps his arm around me, and a tiny, pained noise escapes him. I squeeze his small form tighter, hoping he can feel how much I needed this.

I had to hold him like this many times growing up. Sometimes his shitty excuse of a mother would do something awful, and he’d come running to my place. Or another asshole at school would fuck with him. I’ve never minded comforting him like this because, for some reason, it helps me too.

It’s probably my sick twisted brain, but I feel proprietary of him. He’s *mine*. My person. My thing. When he’s upset, *I’m* the one who can make it better.

And it’s going to stay that way forever.



I wake up feeling uncomfortably sweaty. Even though this room is always freezing cold, my body temperature runs hot—especially when I’m sleeping. I blink my eyes open lazily and come to an abrupt stop. Teddy’s back is practically glued to my front, and my arm is resting heavily on his side. My heart races in my chest even as I tell myself it’s no big deal. I move to extract myself from him, but he stirs. His ass pushes back against me, rotating a couple times.

Oh fuck. My cock is rock hard, and the way he's molded himself against me has it resting right in the cleft of his ass. More sweat beads on my forehead, and my breath trembles. This isn't right. Has this happened before, and I just never noticed?

His breaths are whooshing from his mouth soft and even which leads me to believe he's still sleeping, so this is an unconscious action. I try to move again but he stirs the moment I lift my arm, so I quickly drop it again. His surprisingly soft ass wiggles against me again, and my dick throbs angrily from the friction.

I can understand why I woke up hard if he was doing this to me in my sleep, but that doesn't explain why my erection didn't automatically deflate upon waking up. A guy has never made me hard, and I'm not stupid enough to think it's just a natural reaction to being rubbed against like this.

I'm a man, and he's a man. And right now, I'm unbelievably hard because of him. It doesn't make any sense.

His ass rotates against me once more, and my hips automatically jut forward. My eyes fall shut as white-hot pleasure smolders me from the inside out, and my hips move again slowly, pushing against him.

Oh god. I can't let myself blow a load right now. No fucking way. It's too fucked up— too creepy. Nope. I take a few steadying breaths and remove myself from him in one swift motion, rolling over as quietly as possible. My heart is in my throat as I consider what could've happened just now. I nearly used my *sleeping* best friend to get off. What the fuck is wrong with me?

The next morning, Teddy's leg is thrown over mine and he's... hard against my thigh. It's happened before. It's a little unsettling to feel another dude's hard dick, but I brush it off. He obviously can't help his morning wood. I slide out of his hold and head into the bathroom. I brush my teeth and wash my face, before patting it dry with a towel. My mom instilled these values in me—cleanliness and self-care.

People judge me a lot from my appearance—all the tattoos and my stretched ears, and the way I carry myself, I guess. Imagine what they'd think if they knew how I grew up. That's why I've developed a hard exterior. I only ever say what's necessary and I'm not friendly either. None of that fake, smiley shit.

When I exit the bathroom, Teddy's rubbing at his eyes. I don't know why I see him as that lonely little boy in my head still. We're both adults now and he's grown up a lot. He has a whole life now. Friends other than me. A job.

I open my nightstand and pull out my weed tray. "Here. Roll us something." I hand it to him.

"Good morning to you, too," he teases. He doesn't seem to remember any of our middle of the night dry humping—which means he *was* asleep. I sigh in relief, even though it somehow makes me feel worse about what I did.

"Oh, so you'd rather not smoke?" I act like I'm going to pull the tray back, a smirk planted firmly on my face.

He narrows his eyes at me in annoyance. I give him the tray back and pat his head. "If looks could kill..."

"You're one to talk! Who smiles when they punch someone in the face?" Now we're both laughing. He has a point, though.

From my spot on the couch, I connect my phone to my Bluetooth speaker and start playing the song “Foreplay” by Jalen Santoy. I don’t put the volume too loud since I know the woman next door has a young kid.

I want the vibe today to be a chill one. I don’t have to work since it’s Sunday and I plan to relax.

“Ugh. I need to get my stuff back from Asher today. I need my board and my work shirts.”

Well. Today may not be as relaxing as I thought. I drop my head back against the couch. “I’ll go with you, so he doesn’t give you any problems.”

He shakes his head. “His mom will be there, so he can’t do shit.”

“Okay.” I drag the word out. “You’re going to come stay with me, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Don’t worry, I’ll figure something else out as soon as possible.”

“You can stay as long as you need to, I’m not worried about it. You know you’re always welcome here.”

“Yeah, but we both need our space now. We’re not kids anymore,” he muses.

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. He doesn’t feel like an intrusion. I like having him around.

“Like, isn’t it time for you to get a girlfriend or something?” he continues.

Oh. “What do I need a girlfriend for? So they can bitch at me for falling asleep early and not sending a good night text? I think I’ll pass.”

He laughs at me. “It’s nice to have a person who wants you around and misses you and stuff. Doesn’t have to be a burden,” he says this with a certain sadness in his eyes.

His somber expression makes me consider the fact that maybe I did ruin something for him. Maybe I overstepped by rocking Asher’s jaw. But that doesn’t seem like the problem. He’s barely mentioned him.

“Listen, if I want to hook up, I’ll just do it somewhere else. No big deal. I know it’s a tiny space, but it’ll work for now. Maybe after a while, we could rent an apartment together.”

Teddy winces and looks the other way, not meeting my gaze. “Yeah, maybe.”

For not the first time, I find myself wondering what the fuck is going on. We used to daydream about living together when we were kids. I know we’ve changed a lot since then, but I still feel the same. It’s starting to feel like he doesn’t even want to be friends anymore.

Pain lances through my chest, but I squash it quickly. I stand up and grab the blunt from the tray and head outside. I won’t let that happen, so there’s no need to even stress it.

FOUR

TEDDY

I can already tell I'm doing a shitty job. He knows something's wrong, but he doesn't know what—which makes me feel even shittier.

Last night was bittersweet; I've longed to be wrapped in his arms for too long, but they felt like barbed wire. Every point of contact cut into my skin with the knowledge that he'll never want me like I want him.

The worst part is, somewhere in the back of my mind, I felt good about it. About taking advantage of his platonic affection. I secretly adored it. I had to refrain from breathing in his cigarette tainted scent too loudly. I had to secure my hands in one spot and prevent them from roaming across the hard planes of his stomach. It was most difficult to keep my hips from rutting against his side.

But I did it, and it was both agonizing and euphoric.

That's the kind of thing I want to prevent from happening ever again. I didn't intend for it to happen last night, but he sounded so unsure of himself when he spoke up in the quiet of the hotel room. It's so unlike him, and knowing that my fucked-up problem is whittling away at his confidence was too much for me to bear.

I shoot a text to Damon asking for his help with getting my stuff from Asher's house. I feel bad for asking, but he has a car, and I have too many things to carry all the way to Liam's.

Damon: No worries, man. Be there soon.

I open the wardrobe where Liam grabbed my clothes from last night and search for some jeans. I easily find my clothes because they're the only splash of color in the pile. I get dressed quickly and check myself in the mirror. My hair is wild as usual, so I try to adjust it a bit with my fingers, with no luck. Whatever.

When I open the front door, the sweet earthy smell of weed smoke fills my nose, bringing a smile to my lips. Liam immediately holds the blunt out to me. I hold the hot smoke in my lungs as long as I can while taking in the strip of rooms in the daylight. A few other people are sitting in their chairs too and some kids are riding their bicycles around the parking lot.

My mind immediately jumps back in time to when Liam and I would hang out around the hotel as kids. My mom and I lived there for one school year, and when we moved, I was so worried we wouldn't be friends anymore. The fear was crippling. I thought for sure he wouldn't care about hanging out with me if I didn't live there. That maybe I was just a charity case for him—one he couldn't ignore since I was right there in his face.

I was wrong though. The first day after moving, he met up with me at our usual spot by the bike racks at school and told me to take him to my new house. We skated there, to the apartment that managed to look even shittier than the hotel. Before he left, he said, "You coming over tomorrow?" Warmth spreads through my chest at the memory.

“What are you smiling about?” Liam says, jolting me from my thoughts.

“Remember when I cried because I thought you didn’t want to be my friend anymore after I moved?” I say in between my laughs.

His dark eyes crinkle at the corners and he shakes his head a little bit. “Of course. I told you to quit being a dumbass, because you’re stuck with me.” He chuckles. “Not much has changed.”

The loud thrum of bass rattles the thin window behind us as Damon’s car pulls into the parking lot.

“I asked Dame to take me to get my stuff since he has a car.” My eyes latch on to his thumb and forefinger pulling on one of his thin dreads. His hair is like a mane around his head. Even while sitting in a shitty plastic chair in front of a hotel room, he looks like a king.

He stands up and walks up to Damon’s car, the muscles in his broad back rippling as he moves. Damon rolls down the window and Liam hands him the blunt.

I finally break from my drooling stupor and approach the car. I hear the tail end of what Liam tells him. “Let me know if he tries something, I’ll fuck him up.”

I roll my eyes, but I know he’s dead serious.

We pull up to Asher’s house. “Damn, of course his family is loaded,” Damon says.

It’s obvious how much we don’t belong here. This perfect suburban neighborhood, where every house looks the same

and every yard is maintained—not a single brown spot in sight. It’s the type of neighborhood we would go to for the best Halloween candy as kids.

I take a deep breath to steady myself. This could go either way. He could flip his fucking lid, or he might try to win me back.

“Just stay in the car, I’ll bring the stuff out.”

“Sure thing.” Dame sighs.

I ring the doorbell and hear it echo through the overly large house. The tall door is pulled open by his mom in a moment. “Hey, Mrs. Andrews, is Asher here?” I ask.

She peers around me to the black car in the driveway, I know she can’t see through the tinted windows, but a single hand with a cigarette hangs out the window.

“That’s my friend, Damon. I won’t be long; he’s just waiting for me.”

“Okay, honey. He’s upstairs,” she says, sounding mildly uncomfortable.

My round cheeks and small stature give people the impression that I’m young and naïve for some reason. It used to bother me a lot, but now I use it to my advantage. Someone like Mrs. Andrews would never allow me into her home if she knew how I really am.

When I make it up the stairs, I see Asher’s door is open and he’s leaning against the jam, arms folded across his chest. My eyes catch on the dark purple bruise marring his perfectly chiseled cheekbone.

Hesitantly, I step up closer to him. I don’t even know what to say; I’ve never had to break up with someone face-to-face

like this.

“Um. Hi,” I mumble, already off to a bad start.

“We need to talk,” he says confidently.

“I kinda just wanted to get my stuff...” I trail off. But he turns around and walks back to his bed.

“It’s fucked up how you didn’t leave with me yesterday. You’re supposed to be my boyfriend.”

I cough and cover my mouth to disguise the smile threatening to show itself. It’s not that funny, but I tend to smile or laugh when I’m feeling awkward like this.

I try my hardest to paste a serious expression on my face. “I mean, you disrespected my friend, and you were being a little aggressive.”

“*Your* friend punched me in the face, and you say I’m the aggressive one?” He scoffs, and I realize how dumb it sounds.

“Well, he did that after the fact,” I point out, my brows pulling together in annoyance. I wanted to break up with him anyway, and now I’m trying to use this as a catalyst. It’s not genuine, so I try a different approach. “You know. You and I are very different, I don’t think it’s going to work out between us.”

He stands up suddenly, stalking toward me. He tips my chin up with his finger, his eyes searching my gaze, probably trying to gage how serious I am.

“I think we get along just fine,” he says, voice low and husky. He seals his lips to mine in a soft and gentle kiss. Warmth floods me, despite everything. I’m starved for touch, I can’t help it. He trails his lips to the corner of my mouth, down my chin, to my neck.

My chest heaves as he latches his lips to my neck and sucks.

I need to stop this. But I don't. I bury my hands in his hair and pull him closer. He breaks the suction and looks into my half-lidded eyes.

"See. You still want me," he rasps. And it's not true. I don't want him. I want to be touched like this, but not by him.

I take a step back to separate us. "I can't do this. I just can't. I need some space. I came here to get my stuff; Damon's waiting for me outside."

He folds his arms over his chest again and looks me up and down.

"And where are you gonna go, Teddy?" he snarks.

"Liam's." Saying it out loud makes my stomach flip.

His nostrils flare. "Interesting. Well, when you're done pining after a straight guy, don't come crying to me about it."

I gasp. All the blood drains from my face as I slap my hand over my mouth. *I'm so fucked. He'll tell him; I know he will.*

I steel my expression. "You don't know what you're talking about, Ash. He's just my friend." I grab my duffel from his closet and start throwing all my clothes in it.

"I'm not fucking stupid, you know. I can tell something's off between you two."

"You're wrong," I bite out, trying my hardest to make it sound like the truth.

Once all my stuff is packed, I head toward the door, hoping this is the last time I ever see him because I guarantee he

won't keep this to himself next time.

“I really liked you, you know,” he says from the bed, finally resigned to the situation.

“You don't even know me.” I jog down the stairs as quickly as I can with all my things weighing me down. Luckily, I don't see his mom when I enter the foyer. I wouldn't even know how to explain myself.

Damon pops the trunk as soon as he sees me step out. I load my things into it and slide into the passenger seat. My thoughts are like alarms blaring in my head. I can't take it anymore. It must be pretty obvious because he doesn't say anything, just turns up the volume on his stereo.

The song “Panic” by From Ashes to New blasts through the speakers as I sink into the seat, wishing I could disappear from the face of the planet.

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FIVE

Liam

Last night when Teddy came back from Asher's, it was obvious that he wasn't okay. In fact, it's been a while since he's been his usual self. Most of the time, he's bouncy and excited. Just a ray of sunshine for no fucking reason at all.

I haven't seen him like that in too long. I got him high, and we watched some TV. He was tight-lipped about what happened, so I didn't bother him about it.

But it's all I could think about at work today. I asked Damon about it, and he thought Teddy looked pretty upset when he left Asher's house, too. Which didn't help me at all.

So not only have I been working in the blazing hot sun all day, but I'm also grumpy as shit. It's six o'clock and Damon's just now dropping me off at my place. On some days, we get off earlier than this, and on some, later even.

We stopped at the corner store nearby, so I could grab a bottle of cheap whiskey because it's just that kind of day. There's no way I'll be able to unwind without liquor tonight, not with the anger building up within me. Everything keeps adding up and I don't need to cause any problems. I need to get home, have some drinks, and sleep.

I slap hands with Dame before stepping out of the car and approach my room. There's no light shining through the tacky hotel curtains in the window; Teddy's probably asleep since he had to work early this morning.

I open the door and immediately notice the bed is still made from this morning and Teddy's nowhere to be seen.

For fuck's sake. I slam the door with the sole of my boot. *Where the fuck is he?* It's still sort of early; I'm sure he'll be home soon. I sit down, beginning the process of unlacing my boots and toss my sweaty work shirt into the laundry basket. It shouldn't bother me this much that he's not here; it's not his job to tell me where he is twenty-four-seven, and it's not my responsibility to keep track of him.

Actually, fuck that. I type out a text.

Me: Where are you?

Simple. No need to get so stressed out. The mild headache I feel radiating from my forehead doesn't seem to get the memo though.

I pull a soda from the mini-fridge and uncap the whiskey before taking a few gulps from the bottle. I would usually take a shower first thing when I get home, but the anxiety coursing through my veins won't allow me to do that yet.

I slip on my Nike slides and grab a pre-rolled joint from the nightstand.

The humid air envelops me as I step outside and drop my ass into the chair, setting the whiskey on the concrete beneath me.

As I light the joint, I see Roberto down the walkway sitting outside as usual.

“Hey, Berto!” I shout.

“What’s up?” he shouts back.

I stand up and walk about halfway to him, so I don’t have to yell in front of everyone’s rooms. “Did you see a guy at my room today?”

“Yeah. Little blond dude. He came and left pretty quickly.”

I’m standing in front of him now, so I just nod my head and let him hit the joint a couple times. “Alright, bro. Thanks. You want a couple shots? I’m not good company tonight, but you can hit the bottle.”

He holds up the six-pack of Modelo sitting next to him. “I’m good. Some other time, man.”

I dap him up before heading back to my spot. I’ve had at least five more swigs from the bottle and I’m feeling a lot calmer before my phone sounds off in my pocket.

The screen shows his contact picture—him throwing up a peace sign with a big smile on his face. It’s all in shades of blue from the LED lights in the room we were in at Damon’s house. He took the picture on my phone and set it as his contact. He went the extra mile too and changed his name to “My Favorite Person”.

It usually brings a smile to my face, but not tonight. I answer the call. The first thing I hear is people talking loudly in the background and then the distinct sound of wind blowing into the speaker.

“Hi,” he says, sounding cheery as ever.

“Where are you?” I reply, sounding very much the opposite.

His breathing picks up. “Skating home now. Went to Danny’s place for a bit. What time is it?”

I can tell he’s at least drunk since he’s talking a mile a minute. Danny’s house isn’t too far though, so he should be here soon.

“It’s only eight. See you soon,” I say before hanging up. God, he drives me crazy. If it was anyone else, I wouldn’t be reacting this way, but for some fucking reason, I can’t help worrying about him. I’m not his dad, and he’s not a little kid anymore. I don’t know when I’ll get that shit through my head, but it obviously won’t be tonight.

By the time I see Teddy peel into the parking lot on his longboard, my blood is swimming in my veins. My skin’s both numb and tingly from the alcohol.

He hops off the board, letting it collide with the curb in front of me. He props his hands on his hips and takes a few panting breaths—he probably skated here as fast as he could. I know he doesn’t like skating at night; it makes him nervous since there’s a lot of shady shit going on around here after the sun sets.

He pulls his headphones from his ears and lets the music play out loud—“Infinite” by Silverstein.

“His voice is so beautiful, right?” he asks between panting breaths.

I nod, still maintaining my stony expression.

“What’s got you so grumpy tonight? I mean you’re always mildly grumpy, but you seem grumpier than usual,” he says, talking faster than humanly possible. He probably popped a molly or something.

“You should let me know if you’re not going to be home when I get here.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Um, okay. But why? Didn’t think it really mattered. I mean I don’t want to inconvenience you at all, since you’re letting me stay here. My bad.”

It takes my last shred of patience to not interrupt his rambling. I shoot my arm out and grab his shoulder, making him look me in the eyes. His pupils are blown, and his cheeks are tinted pink. “Teddy. It’s not about that. I just worry if I don’t know what’s going on. Alright?”

He gulps and nods his head repeatedly. His tongue darts out to wet his lips and I catch myself staring at them. They’re dark red, almost like he’s wearing lipstick. They stand out against the golden skin of his face, so, of course, I always notice them.

He clears his throat and steps out of my hold.

“I get it, but you don’t have to worry about me anymore. I’m a big boy now.” He laughs awkwardly, and I don’t find it funny at all.

The problem is that I know I shouldn’t worry, but I do anyways; telling me not to doesn’t make it go away.

“Just let me know next time.”

“Yes, sir,” he says in mock seriousness. My teeth clench together. To this day, he’s still such a brat with me. It’s like he enjoys pressing my buttons.

He swoops down and grabs the bottle from the floor before upending it and swiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “Had a lot to drink tonight, have you?” he asks. His smile falls when he notices the look on my face.

“Come on. Cheer up. I’ll keep you updated from now on, I promise.” He pushes his plump lower lip out in a pouty gesture. And I don’t know why but his pleading starts to thaw me out a bit. It always does.

“Yeah, just got that bottle tonight,” I respond.

His brows lift behind his floppy hair and his eyes widen in an almost comical way. “I don’t understand how you never get sloppy with how much you drink.”

I shrug. I don’t get sloppy; nobody will ever catch me slipping like that. “I just pace myself.”

He grins. “You’re always so in control of yourself and your surroundings. It’s impressive. Wish I could be like that.”

“Well, that’s why you have me.”

His expression sobers a little. “Yeah... we even each other out.” He sighs and turns his head to the sky. “Not gonna lie, I took some molly tonight. Feeling a little jittery right now. You can go ahead to sleep if you want, since you have work in the morning.”

I check my phone. “I’ve got time.”

I watch the profile of his face as his round cheeks lift with a smile. “We need to get a second chair for you.”

He sits down on his longboard leaning against the column behind him. “This is fine for now. Everything feels good at the moment anyways,” he whispers with a dopey smile.

It makes my blood heat. I love when he’s happy like this; it’s infectious. He looks so tiny and adorable sitting down there.

He’s shirtless, wearing his seashell necklace. He never takes it off—not even to shower. It doesn’t reach past the

straight line of his collarbones, almost like a choker. My eyes zero in on the mark on his neck. I can only assume Asher left it there when he went to get his things yesterday. It doesn't sit right with me at all.

I grab two cigarettes from the pack and light them both before handing one to Teddy.

"Why'd you let him do that to you?" I motion to the dark blotch on his neck.

"What? Oh. He just kinda did it," he says, looking a little uncomfortable. "He didn't want to break up, tried to get me to stay."

"It didn't work?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. I'm here, aren't I?"

I take another swig from the bottle, my vision's swimming now—everything's soft and fuzzy around the edges. "I don't like it."

His eyebrow quirks in confusion. "What?"

"The mark. I don't like it." And I'm just as confused as he is. Maybe it's because of my sick feelings about him. He's not my possession, he doesn't actually belong to me. But those kinds of rational thoughts refuse to register in my whiskey-addled brain.

I slide from the chair and squat down in front of him. I notice his short, shaky breaths. The way his mouth parts slightly, like he wants to question me. The little wrinkle between his brows.

"Let me burn you." He peers up at me with wide eyes, scanning my face. He knows I'm not fucking around—which is good because I hate repeating myself.

He presses his lips together and a short nod of his head tells me all I need to know.

“You’re still rolling, right?” I can tell he is, but I want to make sure. As long as he’s rolling, it’ll barely feel like a sting.

Another nod.

I bring the cigarette to my mouth and inhale deeply, making sure the ember is hot enough.

I look into his glassy, green eyes and lean forward. I press the cigarette to the skin of his sternum, right in the middle of his chest. He doesn’t flinch, but I hear his sharp intake of breath.

His entire face is bright red and his chest heaves against the tip of my cigarette, it’s gone out by now though.

In a split second, he lurches forward and slams his lips against mine.

SIX

TEDDY

I rip my lips from Liam's. *Oh fuck. Oh fuck.* I'm such an idiot, but I couldn't help it. He was acting so worried about me. His eyes wouldn't stop examining every inch of my face. He always makes me feel like I'm the only one in the room, like I'm the only one worthy of his attention.

I saw the exact moment he registered the hickey on my neck. A flicker of *something* flashed in his eyes, but as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

"What the fuck?" he mutters, his hand darting up to wipe his mouth.

Mortified. That's the only feeling coursing through my veins at this point. With my eyes stinging and my mouth agape, I flounder for a few seconds, desperately searching for words. Anything. Just say *something*.

"I-I'm sorry," I whisper. "It's the molly. You know how it makes things feel good. I didn't mean to do that, you know. It was the euphoria. Just horniness from the drug, I swear—"

"Stop. Just stop," he says calmly. "It's okay, I'm sure it was just the drugs. I believe you because I know you wouldn't fuck with me like that. You know I'm not gay."

His last words were said with a grimace that made it obvious just how disgusted he is. Disgusted by me, by what I am. My heart is palpitating in my chest, and it won't stop. My face is on fire. I've never felt embarrassment and remorse at this magnitude. My eyes refuse to meet his. I can't bear to see the expression that I know is written all over his face. It will shatter me, once and for all.

I shoot up from my sitting position and grab my board. "I'm sorry, I need to go," I mumble.

I drop the board onto the rough parking lot concrete and hop on before he has a chance to try to stop me. Who am I kidding? He probably doesn't give a fuck at this point. I don't hear a peep from him as I navigate out of there, and I refuse to look back over my shoulder.

The streetlights cast an orange haze over the pavement as my wheels glide across it. The wind is really whipping tonight, and the sound of palm trees rustling fills my ears alongside the car engines zooming past me.

There's only one place I can go, since I'm not willing to bother any of my friends this late at night. It's a long ride, but I finally make it to my special spot. It's hidden well—that's what makes it so special. I haven't even brought Liam here. You wouldn't be able to find it unless you explore. I turn onto the street, watching fancy-ass houses on either side of me as I fly past them. This street has a dead end, but it's a disguise.

At the end, there's an entrance to a Marina on the right, and to the left of it, there's nothing but densely packed trees and shrubs. I pick up my board and head to the left. There's no trail imprinted in the ground because no one comes back here, only me occasionally. After a short distance, the dirt gives way

to sand and the trees become mangroves. The salty smell of the ocean fills my nostrils.

A small strip of beach lies below me, maybe only twelve feet of it. I approach the cliff—it's not very high up so it's easy to venture below—but I don't—not tonight. I don't want to risk the tide coming in while I'm down there.

The best part about this place, aside from the fact that it's all mine, is the palm tree. There's a single palm tree that butts up against another. But it's not just any tree, this one grew horizontally so it could reach the sunlight. It reaches all the way past the cliff and it's uniquely flat at the bottom of the trunk, forming a perfect place to lay down.

The rush of endorphins that have been racing through me seem to come to a halt, making my limbs sluggish and heavy as I lift myself onto the tree. I recline back and lay my head on the hard trunk, resting my feet against the opposing tree.

My chest is still rising and falling and there's a sort of buzzing in my brain that seems exponentially louder now that I'm surrounded by silence.

I lift my shaky hand to wipe the thin layer of sweat from my brow and look up at the dark sky.

I really fucked up this time. I don't know what came over me; I've never made a move on Liam like that. Because, like he said, he's not gay, and it's not okay to do that to someone. God, I'm such a bad friend—maybe a bad person, even. Because I fantasize about doing so much more all the time. I wish I could corrupt him with my body, just to show him what he's missing. *Me.*

Just fucking stop, Teddy.

It'll never happen. I need to stop living in this cruel space in my head where my mind tricks me into thinking we could be more than friends. For not the first time, a fleeting thought crosses my mind insisting me to never see Liam again. It would benefit both of us—he wouldn't have to deal with me anymore. No more worrying, no more unwanted advances, and maybe I could finally move on.

It's not possible though. Liam's too stubborn to admit his life would be easier without me in it, and I'm too soft to follow through. So, we're at a fucking standstill.

I'm just going to need to put some healthy boundaries between us. No more platonic affection—which is all his doing. I won't let him hold me or hug me when I'm upset ever again. That's the main thing because it messes with my head.

And I need to get laid. Even as I convince myself of these things, the thought that won't leave me alone is the way his lips felt against my own. Thick and soft, much bigger than even my pouty ones. He could consume my mouth with his own, batter and bruise it. *Stop it!*

I pull my phone from the back pocket of my jeans. My eyes burn when I see my wallpaper—Liam and I, at a party. His arm is thrown over my shoulder, all his blindingly white teeth on display, while I'm smiling up at him like a golden retriever. Fuck. Okay, guess I should change that. Who else do I think is hot as fuck? Think. Think. Think.

Ah. *Ian Somerhalder*. After a quick search, I find the perfect picture and set it as my background.

Good... this is good. I work hard to convince myself of it even though my chest feels a little more hollow than it did before. I lay my phone on my chest before the idea of letting

Liam know I'm safe takes ahold of me, and close my eyes, not allowing myself to open them. I need to sleep.

A vibration on my chest startles me, and before I know it, I'm plummeting to the ground. I land on my back with a hard thud. "Fuck!" I wheeze. The short fall knocked the air out of me.

My phone is still buzzing in the sand next to me. I peek at it through squinted eyes, since the sun is shooting daggers through them. It's Liam, so I toss it back down and rub at my aching eyes.

The unmistakable buzzing sound starts again. Ugh. I begrudgingly answer it.

"About time you answered the damn phone. What do you have it for if you don't answer it?" he asks, voice loud over the power tools in the background.

I groan loudly. "I just woke up, chill."

"Chill? Right. Well, if you want me to chill, maybe try not riding off into the night while you're high as fuck and clearly upset. Maybe try to shoot me a text letting me know you're alive, so I know you didn't get robbed or jumped or some shit. That'd help me be more fucking *chill*," he growls into the phone, voice low, so no one hears him acting like a psycho.

"Well, I'm fine. Other than the fact that your incessant calling made me fall five feet to the ground, but that's beside the point—"

"What? What are you even talking about?"

"Nothing. Go back to work. I'm fine. I'll be at the hotel when you get home. Bye." I quickly hanging up the phone. I

lay it down on my chest and a hiss of breath leaves my mouth.

I nearly forgot about the cigarette burn. Sitting up, I lift my shirt and see the angry red skin smack dab in the center of my chest. I lift my finger and graze it across the small circle; it doesn't really hurt, just a dull sting. I can't even begin to understand why he did that. Some weird sense of propriety over me? Why else would he want to mark me right after noticing my hickey.

I scoff. That's the type of thing about Liam that confuses me—his over-the-top possessiveness. It feels like *more*. More than just friends. But that's just the desperate voice in my head telling me lies. Making me feel like I have a chance.

Ugh. I stand up, brushing the sand from my palms and begin taking my clothes off. I might as well take a dip in the water while I'm here. I can feel grains of sand all over my sweaty skin, so this is a good chance to clean up a bit. Clad in my pink, cherry-covered briefs, I make my way down the somewhat steep cliff as gracefully as I can, excitement growing in my chest the closer I get.

I race across the narrow strip of beach straight into the water. As soon as it gets deep enough, I take a deep breath and dive under, propelling myself forward. When I can't hold my breath any longer, I surface and instinctively reach both hands up to swipe my curly hair from my face.

The ocean floor is well below my feet, so I wade in the water for a bit, tuning in to the Marina workers on the other side of the trees.

As I float on my back in the water, two things ring loud and clear in my mind. I never want to leave this beach, and I wish Liam was here with me. Then, it'd be perfect. I'd never have to leave.

I let my mind run wild for a while, imagining a life with him, until it's too painful to bear.

While trudging back to shore, I remember that I actually have to work today, and I can't spend all of my time at my special spot. Stupid responsibilities. Groaning loudly, I pull my jeans over my wet skin—which was a bad fucking idea, but I don't have time to air dry since I work eleven to seven at a shitty gas station.

On my way back into the trees, I look over my shoulder and blow a kiss. "I'll be back for you," I say out loud.

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SEVEN

Liam

I don't bullshit anyone so I sure as shit won't bullshit myself. I wish I could explain away what happened last night, but there's a few things I've realized.

First of all, I burned Teddy with a cigarette because I wanted to. I wanted to put a mark on him that won't go away. Asher's stupid fucking hickey will be gone by tomorrow, since it was weak as fuck—even I could do better than that. But my mark will stay, just like me.

And another thing. Teddy ran away after kissing me. But he didn't run because of the kiss. No. I saw the wince and agony in his eyes when I snapped on him for it. He ran because I hurt his feelings. Thinking back, I can see how what I said to him might've been harsh and offensive.

I mean, I wasn't grossed out by the kiss. It wasn't repulsive to me, but why would it be? It was just a kiss—a shitty one at that. He slammed his face into mine, knocking my nose. No finesse.

Regardless, just because his lips touched mine, doesn't mean I'm automatically gay. That's not how it works; it isn't a contagious disease. So, maybe, I shouldn't have exploded on him like that.

Damon interrupts my thoughts from the driver's seat of his car. "What's going on in that fucked up head of yours?" he asks.

I briefly consider telling him about what happened, but I squash the idea quickly. Dame is cool, but he doesn't need to know about this. I don't need him giving Teddy shit for a drunken mistake.

"Same old, same old," I respond.

He chuckles. "Either something's stressing you out, or you're planning someone's death. I honestly can't tell."

That brings a smile to my lips. "Stressed, man. Was up way too late last night. Barely any sleep. Work was long today."

He exhales a deep breath as we pull into my hotel's parking lot. "Ain't that the truth. Can't wait to go home and make Ben give me a back massage," he jokes.

"Yeah, I'm gonna need you to keep that to yourself. Thanks," I grimace.

He comes to a stop, not even bothering to park. Probably really eager to get that massage. I shake my head and slap his hand, dapping him up, before stepping out of the car.

When I enter the room, I notice the shower's running and Teddy's voice drifting out of the cracked bathroom door. He's singing his awful rendition of "Badfish" by Sublime with the music playing from his phone.

While unlacing my boots, I hear the shower turn off, and he's still singing as he steps out with the towel around his waist. As soon as he notices me, he yells and drops his phone. "Fuck! I didn't know you were here," he pants, chest heaving with fear.

“I literally live here. Would a robber just sit on the couch and wait patiently for you to get done showering before stealing our shit?” I deadpan.

He snorts out a laugh. “No. I guess not.”

While heading to the bathroom, I strip off my dirty Luke’s Construction shirt and say, “By the way, if anyone ever tries anything when I’m not here, there’s a pistol in my nightstand.

I can hear him pause while rummaging through the wardrobe. “You know, I’m not even surprised.”

After ruminating on everything even more while showering, as soon as I open the door, I say, “We need to talk.”

I’m surprised to see him all dressed up though in cutoff jean shorts that reach just above his knees and a loose-fitting tank top that reads ‘gay as fuck’.

I lift an eyebrow at him. “Going somewhere?”

He looks up from the table where he’s rolling a joint. “Party at Danny’s, you know the drill.” I look at him expectantly. “I know you have work in the morning, so I didn’t think you’d want to come.”

“I’m coming,” I say with finality.

“You sure about that? Don’t you have to be up at like six in the morning? I can go by myself; I’m meeting someone there.”

“Ant?” I ask, walking to the wardrobe to pick out an outfit.

“No, not Ant. Although, he’ll probably be there too.”

“Then who?” I ask again, growing impatient.

He clears his throat, and I turn my head toward him. He looks nervous for some reason. *He better not say fucking Asher.*

“His name’s Travis, he went to school with us. Not sure if you remember him.”

“Travis who played basketball with Damon?”

His brows lift in surprise. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“Didn’t realize you were friends.”

“We weren’t, but now we are... kinda. He’s been going to Danny’s parties, and we chatted a couple times. He gave me his number last night.”

“So, you’re gonna hook-up?”

He coughs loudly. “What?” he squeaks, face beet red.

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to be embarrassed, T. We’re grown up, you don’t have to be so shy about it.”

He gives me a weird look, one I can’t decipher, before practically running outside with the joint in his hand. I shake my head. He’s so fucking weird sometimes. Finally, all dressed in black jeans and a plain black t-shirt, I head out. “Let’s go,” I say and drop my board to the ground.

The party is raving by the time we get there. Teddy and I head straight for the kitchen—which is trashed, as usual. Red solo cups litter every surface, and the floor is covered in dirty shoe prints. There’s a thick haze of smoke in the air and a shit ton of people crowded around the pool table. I grab a bottle of cheap whiskey and pour a cup until its nearly full, while Teddy pulls a beer from the fridge. We both take a swig and address the room.

“I’m trying to get fucked up tonight,” Teddy says with a sinister grin on his face. Great.

“Try not to do anything too stupid, alright?”

His smile only grows wider.

We’re in the living room shooting the shit with a couple guys and their girlfriends when Teddy checks his phone. Then he turns around and walks out the front door. I guess Travis is here. I tip my cup back and finish it off. Fuck, he’s been out there for a while; I usually rely on him to make conversation at parties because I hate talking to people. Even getting drunk doesn’t help me be more sociable. I’m starting to get bored being here when the door opens again and Teddy walks in tucked under Travis’ arm.

I couldn’t remember him clearly, but now I definitely do. He’s huge, at least a head taller than Teddy and he has a chiseled face to match his arms. I guess I can see why T is into this guy. Total jock type.

I watch as Travis leads him to the kitchen so he can get a drink, with a big-ass smile pasted across his face. I’m guessing this guy will be a quick rebound.

A hard slap hits my back and I quickly avert my gaze from them, whipping my head back, my eyes landing on Ant.

“What’s up, dude?” He follows my line of sight. “Oh shit, is that Travis? I didn’t even know he swung that way.

“Me either,” I respond with a shrug.

“Huh. Well, good for him. Moved on from Asher quick.” He laughs. “Let’s head out back. I want to see who’s fighting tonight.”

He walks toward the sliding glass door. Recently, Danny started letting people fight in his backyard and they can place bets if they want to. It's a chill ordeal, but I've seen some drunk assholes end up knocked out many times.

As soon as we step out, sweat clings to my skin from the thick humidity. There's an old fence surrounding the perimeter of his yard that's been done in by hurricanes. Overgrown weeds cover most of it. Way more people are crowded around, forming a large circle in the middle of the yard where the fights take place, but there's also people leaned up against the house who don't care about watching. I look down just in time to avoid tripping over a chick splayed out on her back in the grass, her arms reaching toward the sky. A cheesy-ass smile on her face. She's obviously tripping on acid or something like that.

I sidestep around her as Ant works his way through the dense crowd of people. Danny himself is in the middle of the pit with a joint in one hand.

"Alright. Up next we have a newbie." He gestures his hand behind him, and lo and fucking behold, it's Jasper, Damon's best friend. "Who wants to fight this dude? Look at that perfect face. Don't you want to put your fist through it?"

I see a group of amped up dudes to my left shoving each other forward, daring each other to go for it.

"Hold up! I got this," Ant yells beside me. I watch with confused amusement as he pushes himself to the pit. He walks right up to Jasper and takes his shirt off. "We're friends, right? Nothing personal." He gives Jasper's shoulder a shove, and the crowd erupts into cheers.

Based off the grim look on Ant's face, it seems incredibly personal. Interesting. I wonder what Jasper did to end up on

his bad side.

Danny walks backward to stand with everyone, still puffing on his joint, as Jas steps forward and shoves Ant harder. “You got something to say?” he asks, brows furrowed in anger.

They’re both equal in size and probably strength too, although Ant’s made from tough stuff. He’s used to defending himself on these streets, and it’s to my understanding that Jasper lives a quaint little life in the suburbs. Who knows, though. Nothing surprises me anymore.

“I think you know what my fucking problem is,” Ant seethes, and honestly, I wish I knew what he was getting at. He steps forward to get in Jasper’s face when, suddenly, Jasper’s fist rears back and cracks him straight in the jaw. Ant stumbles back a few steps but rights himself. The crowd is fucking hysterical now, shouting, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

He spits out some blood and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, before charging forward and slamming his fist into Jasper’s face. Jasper falls flat on his ass, and next thing I know, Ant’s on top of him. He punches him a few more times before Jas manages to flip them over. With his hands pinned above his head, Ant rears up and spits in his face. “Piece of shit,” he seethes through gritted teeth.

Oh fuck.

To my surprise, Jas wipes the spit and blood off his face and smears it roughly across Ant’s own face before slapping him on the cheek a couple times. He leans down with a sinister smile and says something to him that I can’t hear over the raucous crowd around me. All I know is Ant’s expression transforms from furious to stunned, before wrenching his arms free and shoving Jasper off him.

He shoves his way through the crowd, and I speed up to catch up with him. He doesn't bother going through the house, opting for the gate instead.

“Wait up, bro. What the fuck was that about?” I say, grabbing his shoulder to stop him.

“None of your fucking business,” he spits before shrugging out of my grip and stalking off to his car.

Fuck all this shit. I don't have enough patience to even attempt to decode his bullshit, there's enough on my plate already with Teddy. I shoot a quick text to Ben telling him he might want to check on his boy. It's nearly eleven now, and I'm ready to get the fuck out of here.

My skin is itchy and hot, so I take my shirt off, tuck it into my back pocket, and light a cigarette before heading back inside to find Teddy.

I feel like a grumpy old man, but I worked all day and I have to get up and do it all over again tomorrow. Not to mention I'm running on barely any sleep.

I cross the threshold into the house and take a look around. There are way more people here than when we first arrived. I recognize most of them, though, since it's usually the same crowd at these parties.

I turn to my right to ask someone if they've seen Teddy anywhere when my eyes catch on a guy who, from behind, looks a lot like Travis. And then I see it—blond curls peeking over his shoulder from where Teddy's face is buried in his neck.

My face heats up, right before deciding I definitely shouldn't be watching him like this. But then I notice Travis' arm pumping back and forth like he's—

What the fuck? There's no fucking way T is letting this dude jack him off in the middle of a fucking party. The heat in my cheeks turns into a complete inferno as I take a step forward and hear Teddy making sounds I never thought I'd hear come from his mouth. Little soft ones.

In that moment, I need to decide whether to walk away or put an end to this shit. T's probably fucking wasted right now and he'll regret this in the morning. I just know it. He'll spend all week internally beating himself up about it until he has a chance to get wasted again and start all over again.

Simple decision for me since I couldn't give a fuck less about *Travis*. All I'm concerned with is Teddy, and something about this doesn't feel right.

I continue my path toward them and grab the dude by the shoulder, wrenching him back. "T, we're going home. Now."

"What the fuck!" he shouts at me while tucking himself back into his shorts.

I glance at Travis and see his jaw twitching and his brow in a hard line.

"Who are you?" he asks, to which I chuckle because how come every guy who hooks up with T acts like they don't know who the fuck I am? And I almost want to thank this guy for giving me a laugh tonight, but instead, I grab Teddy's arm and drag him away. Literally drag since he's resisting.

When we get out of the house, he rips his arm from mine, visibly fuming. Whatever. I head toward the bush we hid our boards in and pluck them out. I turn around to hand his to him, but his feet are still planted firmly in front of the house, arms crossed in front of his chest. He looks truly livid and for a split second, I consider the fact that I might have made a mistake,

but just as quickly, I brush it off. Because if this Travis guy is worth his salt, this won't deter him from being with T, and if it does, then so fucking be it.

“You need to tell me why you just did that. Right now,” he fumes. “I was finally getting some, and you came in and fucking ruined it!”

“While you were in there letting that dude jack you off in front of every person in that fucking house, Ant was out back getting his ass beat by Jasper,” I say snidely. “That's not really the issue, though. The problem is I'm not going to let you do that shit in front of all those people.”

“What shit?” he interrupts. “Gay shit? Is that the problem? Because it seems like it is. I don't think you'd care if Ant was in there getting sucked off.”

I rear back, momentarily floored by his comment.

“Don't look so fucking surprised. I can tell how disgusted you are by me. By what I am. It was written all over your face last night.”

He's starting to piss me off now. My fists clench at my side of their own accord. “Number one, I obviously don't give a fuck what Ant does, which is why I'm standing here right now. And number two, just because I'm not gay, doesn't mean I'm disgusted by you. If I was, once again, I wouldn't be standing here right now. Get your head out of your ass, you'll thank me tomorrow.”

He just stares at me with calm derision. “If only you fucking knew,” he mumbles, “you'd ditch me in a heartbeat.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I ask, stepping up close to him. “Be direct.” I look him up and down, his back is straight and he's trying to stand his ground. “From where I'm

standing, it seems like you're just talking shit, and you know how I feel about that. Say what you mean," I egg him on, hoping he'll explode.

He shakes his head and shoves my chest. "Just forget about it. Let's go."

"Oh! Now you wanna go? Nah. Let's talk about it. Because I just helped you out in there, and here you are trying to give me a hard time." I back him up until he's pressed against someone's car. In the light coming from the streetlamps, I can see him more clearly now—his cheeks are bright red, and his eyes are glued to the right, refusing to meet mine.

He takes a deep breath, steeling himself. "You know what, Liam. I don't need you to babysit me. If I want to let someone give me a drunken orgasm in the middle of a party, then I should be able to do that. Where do you get off trying to be my dad? You're my best friend, and that's all you'll ever be..." he says, voice trailing off.

I lift my arms to either side of his head, caging him in. His breath falters, mouth opening slightly as he meets my stern gaze.

"I don't understand why you're still struggling to grasp this. Here's the thing, T. There's only two people in this world that I give a fuck about, and you're one of them. You know that and you know *me*. Better than anyone. So, I'll do whatever the fuck I want when it comes to you. Just accept it and move on."

"W-well, you really should stop. I-it hurts," he rasps. And the grimace on his face makes it look like he's in physical pain. My brows furrow as he continues, "That kind of thing gives someone like m-me the w-wrong idea."

Someone like him? What the hell's that supposed to mean?

"God, I'm such a fucking idiot," he says, covering his face with his hands.

I've never been more confused in my life as I reach up and pull his hands from his face. "T. Look at me," I demand. I try to tip his chin upward, and when I finally manage to, I see his seafoam green eyes are glassy with unshed tears. Heat rushes through my body as I feel the urge to console him, but I don't even know what for.

I cup his soft cheek. "Hey, hey, hey. What's the matter?"

His mouth sets into a hard line. "Why do you touch me like this? I've never seen you touch any of the other guys like this." He tries to pull free from my hold. "You have to stop. I can't take it anymore." The words barely escape his lips as a single tear glides down his cheek, coming to a stop on my finger.

I pause and seriously contemplate what he said but come up short for an explanation. It's always felt natural for me to be this way with him. Like a caretaker. Like he could look to me for guidance or comfort. "It's always been this way with us," I say, confusion riddling my tone.

He scoffs. "Well, I hate to break it to you Liam, but I'm *gay*. I'm attracted to men. And you act like a fucking boyfriend to me, so it's hard for me to distinguish the difference with you. Just stop."

I step back, my hands lifting to pull at my hair. "No. That doesn't make any fucking sense. Friends can be close like this, I've seen it. You were the exact same way with Ben, and we're way closer than you guys ever were. So, try again," I say, chest heaving. "Actually, don't. Why are you pulling this shit

right now? It doesn't make any sense. It fucking feels like you're trying to split us apart. Shit's just been adding up lately—you're constantly trying to push me away and it's just not the same anymore. How about you tell *me* what the fuck's going on because *this...* whatever *this* is fucking *hurts.*" I swiftly turn around and scrub my face with my hands. *How did we get here?* The biggest downfall of our friendship is that it makes me feel way too fucking much.

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EIGHT

TEDDY

Even in the midst of one of the worst arguments Liam and I have ever had, he still can't keep his hands off me. He tries to handle me, pawing at my face, grabbing my arms, pushing his forehead to mine. He does things aggressively; any onlooker wouldn't think he's being affectionate, just friendly. But I feel the way his eyes burn into me with an intensity no one else could fathom. How his fingertips dig into the skin of my cheeks, but his thumb only grazes my jaw softly.

It's fucking confusing. I can't make sense of it all. Pain spears through my chest when I consider telling him my biggest secret, but I need to. Right? Because how will he ever understand why I'm driving this wedge between us. And on top of all the pain I'm experiencing, I know he's hurting too. He never displays this much emotion about anything. Rarely ever raises his voice. But, because I'm such a shitty friend, he's outside of someone's house, shouting and losing his composure, where anyone could walk out and see him. I know that's the last thing he wants.

He's always had this thing about keeping a stoic, calm exterior. So everyone he's ever met has no clue who he really is, he won't let it show.

“Let’s go home... I’ll explain when we get there,” I whisper. A heavy weight settles in my gut as my mind plays the tape of what will happen later tonight. The story of how I’ll lose my best friend.

“No. You’re going to tell me right fucking now. I’m sick of this shit,” he says through clenched teeth.

I can’t take this anymore. I can’t keep this act up much longer. I take a breath, attempting to steady myself because I can feel bile rising in my throat.

“For fuck’s sake, Teddy. It can’t be that bad.”

“I’m fucking in love with you, Liam!” The words rip from my chest in a loud shout, spittle flying from my mouth. “Fuck,” I choke out on a sob. “How can you not tell? I can’t even look you in the eyes anymore because it hurts so fucking bad.”

“No fucking way, Teddy. There’s no way,” he says, running his hands through his hair agitatedly. “It’s a mistake. You’re just mixing up your feelings.”

“Really?! I’ve been mixing up my feelings since eighth grade? I know how I feel.” I laugh sarcastically. “Believe me, there’s no mistaking it.”

I didn’t know what to expect from this, but denial definitely wasn’t it. The expression on his face is agonizing. He looks like he might actually cry, and I’ve never seen him cry before. Ever.

I turn around, ready to flee from the worst moment of my life, when he attempts to grab my shoulder to stop me, but he quickly withdraws his hand. “Shit!” he yells.

My face crumbles. “Wow, see. You can’t even touch me?” I shake my head. I can’t stop the onslaught of tears anymore.

I've thought about this moment a million times over the years—the moment I finally tell him. I've played it out with many different endings, but none of them even compared to the pain I feel right now. They don't come close to it. My chest is cracked open, my heart laid bare, and he's repulsed by it. By me.

I start to back away. This is really it. Ten years of friendship down the drain because of my foolishly hopeless heart.

I skate away as fast as I can, the sole of my foot aching from pounding it into the ground so hard. I don't know where I'm going, but I need something. Something to take all of this away.

Am I melting into this couch? It smells like old sweat and maybe semen? The thought makes me shudder, so I try extra hard to make my brain communicate with my body in order to stand up. Luckily, I'm not too fucked up yet. When you use acid as much as I do, you build a tolerance to the stuff. So, a small dose of a couple tabs makes my vision wonky and sometimes is enough to make me forget I have a body. All good things.

Got my heart broken.

Lost my best friend.

Decided taking acid at a literal trap house was a good idea.

My life is a fucking joke at this point.

I know I'm out of place at this party, but it's Mad's house—one of my best friends ever. That's not his real name, but his

real name doesn't matter. Everyone knows him as Mad. I'm not sure how I managed to get so close with a guy like him. Most people see his face tattoos and crazy eyes and look the other way, but I saw him at a party one time. He was sitting all alone on the cold steel of the train tracks. Since I was so intoxicated, I thought it'd be a good idea to talk to the scary stranger. I know what it feels like to always be around people and still feel alone.

We talked about so many things. He has two kids who he loves with everything in him. He sells a lot of drugs. Way more than anyone else I know, and he may or may not be in a gang.

But the conversation we had was intellectual. He's a very spiritual guy and he saw the same thing in my eyes as I saw in his. He must've. That's the only explanation for why he always invites me to his trap house and treats me like we've known each other our entire lives.

I navigate around all the scary looking dudes posted up around the room and make my way outside. Despite the overall air of impending danger, I always feel safe here. Everyone knows not to fuck with me because of my odd friendship with Mad.

I make it to the back door and step into his back yard. Every square inch of his fence is covered in graffiti, and it's all done by Mad. It's one of the most amazing things about him—his artwork.

The colors all swirl together into a satisfying pattern in my acid-laced vision. A smile spreads across my face, and then I spot him. He's sitting on an office chair in the middle of the yard with a bunch of other guys sitting in odd chairs, too. It seems like he's miles away. Whenever I take a step, the ground

seems much farther away than it actually is. My depth perception is all messed up.

Suddenly, I'm standing in front of him. "How was the acid?" he asks. His voice sounds different in my ears.

"It's doing what it needs to," I respond.

It's making me numb.

I can't feel my legs, but I'm still standing somehow. I can't feel my chest, but I know it was aching.

"Wanna smoke?" He reaches out and grabs my shoulder.

I nod my head back at him. He doesn't know what happened earlier, but he knows I'm not okay. "Get him a chair." I hear him tell someone, and before I know it, a chair appears in front of me. Time is so weird when you're tripping. I sink into the chair. Mad's on one side of me and some guy I've never met before is on the other. When Mad hands me the tray, I immediately get to work. He knows I love to roll weed, and even though I'm hallucinating, I can still roll a perfect blunt.

A pile of already grinded weed lies in one corner and there's a tiny bag of white powder next to it. I hold it up and show Mad. "You want me to lace it?" He usually likes to smoke coke-laced blunts, but I want to make sure before I go using up his stuff. I don't make a habit of doing coke, but I can't find it in me to care about anything tonight.

"Of course. You know you don't need to ask," he rumbles. His voice is deep and gravelly. I think it's because of an injury, but I never asked.

The sounds of their conversation fade into a distant hum as I lose myself in the precise art of blunt rolling. It's going to be the nicest one I've ever rolled with the amount of focus I have

right now. Soon enough, I'm putting the blunt to my lips and lighting it. I take a few deep inhaleds and a zap runs through my body from the coke, immediately making things appear clearer.

I reach over and rest my arm on the arm of Mad's office chair waiting for him to grab the blunt, but then I realize something.

His face is set in stone as he stares at some guy walking towards us. "Mad, who's that?" I ask.

"Somebody who shouldn't fucking be here."

He takes the blunt from my fingers and hits it, and I focus my gaze on the guy again. "What'd he do?" The words barely leave my mouth when I see a flash of metal and Mad shoves my chest with the palm of his hand. My chair tips all the way back to the ground with a thud.

POP! POP! POP! The distinct sound of gunshots rings through the still night, followed by shouts and screams. I scramble from the chair staying low to the ground, and look over it, trying to make out what's going on, but there's too many people standing in front of me.

I wish I could say this is the first time I've seen him do something like this. That's probably why they call him Mad.

I'm starting to come down from the acid, but things still look a little blurry around the edges and distorted. Someone grabs my arm and pulls me up to stand. "Go home, lil' dude," he says. He doesn't need to tell me twice; I rush to the front yard, grab my board, and am skating away when I hear police sirens in the distance. I decide to turn down a smaller street and take the longer way, so the cops don't see me. I didn't do

anything, but leaving from the direction of a crime scene is probably not smart.

I shake my head to myself as my foot pounds against the concrete. Damn. I really hope he doesn't get arrested tonight. What will happen to his kids? I'm sure they're at their mom's house, but it's my understanding that he supports them financially. Sadness overwhelms me at the thought of them growing up without him. I know he's not perfect, but he really does love them. They're his whole world, and the only reason he hasn't blown his own brains out—he told me so.

I force the thoughts from my head and pick up the pace. The neon lights blur past me in colorful streaks and the breeze coming from the ocean assaults my skin. I breathe it in deeply. Sometimes I do things on autopilot. For weeks, I'll make irrational decisions and then I'll suddenly wake up. I was never actually asleep, but that's how it feels—like I mentally checked out.

I think I'm awake again.

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NINE

Liam

I haven't even been able to process the shit he dropped on me after that party because he's missing. No one has heard from him since that night. It's been three days.

For three days he hasn't replied to texts, answered calls, or been active on any social media. He won't even answer Ben, that's how I know something's seriously wrong. And after the way he left that night, trying so hard to hold himself together when he was clearly falling apart, I'm worried he might've done something more stupid than usual.

I'm such a heartless asshole. Why did I have to act like that? It was just my gut reaction; I couldn't help it. After all these years— after we've slept together, even got dressed together. And the whole time he's been thinking about me like that. We fucking went to church together with my mom. We're practically *brothers*. What a fucking mess.

I call Ben, like I've done every day, to see if he's heard from him. He picks up on the first ring.

“Any updates?” I ask.

“No... But, uh. Did you hear the about the shooting at Mad's house? It happened the same night...”

I haven't told Ben what happened exactly, but I said we had a serious fight.

"Yeah, why does that matter? Teddy wouldn't go to Mad's house. He doesn't even know him like that."

"Um, yeah, he does, Liam. They're pretty good friends. So, there's a slight chance he might've been there that night."

I scoff. I've never felt more unsure about the relationship Teddy and I have. Of course he's become besties with the biggest drug dealer in the fucking city.

"Why didn't you tell me this shit sooner?" I say through clenched teeth, trying incredibly hard to use restraint.

"I didn't know until today. I didn't even make the connection."

I know where Mad lives, but I'm not exactly interested in showing up uninvited to that lunatic's house. "Do you have Mad's number?"

"Fuck no. Why would I?" I roll my eyes and take deep breaths. One. Two. Three. Okay, crisis averted. It's alright.

"I'll figure it out," I seethe and hang up.

I grab my gun from the nightstand and light a cigarette. I don't really know what I'm about to walk into, but hopefully, Mad can give me some good fucking news.

By the time I get to Mad's house, it's already getting dark out. There's three men sitting on the porch playing dominoes, and they seem to be in a pretty good mood until I walk up.

"I need to speak with Mad," I tell them, keeping it simple and straight forward.

“What for?” the biggest one says before slamming a domino down on the table.

“I’m looking for someone—little, blond, white boy. Think he might’ve been here Thursday night.”

That finally gets his attention. His eyes snap up to mine, and he must see the seriousness in my face because he calls out to Mad.

The screen door slams open a moment later and out walks Mad. Dressed in a white wife beater, gray sweats, and jail slides on his feet. His hair is done in skinny braids and his face is covered in tattoos. I’ve only ever seen this guy at the occasional party. I really can’t begin to understand what Teddy and him have in common.

I tip my head up at him. “Was Teddy here the other night?”

“Who are you?” he asks, looking at me curiously.

I shake my head. None of his friends ever know who I am and it’s really starting to get fucking annoying.

“We’re like family. We grew up together. Best friends.”

“If y’all are so close, then how come you don’t know where he is? He left here all in one piece that night.”

My nostrils flare. Who does this guy think he fucking is?

“We got into a fight before he came here, and no one’s heard from him since then. So any information you have would be pretty fucking helpful at this point,” I say, ditching the nice-guy act.

He cocks his head to the side as the men who were previously minding their business look up at me in unison. Mad takes a few steps closer to me and I stand my ground. He looks down his nose at me even though we’re the same height.

“What did you do to him? He was a fucking mess when he got here, and I ain’t never seen that kid with nothing but a fucking smile on his face.” It stings. I feel my gut recoil at his words because I know how true they are. He assesses me closely, his eyes ticking across my face.

“Oh.” He drags the word out. “I know who you are. Yeah. Love is a fucked-up thing, aint it?”

“What are you trying to say?”

His face is grim. “He told me everything, a long time ago. And I bet he told you, too. That’s how he ended up here that night. I’m right, aren’t I?”

My jaw ticks as I try to keep my mouth shut. He sees right through it.

“You need to make shit right with that fucking boy—is what I’m saying,” he declares, voice low. And it somehow sounds like a threat. He takes a few steps back, never breaking eye contact.

“I don’t know where he is, but I’m gonna give him a call. I know the cops didn’t pick him up that night; I can tell you that much.”

I nod, my face set in stone. There’s nothing more I can do at this point. I turn around and grab my board. The whole way home, Mad’s words ring through my head. *Love is a fucked-up thing, ain’t it?*

I can’t imagine a world without Teddy in it. He’s been my closest and only friend for as long as I can remember, and before that, there was no one. And yeah, we’ve made other friends over the years, but it’s still been just us. A friendship and bond that no one could break.

Sometimes, I think it's too much. Not normal. I've always envisioned him and I growing up and moving in together, living out our lives with each other. A woman has never even entered that picture in my head. I don't think that's normal for friends. Even best friends.

The way I see it, no woman—shit, no *person*—could fill Teddy's shoes. I've never even cared much about investing time and emotion into the women I've hooked up with, and I think it's because I just don't care to. Teddy has always been my rock. My shoulder to lean on, and the person I go to for everything. I even go to him for physical affection. I've never cuddled with anyone other than him, and I'm not entirely sure most dudes cuddle with their friends. Despite knowing that, I still thought it was okay to show that kind of affection to him because it felt *right*.

So why should I waste energy trying to form a connection with anyone else?

Now that I know he has feelings for me, and that he has for much longer than I like to think about—it makes sense. I can look back and see it all, how he began to change. It's *blindingly* obvious. It only serves to make me feel worse for not realizing any sooner. I can't even begin to imagine the kind of pain he went through.

I can't let go of the image of his agonized face when he finally came clean to me about it all. He was sure that confession would spell the end for us, and he'd felt that way for so long that nothing could convince him otherwise. I can't fucking stand to see him that upset over anything, especially me. If he's upset because of me, then he can't come to me to make himself feel better. And would you look at that—another fucking wedge to drive us apart.

The thing is, after he exploded and unleashed years of pent of anguish, I wanted to pull him into my arms and tell him it'd all be okay. I wanted to smooth his hair and inhale his calming scent. But I knew that wasn't enough to fix it this time, and when he turned around and skated off, I felt my heart leave with him.

I pull out my phone and call Ben. He went through something similar, right? He could help me. *Fuck*. I hate talking to people about personal shit.

“Yo, did you find him?” he asks.

“No, but Mad's going to call him. Hopefully he's just ignoring us. But, uh, look. I need to ask you something,” I say tentatively.

“Um, okay. Shoot.”

I grab my skateboard up and enter my cramped hotel room. After a few deep breaths, I respond, “Am I in love with Teddy?”

He coughs obnoxiously into the phone, and I can already feel the urge to say *fuck it* and hang up.

“How am I supposed to answer a question like that, Liam? Do you want to kiss him and love him and spend the rest of your life with only him?” he says, sounding confused as ever.

I steel myself and try to speak honestly. “I refuse to not have him in my life forever, and of course I love him. I love him more than anyone or anything else on this fucked-up planet.” *Do I want to kiss him?* The thought echoes in my head, and surprisingly I don't feel repulsed by it. I can clearly imagine pressing my lips to his full ones and owning his mouth. *Wait, what?*

“Liam... I feel like you maybe know the answer to this question—I don’t know what insight I can possibly give you. With Damon, I always had a *fixation*. Yeah, I guess that’s what I’d call it. It wasn’t until he noticed me and acted on it that I gave in and just followed my heart. Well, my dick. But, uh, you know. Maybe just try it out? Like kiss him or something.”

My fingers dig into my temples. “Ben, what the fuck.”

“Look, you’re the one who asked me for help. Me, of all people. Here’s my opinion. I think you do have feelings for Teddy. You guys have always been like two puppy dogs chasing each other around. And you look at him like no one else exists. Hell, you act like no one else exists. Just give it a *try*. This is just as awkward for me as it is for you, so I’m gonna let you go now.” The words tumble out in a rush before he hangs up.

I think there’s a lot of truth to his rambling nonsense. What would it hurt to try? The way my blood rushed to my cock when I imagined kissing him a few minutes ago makes me want to *give it a try* right now.

TEN

TEDDY

Sitting on the edge of the cliff, legs dangling below me, I watch the sun grace the horizon. I bring the cheap bottle of vodka to my lips. It's been a peaceful time—these past few days. Just me, liquor, and my favorite palm tree.

I didn't have anywhere else to go... I didn't want to tell anyone about it. Not even Ben. It's just too humiliating, and even if I wanted to, I can't relive that night. I've managed to stay drunk enough to block it out.

I run my hand through my sandy hair. I probably look homeless by now. That's right, I am technically homeless. I lean back all the way to the ground and close my eyes.

I'm drifting in a half-asleep state when my phone starts ringing. Every time someone's called or texted me, I make sure to check who it is. This time, Mad's name flashes on the screen. I bolt upright, swiping to answer so quickly I almost drop the damn thing.

"You're okay?" I ask. "Thank God."

He laughs on the other end. "I should be saying the same thing to you, man. Apparently, you've been missing?" he questions, sounding amused.

“What? How did you know?”

“A big dude with dreads waltzed up to my place asking for you. It was Liam, wasn't it?”

I swallow roughly. “Mhm. Yeah, that's him.”

“He's pretty torn up. He even tried to square up on me for a second there. You might want to at least let him know you're alive.”

I laugh. Liam's a crazy motherfucker for trying to fight Mad.

“Don't worry, I didn't touch him,” he assures me, jokingly. “Where've you been, anyways?”

“At the beach,” I muse and take another swig of vodka.

“This whole time?” he asks surprisedly.

“Yup. Didn't have anywhere else to go.”

“Come over here and get a shower and shit. I'll be expecting you soon, Teddy.” He hangs up the phone quickly, leaving no room for argument.

I groan and slip my phone back into my pocket. Why can't I lay here in my sorrow and avoid my problems a little longer?

I'm sweaty and caked in sand, though. A shower would be nice and maybe a blunt too. Yeah, that's good.

Clean, high, and only mildly drunk, I come to a stop across the street from Liam's hotel room. The idea of hitting Ben's house instead is weighing heavily on my mind. I heave a sigh and power across the street, dodging passing cars. This doesn't have to take long; I'll just get my things and go.

I knock on the door tentatively and hear him shuffling toward it. Each step he takes toward me ramps my heartbeat up higher and higher. The door swings open with a rush of frigid air. My breath falters as Liam yanks me by my arm, crushing me to his chest. His fingers tangle in my hair to the point of pain.

He's touching me. The thought ricochets in my chest like a dull ache. I try to extract myself from his arms, but he doubles down, squeezing tighter.

“Stop it, Teddy,” he demands. “Just stay still.”

The seconds tick by agonizingly. “Just stop, okay? I’m fine, everything’s fine.” I push out of his arms, and he lets me this time. His forehead creases in concern.

“It’s not fucking fine; what were you thinking?” he bellows. “You have no reason to be at a fucking trap house!”

Shaking my head, I drag in a tired breath. “Mad is a good friend of mine; he cares about me, and when I told him I wasn’t okay, he made sure I was. End of story.”

I navigate around his big form obstructing the doorway and head toward the wardrobe.

“What are you doing?” he asks erratically.

“Packing my stuff,” I mutter.

He storms across the room and slams the wardrobe shut. “We need to at least talk about this—you’re not going anywhere,” he fumes.

I whip around. “What’s there to talk about?” I shout. “I’m in love with my straight best friend, seems pretty cut and dry to me!” My hand trembles as I reach to open the door again. What more does he want from me?

Liam's hand slices through the air, wrapping around my throat in a bruising grip. He shoves me against the wardrobe and in the blink of an eye, his mouth crushes mine. My brain short circuits for a split second, then he moves, slanting his lips over mine gently. When he breaks away, I exhale shakily.

"I had to see," he breathes, eyes glazed over.

My brows draw up in confusion. Heart thumping against his hand on my throat, I ask, "W-what?"

He seals his lips to mine again, and I relax this time, allowing him to work his tongue into my mouth. His lips are softer than I ever expected, but still firm in a way that I associate with him as a whole. His tongue explores my mouth, gliding against mine slowly. It's all-encompassing fire. How does it feel this way? This passionate?

He groans, and my mind catches up to my body. I pull away reflexively. "Stop. You need to stop. Don't do this to me," I croak.

His hand falls to his side and he takes a step away from me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I scoff. "Well, you saw how it went the other night. That's why."

He shakes his head and reaches for the bottle of whiskey on the table, my gaze fixated on the long column of his throat as he upends it. He's a wreck, and it hits me just how worried and upset he's probably been. Takeout boxes litter the table and his clothes are strewn across the room. His work boots aren't even by the door like they always are.

I let my gaze drift to the bathroom door behind him. My eyes lose focus making my vision blur as I stare at nothing, cycling through all the different ways to say what I need to.

“Do you remember when we first met, and I followed you around like a lost puppy dog? You were my first real friend. The first person to give me a chance—the weird, girly, poor kid. And then you came along, already the coolest guy at the age of twelve, and I couldn’t believe it. How lucky I was. I still don’t understand it.” I sigh.

“All those times when kids would bully me, or my mom’s boyfriend’s hurt me. You were always there to defend me. I brought an endless stream of bullshit into your life, but you took it in stride. Just like with everything else you deal with. Nothing phases you.” My eyes sting, and I can’t remember the last time I blinked. I hear the whiskey sloshing around in the bottle as he tips it back again.

“It didn’t even phase you when I came out as gay. It was business as usual for you. But I think this will phase you. I think this is going to ruin it all, a-and I’m s-scared.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” he interrupts. His deep voice sends a shiver through me.

I shake my head and drag my hands over my face. “I’ve always loved you, but somewhere along the way that harmless feeling turned into something else entirely, and I don’t know how to make it stop. I swear if I did, I would end it. I feel like the most worthless person on the planet.” My voice breaks and a sob rips from my throat. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I should have told you.”

The words won’t stop. I can feel myself drowning in them—the lies and empty apologies, because I don’t regret it. I don’t regret every moment I managed to squeeze out of our friendship before the inevitable end.

The flick of a lighter interrupts my whirling thoughts, and I cut my eyes to Liam as he takes a long drag from a cigarette.

He never smokes them inside; he absolutely loathes when people do that, and I feel even more sick that I keep ruining him. The column of his throat is on full display as he tips his head up to the ceiling. His eyes aren't closed though, they're wide open. And his chest expands and contracts evenly.

Even though everything is crumbling around me, I still notice the way his abs lead into the tight elastic of his boxers, and how a few ropes of his hair fall over his pronounced collarbones. No matter what he's doing, I'm always enraptured by him.

"It won't just go away. Even now..." I mumble, voice trailing off.

He assesses me with dark eyes, brows furrowed. "Even now, what?" he asks.

I sigh. "Even now, during the worst moment of my life, I'm still attracted to you. It's sick. You didn't ask for this." I shake my head, knowing I'll never forgive myself.

He stalks toward the bed. Sitting on the edge, he clasps his hands together. "Who else knows?"

"Other than Mad, only Ben. I couldn't keep it to myself anymore, I needed help."

"And what did he say?"

I chuckle even though it's not funny. "He pretty much told me I need to start hooking up with guys so I would stop obsessing over you."

His face turns harsh. "And how did that work out for you?"

"I mean, it helps—sexually but not mentally."

He scoffs. "Seems like shitty advice to me."

I rear back. “Um. No, it wasn’t. What else was he supposed to say?”

“You should’ve told me. He should’ve told you to be honest with me. But I don’t see why you wouldn’t have been in the first place. What are you so afraid of?”

“How could I not be afraid? Everything’s going to change now.”

“Nothing’s changing,” he says with an air of finality that shuts me up.

“Liam. Don’t you understand that I can’t just sit around and watch you be with

other people? I can barely refrain from touching you. It’s agonizing and it’s sick.”

“So, touch me then.”

Heat rushes through my body from the tips of my ears down. “W-what? N-no.”

“Come. Touch. Me,” he demands, his voice a low rumble.

God. I want to. I want to, so much so that I’m stuck to my spot, eyes wide and mouth agape. Frozen. I never thought this would happen. There are so many things wrong with this whole situation, but my cock doesn’t care in the slightest. It’s practically strangled by my tight jeans, aching to get out.

I sneak a glance at his face and regret it immediately. His eyes are darker than I’ve ever seen them, and his jaw is set so harshly I wonder how his teeth can handle the pressure.

I close the small space between us. With him sitting on the bed, we’re almost the same height now, and I have to look down only slightly. God he’s so fucking perfect. His skin is rich and looks pillowy. Without overthinking it, I reach my

palm up and touch his cheek. I hold the side of his face and he tilts his head up. His thick eyelashes may be the only feminine thing about him, the way they curl up at the ends. I want to drag my fingertip across them. I want to touch every part of him. I trail my fingers toward his full lips and look him in the eye for reassurance. Then I drag my thumb across his lower lip, entranced by its softness and the slight give.

“Don’t you want to kiss me?” he asks, breaking through my haze. My breath stutters and I lick my lips.

“B-but you’re not gay.”

He grabs my hand roughly and shoves it onto the zipper of his jeans. “That answer enough for you?” he says through gritted teeth.

Holy shit. He’s rock-hard, from me. Because of me.

“But how?”

“Fuck if I know.”

Next thing I know, he grabs my face with both hands and slams our lips together. His kiss is hard and his lips are much bigger than mine. He’s kissing me with such intensity it feels like I’m being eaten alive. A small whimper escapes my throat, and he groans into my mouth. His hands drop to my hips and pull me closer until I’m straddling his lap. He squeezes my hipbones so hard I’m sure there’ll be bruises tomorrow. The thought makes my cock twitch.

I can’t stop myself from pulling his lip between mine and sucking on it. I suck on it so hard that it’ll be sore. I want it to be. And I think he loves it because his fingers dig deeper into me, forcing me down on top of him. And—Oh God, I feel it. His hard length presses against mine just barely. Suddenly, I’m

rocking my hips, my thighs squeezing around him of their own volition. I've never felt this way before. So needy. So slutty.

Heat tingles up the back of my neck as embarrassment washes over me. What if he thinks this is disgusting? I didn't even check with him before I started dry humping his leg like an animal. Fuck. I let go of his lip and pull back, chest heaving.

"I-I'm sorry." I try to shuffle off his lap, but he holds me still.

"For what?" he asks, voice slightly raspy.

"This is probably too much for you. I'm not usually like this, I swear. Fuck."

"My dick's hard as a fucking rock, Teddy. Believe me, it's not too much." He grabs my chin, squeezing it between his fingers and pulls me closer. "I think I like you like this," he whispers in my ear.

"R-really?" I stutter. My hips won't stop rocking against his in a slow agonizing rhythm.

He tilts my chin up and trails his tongue from the base of my throat all the way up to my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "You fit perfectly on my lap. The little sounds you make. Fuck. I can tell how much you need it, and it's so fucking hot."

A low whine leaves my lips.

"I wish you could see yourself right now. You look like you've already been fucked."

Lust is a heavy cloud in my head, and I can barely process the words he's saying anymore. "You're gonna fuck me? I've never..." My voice trails off.

“What?” he interrupts. “What about Asher?”

“We never had sex. We only gave each other blowjobs, and it made him really mad that I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t even let him finger me; it just didn’t feel right.”

His lip curls into a sneer. “What a pussy,” he growls. And then the pressure of my jeans against my dick is alleviated because he unbuttoned them. He wraps one arm around my back and lifts me up a bit, using the other hand to pull my jeans and briefs down past my ass. The cold air assaults my flaming skin, and I gasp.

Suddenly, his fingers are against my lips.

“Suck,” he demands.

Oh my fucking god. What is going on? My eyes are barely open, and my mind is void of all logic, so I wrap my lips around his two fingers and suck. My hips are still trying to rut against him, but the position of my jeans restricts me.

He pulls his fingers from my lips with a groan and reaches around my back side, sliding them down the crease of my ass. I start breathing frantically and lift my hips.

“Ungh... are you sure? U-usually people start with a hand job or something?” I stutter, barely able to form words.

He presses me back down and lowers his fingers until they’re resting on my hole. “Why would I do that? I’m not going to treat you any differently than any other person I’ve been with. We’ve waited long enough. You have a perfectly good hole right here, and I want to be inside it. Now.” He punctuates the word with a hard rub against the ring of my tight muscle. He circles around and around until I start mumbling incoherently. He presses one finger into me, just the tip, but it stings a little. Nothing I can’t handle, though. He

grabs my chin and pulls me in, shoving his tongue into my mouth at the same time as his finger pushes the rest of the way in. I moan against his tongue and wrap my lips around it, sucking on it with the same fervor I did his lip.

He thrusts in and out of me until there's barely any resistance, and it doesn't take long because I'm basically in the clouds. I don't think I've ever been more relaxed. It feels like I'm on ecstasy, and I could melt right into him.

"Please fuck me. Please, I'm ready," I whine against his mouth.

He lets out a low growl. "You beg so fucking sweetly. I didn't know, but I wish I would've known sooner." He pulls his finger out of me, and I immediately hate it. "Take your pants off."

I shuffle off him, quickly shoving my pants to the floor. "Do you need lube?" he asks.

"Oh yeah. I have some." I turn around and unzip my backpack, pulling out the small bottle.

"Why do you keep lube in your backpack?" he asks, his brow quirked.

My face heats with embarrassment once again. "Where else would I put it?"

He shakes his head and unzips his pants, pulling them down to his thighs. "Doesn't matter. Come here."

My mouth fills with saliva as I take in his cock. The first time I've ever had permission to do it. It's fucking huge. I've never seen it this hard before. It's wide, too. *Fuck.*

I lower myself onto his lap again. He pulls my shirt over my head, baring my nakedness to him. My arms immediately

wrap around my chest, feeling insecure, especially since he's still fully clothed. And what if he hates that I don't have boobs? What if he finds it repulsive?

His brows pinch together, and he pulls my arms away. Leaning down, he licks across my nipple, pulling it into his mouth. "Hm. Look at these tits," he groans.

My eyes shoot open so wide I feel like they'll pop out of my head.

"What? You don't want me to call them that? They look like tits to me. Just smaller. Like you." He smirks.

"I'm not that small!" I fake shove his shoulder.

"Pretty fucking small, just like this tight little hole you got," he whispers into my mouth as he brings lube-slicked fingers to the crease of my ass. He runs them back and forth a few times before pushing one in, stroking me from the inside.

This feeling—this fullness, I never knew it'd feel this good. But I need more. So much more. I let my head fall to his shoulder and whimper into his neck, "More, please."

"Well, since you said please."

Before I know it, I'm empty again and his fist is wrapped around his own length, coating it with lube. It sounds so wet, and I need it. I lift onto my knees and grab it away from him before he's finished.

A predatory smile spreads across his face, the crazy one. The one he wears before he gets violent. And, God, it sends electricity through my body.

"Damn, you need it that bad, huh?"

I ignore him because at this point, I can't take it anymore. I'm out of my mind with lust and aching for his cock. I've

waited so long for it. I've shown restraint for long enough.

I press the dark head of his cock against my hole and slowly lower myself. As soon as it starts to breach me, alarm bells sound in my head. Oh no. It's not going to fit, there's no way, so I come to a halt. But, Liam grabs onto my hips and thrusts upward, and the entire head pops through. Pain lances through me, but I rock up and down a little, working through it until I get lower and lower.

The pressure is intense, and it feels like he might've actually split me open. My heart beats faster than I ever thought it could and my hands tremble.

I finally seat myself all the way down until my thighs are touching his, and a loud moan rips from my throat.

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ELEVEN

Liam

This man is trying to fucking kill me. I just know it. I'm not even going to try to rationalize how we ended up like this right now, but, I knew from the moment I pinned him against the wardrobe that this is what I want.

I'm balls deep in my best friend, a guy. And for some reason, my cock is harder than it's ever been. And the loud moan he just let out nearly made me come. I've never experienced something like this. He's so... he's just everything. The way he needs me. The way he writhes around on my lap so shamelessly. I don't understand why, but it affects me. Makes me feel like I need to give it to him; he needs it so badly, and now that I'm here—buried inside of him—I know that I'm never going to let someone else touch him again. He has no reason to do that anymore, anyways.

His entire body is trembling, I can feel each shiver against my own skin as he starts rocking up and down. With his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his white-blond curls bouncing, he looks like a depraved angel. And it gives me something I didn't realize I even needed.

He kept saying how sick he is for feeling this way about me, but I didn't want to break it to him that I'm just as sick as

he is. My overly possessive feelings for him have been edging on more than friendly for a while now. Having my cock deep inside of him means I'm closer to him than anyone's ever been. The fact that he's whining and moaning incoherently just cements the fact that he'll never need anyone else. *Only me.*

I stand up abruptly, turn around, and toss him on the bed. "Face down," I order, voice low and even.

As soon as he flips over, his ass is already pushing up from the bed. I never expected him to be like this, so hot and desperate—like he's dying for cock. And I'm the one who's going to help him. I rise to my knees on the bed and hover over him, palming the soft globes of his ass. They're completely hairless and tanned to a golden shade like everything else about him. He's a golden fucking angel, and I'm about to mar his perfectly blemish-free skin. I bend forward and sink my teeth into the soft flesh. He bucks and squeals, instinctively pulling away, but I stroke his slicked-up hole with my thumb, and he slowly relaxes back into the mattress, letting me gnaw and suck at the now bruised skin.

When I'm happy with the red and purple art, I lean back and line up my dick with his entrance. His breathing turns rapid and flustered as he thrusts back against me. I push inside, meeting barely any resistance—only soft, warm tightness. It's so tight, tighter than any pussy I've ever been in, and I feel like I'll come sooner than I want to. But, fuck it. I start jack hammering into him, hard and fast. Thrusting as deeply as I can. My golden angel is absolutely mindless, in a daze, and mumbling things I can't understand. He gave up trying to stay on his elbows, so he's flat on his stomach, back arched as much as he can from this position.

I notice the profile of his face and how his eyes are closed, long lashes fanning across his cheeks. His lips, that are so ridiculously plump, appear to be dark red—probably from my bruising kisses. His eyes pop open and he looks at me... really looks at me. And it throws me over the edge, my balls tighten, and I release inside of him, never once looking away. I know I've never come this hard in my life. I slowly pull out and he winces, hissing through his teeth a bit.

“You okay?” I pant.

His beautiful face stretches into a smile. “Yeah, you have a huge fucking dick. Like monstrously big, and you just railed me into next week.”

I can barely hold back a smile as I lean down and inspect his hole. It's red and puffy and swollen, so I press my lips to it, and he gasps. As I'm pulling away, I see a trickle of my come leaking from it, trailing down his balls, and my cock starts to harden again. Thoughts of pumping him full of my cum and making him go out in public with it leaking from him flood my mind, but I tamp it down.

He rolls over and I see a wet spot on the bed. “You came without me even touching you?” I ask. I didn't see him stroke himself.

He blushes and covers his face. “What did you expect to happen? You were pegging my prostate like it personally offended you.”

I laugh loudly. “True,” is all I say.

I open the nightstand and pull out a pre-rolled joint and put it to my lips. There's no better feeling than smoking after an orgasm—it keeps that sated high feeling going. After lighting

it, I lay down on the bed. Teddy sits up and winces again. “You sure you’re okay? Can I do something to help?”

“No, it’s fine. It won’t be as bad tomorrow.”

“Hm. Come here,” I tell him. He scoots closer and I grab his chin. I look into those green eyes as I hit the joint, and put my lips against his, blowing the thick smoke into his mouth. I watch his pupils dilate. When he tries to pull away, I stop him and taste the inside of his mouth again. His lips are just as soft as they’ve always looked to me, and I enjoy how they feel against mine.

I’m going to own every part of him. Now that I know I can, nothing’s going to stop me.

He breaks the kiss and I hand him the still burning joint. He hits it a few times and then collapses to the bed, exhaustion finally catching up with him. I puff on the weed and watch him drift to sleep. He’s lying on his stomach with his face pressed into the side of my thigh, his breaths fan over my skin, in a way they’ve never done before. But I like him there. It’s just like when I hold him to my chest.

I need to do something though, so I get up slowly. I step into the bathroom, not bothering to turn the light on and grab a washcloth. After running it under warm water, I walk back to the bed and carefully lay it over his tender crease. I don’t know if it’ll help, but I hope it does.

As I lay down in my bed with Teddy right next to me, it doesn’t feel weird. It doesn’t feel wrong. He’s always been my only soft spot.

Knowing that he’s always wanted me like this makes a lot of things click in my head, though. It all makes sense now. It’s

not like the thought hasn't crossed my mind, but it never held much weight because I figured he'd just let me know.

I lied when I told him nothing's going to change. Everything will. I can feel it already. Are we a couple now? I guess so, because I don't want him to be with anyone else. Ever. I didn't like him being with anyone else to begin with, so it's not much of a surprise.

But if we're a couple, we have to be a couple in public too. I've never been one to draw attention to myself, but this is going to leave me with no choice. And I don't like that at all.

I don't need him thinking I'm ashamed of him though. I don't know why, but he's always been so sensitive about that. When we first became friends, he acted like he couldn't approach me at school, like I wouldn't want people to know we hung out. Which is fucked because anyone would be lucky to call him their friend.

I'm going to make him understand that I don't give a fuck what anyone else thinks of me. Only him.

When I think back to the girls I've been with, they all blur and fade together, and none of them even come close to inciting the same feelings that he did. I've never cared much about sex. I could go to a party and walk out alone, and I'd be perfectly fine. Happier, perhaps, about not having to deal with someone. I just thought that sex wasn't as big of a deal as other dudes made it out to be, and that I might be asexual.

But that can't be the case because the sight of Teddy's bare ass in my bed makes me want to rail him again, right this moment. So, I do find someone sexually attractive. And that someone has a dick.

I roll over and lay my hand across T's ass cheek, the one that's covered in red and purple marks and close my eyes. *We should've done this a long time ago.*

“You, what?!”

“I fucked Teddy last night,” I state simply.

Damon's acting like I've grown two heads, but I don't understand why. Everyone's always joked about how close T and I are.

“Okay, but I thought you were straight.” He takes a bite from his sandwich that Ben probably made for him, since he usually packs his lunch for work.

“That's why I'm telling you this. I don't know what I am and figured you could help.”

“You think I'm some kind of LGBTQ+ psychic or some shit?”

I stare at him blankly, waiting for him to get all his laughs out.

“Oh, you're being serious?”

“Am I ever not?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Maybe you're bisexual. You've hooked up with a lot of girls, right?”

“Yes, but I didn't really care about having sex. I just did it out of some weird obligatory feeling.”

He quirks a brow in obvious confusion. “Uh, okay. You might just be demisexual. You only feel sexual attraction once you're really close with someone.”

I let that idea roll around in my head. I mean, I guess it makes sense. I've never been close to anyone except Teddy, and he's the only person I've ever cared about having sex with. It still feels strange to label myself that way though. "Maybe. I guess it doesn't really matter."

He nods, seemingly lost in thought. "So, are you guys a thing now?"

I smirk. "What do you think?"

"Well, good luck with that. He's a wild one."

"If anyone can handle him, it's me."

My phone interrupts our conversation and 'Mom' flashes across the screen as I pull it from my pocket. I slide the button to answer it. "Hey, Ma."

"Hey, baby." My mom's southern drawl fills the line. She was born and raised in Georgia, and living in Florida for the past twenty years hasn't changed that. "Think you could come by today? It's been a while since I last saw you."

By a while, she means two weeks. "Yeah, I can do that. Do you need me to bring anything?" She starts listing a few things she needs from the store. She doesn't drive—I usually bring her stuff when I can, so she doesn't have to make the trip on foot very often.

"Make sure you bring Teddy, too. Alright, love you. Bye." And just like that, she hangs up the phone.

Fuck. I didn't factor my mom into this whole sexual discovery. She's an unwavering southern Baptist. I love her to death, but she's so consumed with her religion. She makes all kinds of off-handed comments, not realizing how much she's offending people. That's why Teddy has been avoiding seeing her for a long time.

My mom's always been a pseudo-mom to him. He relied on our tiny hotel a lot growing up, and my mom's heart is so full of kindness that she couldn't help but take on that responsibility. But would that change now? Teddy paints his nails and wears pastel colors and eyeliner. Will she just disown him over something like that? Give him a hard time?

The thought sends sickness coiling in my gut. I don't ever want to have to choose a side between the two of them. I don't know if I even could.

The only thing I can do is stand up for him, but I'm not going to tell her about me. No fucking way. Maybe in a while. Or maybe I could just keep it a secret from her until the bitter end. That'd be the best way to go.

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TWELVE

TEDDY

Liam: Ma wants us to come over for dinner tonight. Come straight home. We need to grab some groceries for her.

I stare at my phone in disbelief. No. There's no way I'm going to go see Ms. Janet after her son fucked me into oblivion last night. She'll know, and as soon as she catches on, she'll have a heart attack or something equally catastrophic.

She doesn't know that I'm gay and I planned to avoid it for as long as I could. But coming out and admitting that her son and I have... sexual relationship, is definitely not going to work. What was he thinking agreeing to that?

The more I think about it, the simpler the answer gets.

Me: I don't think that's a good idea. Gonna have to pass on that. Maybe another time?

I send the message out of view of the cameras here at work. There's a strict 'no phone policy' at this gas station.

Liam's not going to like my answer, but so be it. I don't know where he and I stand right now since he'd already left for work by the time I got up this morning. For all I know, he regrets everything and never wants to see my face again. He

was definitely into it last night, though. The thought sets my blood on fire.

Damn. I never expected him to be so dirty. I mean, he was all in. I could've just sucked his dick and been happy for the rest of my life, but no. He wanted to have full-on sex the first time he ever hooks up with a guy. It makes no sense, but I can't complain.

All day, I've been driving myself crazy. Considering all the possibilities this day may hold. The poor skin around my fingernails is ripped to shreds and my cheeks are raw from chewing on them. Anxious is an understatement.

Just because he fucked me and even seemed to enjoy it, doesn't mean we're going to run off and get married tomorrow. He's probably not ready to be out in the open with this whole thing. Or maybe he'd rather ignore it forever and try to stay friends with me.

If that's the case, then that'll be it for us. For good. Because now that I've tasted and felt him, I can't go back to before. Even thinking about it feels like daggers through my heart.

I restock everything in the store and clean every spout on the soda fountain, even though those are the night crew's duties. I need something to occupy my mind because the silence on Liam's end is killing me. He hasn't texted back or called.

It's nearing five o'clock—the end of my shift, when Damon and Liam pull into the parking lot. I know for a fact that it's them because of the heavy metal music playing so loudly the huge windows of my store are vibrating from the bass. I roll my eyes to myself, but when I see Liam step out of

the car looking sexy as ever, with his dreads in a ponytail and his shirt off, my heart skips a beat.

This is the first time we'll be face to face since last night. The doorbell jingles as he walks in without bothering to put his shirt on.

“No shoes, no shirt, no service,” I yell, pointing to the sign on the door. The smile on my face spreads as he ignores me and continues into the store, heading toward the beer. After grabbing two forty ounces, he swaggers toward me and sets them on the counter with a heavy thud. “I need cigarettes too, angel.”

The term sends a jolt through my body. Angel? I narrow my eyes at him in confusion but turn around and grab his cigarettes. Marlboro black menthols.

I start scanning his items. “Angel?” I ask. I double bag his beer and leave the cigarettes out. He starts slamming the bottom of the pack against the palm of his hand to pack them tighter.

He hums. “You look like a golden angel when you're being fucked.” He lets his gaze roam all over me. “Actually, you always look like that.”

I gasp in disbelief, mouth hanging open. He really said that at my job! Before I get a chance to say anything, he flicks my nose, grabs the beer, and the jingle sounds again as he steps out. I watch as he unwraps the cellophane and pulls a cigarette from the fresh pack. When he gets into the car, he rolls the window down and lights the cigarette.

And they just sit there. Fuck. He's going to give me a ride home, probably to coerce me into going to his mom's. I bring my fingers up to my nose, rubbing where he just flicked it.

Only a couple more customers come in before the night shift girl comes in to take my place. I count down my drawer and tell her about all the shit I manically cleaned so she doesn't have to. Then I grab my skateboard and head out.

When I slide into the backseat of the car, Liam hands me a cigarette. "You can just take me home with you, Damon. I need to see Ben."

He shrugs and says, "Alright."

At the same time, Liam says, "No."

They both look at each other accusingly.

I roll my eyes. "I'm not going to see Ms. Janet today and you know why, so just leave it."

After a few moments of silence and him twisting a dreadlock in his fingers incessantly, he finally speaks up again, "So, you're just going to hang out with Ben tonight?"

"Most likely, yeah. That's the plan. Unless you had something else in mind? It is Friday."

When he doesn't say anything else, Damon turns the song up—"Into the Dark" by Point North and Kellin Quinn, and damn, it sounds so good in his car.

We pull into the parking lot as the song's ending. Liam's already out and unlocking the door to our room without another word.

Fuck. I start chewing at my lower lip anxiously as I get out and slide into the front seat. Damon shakes his head at me as he reverses out. "Should've just went with him," he says.

"No. You don't know his mom. The sight of me as a full-blown homosexual might send her to an early grave. Not to

mention—” I clamp my mouth shut before I say something stupid.

“Oh, do tell. He already told me anyways.” He chuckles, wearing that big, bright smile that captivated Ben in the first place.

I shove his shoulder. “I can’t believe he told you!” I exclaim.

“Of course he did. We’re besties.”

I laugh loudly. “Really? Since when?”

He scratches his head in mock thought. God, he’s such a smart ass.

“Well, if you know, then you can put two and two together as to why I will not be attending family dinner tonight. Just like I haven’t in months.”

“I guess I get that, but you fools are going to need to figure it out eventually.”

I focus my gaze out the window, looking at the same scenery I’ve seen my whole life—the tall palm trees, the overgrown grass, crumbling sidewalks. Poverty everywhere. The other side of big city life; the side people tend to ignore. It’s the only thing I know, though, and it reminds me of my mom and the squalor she lives in. Maybe I should check on her, it’s been so long. I know it’ll fuck with me, but a small voice in the back of my head tells me it’s the right thing to do.

I shake my head to myself as we park in front of Damon’s apartment. Maybe some other time.

We both get out of the car, and I remember to grab my board to take it with me. Damon grabs a bag of tools from the

trunk of his car and leads the way. “I really need to get a truck,” he thinks out loud.

He unlocks the door and the smell of weed smacks me in the face. “Honey, I’m home,” he bellows as if Ben wasn’t sitting right there on the couch.

“Hey baby, how’s your ass feeling?” Ben asks him without looking up from his laptop.

I try to hold in the laugh, I really do, but it explodes from me. Ben looks up in surprise, gaping at me.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. I think you should be asking Teddy that same question.” Damon smiles knowingly and goes straight for the bathroom, leaving us both stunned.

I plop down on the couch next to him and wince only slightly.

“So, how’s your ass feeling, Teddy?” Ben says curiously, a big smile plastered on his face. I don’t think he ever smiled like that before Damon came around.

“Wrecked, thanks to Liam.”

“No fucking way!” he shouts so loud that I hear Damon cackling from the bathroom.

I sigh dramatically and let my head fall back. “At the party on Thursday, we got into a fight, and I told him I was in love with him. Told him everything.”

“And I’m assuming he didn’t take it well, which is why you disappeared for days. So, how the hell did that lead to sex?” I swear his eyes are going to leap from his sockets any minute now. I tell him the whole thing, from start to finish. All the dirty details, and you know what this fucker says?

“He kissed your asshole?!”

“I can’t make this shit up,” I respond and take a hit from the tall bong he has on coffee table.

He looks more distressed than I feel at this point with his head laying back against the couch and his hands rubbing at the sides of his face. I hand him the bong, and he hits it, still completely lost in thought.

He exhales a giant cloud of smoke and looks at me, glassy eyes full of concern. “What does this mean?”

I shrug. “I honestly don’t know. I thought we’d talk about it today, but his mom’s doing dinner tonight and I ditched—for obvious reasons.” Ben has had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Janet, so he knows all about her God-fearing lifestyle. The only thing I’ve never been able to relate to when it came to her. My childhood was religion-free, and I feel completely indifferent toward it. Except for the people who take it way too seriously—turning a good thing into a bad thing, and that’s sort of how she is.

“Fuck, dude. Well, y’all need to find a chance to talk about this, sooner rather than later. Liam’s unpredictable as fuck. I swear I never know what’s going through his head. I definitely didn’t see this coming.”

His statement gives me pause, because he’s right. I—never in a million years—saw last night going the way it did, and I know him better than anyone. I get goosebumps, and the hair on my arms stand up.

Anything could happen now. It’s up in the air.

I look Ben in the eyes and say, “I think it’s time for me to get drunk.”

He nods his head slowly. “Be careful.” And I feel the weight of those words in my chest as I pick up my board and

head out the door.

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THIRTEEN

Liam

Dinner went exactly as I expected it to go; Mom cooked my favorite things. She has a hot plate, a conventional oven, and she recently got a pressure cooker. Her kitchen set up is minimal, but she makes some bomb-ass meals with what she has. I've always been amazed by that.

She made homemade macaroni and cheese, fried pork chops, and collard greens. She even sent me home with extras for Teddy. She always asks about him, and she also suspects something's wrong. It's unlike him to not come around for such a long period of time. She tried to get answers out of me, and all I could say was, "It's his story to tell."

But that didn't get her off my case, either. She's like a fucking mind reader or something. I maintained the same stoic composure the entire time I was there, but she still grabbed my arm firmly before I left, and said, "When you're ready to talk about whatever it is, I'm here." Her eyes were wide and filled with compassion. It's too damn bad because I think she'd prefer it if I never tell her about this.

Well, at least the crisis has been averted for now. I have a feeling another one's coming, though, because it's one in the morning and Teddy still isn't here. I tried calling him, but he

didn't answer. I asked Ben if he was still there, and he told me he left not long after he got there. It fucking bothers me. I hate that it does, but I can't help it.

He needs to tell me this shit. He should be telling me if he goes to a party and where it is. I care about him and his safety. I know he's not used to having to check in with anyone because his useless mother never cared about what he was doing or who he was with.

I grab the whiskey that's almost finished now and head outside. I'll be right here, ready for him when he gets home. I chug the whiskey from the bottle and light a cigarette.

Surprisingly, I hear the scrape of Teddy's wheels against the rough pavement of the parking lot before my cigarette is even finished, and he's really gunning it, too. He comes to an abrupt stop at the curb in front of me and keels over, hands on his knees, panting.

"Fuck," he wheezes. "Sorry, I lost track of time. Was at Mad's house."

I rear back. Why the fuck was he with Mad again?

"Why do you insist on hanging out at a trap house with one of the biggest dealers in the area? You know he's a fucking psycho."

"Yeah, I know. I know, okay. But he doesn't act like that with me. He's different than everyone thinks."

"He literally shot someone a few nights ago. That person might even be dead now," I deadpan.

He starts pacing back and forth, cupping his chin in thought. "He just needs help, Liam. He's been through a lot, you know. He didn't get this way overnight."

Teddy and his heart of fucking gold. He's really trying to justify what Mad does. He robs, kills, and fucks people over. He sells guns, stolen cars, and any drug you could ever need. A total loose cannon.

And my golden angel thinks he's a good friend.

I could tell that Mad seemed to care about him, but he's not the type of person Teddy should be hanging around all the time.

He looks at me and lets out an exasperated sigh. "Seriously, Liam? You're a psycho, too. The only difference between you and him is that you're not a criminal."

"That's not even true, and you know it. I feel things, occasionally."

"So does he. He just doesn't show it to anyone. Just like you."

I scoff. "Okay, whatever. I'm the same as Mad. Why don't I have a cool street name then?"

He stops in his tracks, spinning around to look at me. "Did you seriously just make a joke about this?"

I shrug and take another swig of my whiskey. "Come here, Teddy," I say, lowering my voice to a whisper.

His quick intake of breath gives me pause. "Are you nervous?" I cock my head to the side. "After *everything*?"

He takes a few steps toward me and sits down on his board like he usually does. There's a certain satisfaction I get from seeing his small form down there like that.

"You've been doing some dumb shit lately, Teddy," I say, even though I don't like being an ass to him. He needs to understand the severity of his decisions, and no one else will

do it. “You went to a trap house, used multiple drugs that have the ability to incapacitate you, and you didn’t tell anyone where you were. That’s the least you could’ve done. If something had happened to you, no one would’ve known. You could’ve gotten shot. I wouldn’t have known. And then you go back to the very same place again. It shouldn’t even need to be said at this point, but I care about your stubborn ass. People do care about you.”

The light from the window behind me reflects in his glassy eyes. He wipes at his nose and a single tear rolls down his reddened cheek. It’s like a kick in the gut, but I have to do it. He understands tough love, it’s all he knows.

He shuffles forward off his board and onto his knees, wiping at his eyes. “Can I touch you?” His words are only a shaky whisper. I give a slight nod and stretch my arms out to him. He grabs ahold of them and shuffles forward, wrapping his arms around me, and burying his head in my thigh—right next to my already stiffening cock.

“I’m sorry, Liam,” he says into my leg. “I didn’t even think. I haven’t been thinking lately. It’s all been a blur.”

He gets like that sometimes. I can tell when he loses it and flies off the handle for a while. He’s always done this, but he’s never gotten any help because of his mother.

“I feel better already. I’m gonna do better now, I promise.” He nuzzles his face in my thigh, and the sweatpants I’m wearing do nothing to stop the feel of it.

“Is everything gonna be okay?” he asks, his voice small and childlike. Warmth spreads through my body at the sound of it. He only ever talks like this to me. I love all the things that he saves for my ears and eyes only. I brush my fingers

through his hair and look up toward the moon. “Yeah, angel. Things are fine. Shit happens.”

We sit like that for a while, and I start to think he might’ve fallen asleep, when suddenly he says, “You smell really good here.” I look down at his curly head buried right next to the base of my fully erect dick. “Like laundry soap and dick.” He snickers.

I use the hand in his hair to push him closer to it. He opens his mouth against me. The heat and dampness make my balls seize. He peers up at me through his lashes, looking like a dirty fucking angel. I smirk down at him. “What do you want?” I ask just to hear it from his innocent mouth.

He tightens the suction on the base of my dick before pulling away. “Let’s go inside.”

“Why?”

He rolls his eyes. “You know why.”

“Don’t be shy now, T.” I tsk.

He looks away, pulling his lip between his teeth. “I just want to taste you, okay? Really bad.” His soft, sweet fucking voice makes my nostrils flare. I grab his chin roughly, and he lets out a surprised yelp.

“Go inside and get naked, angel,” I say through gritted teeth.

His eyes widen, but he stands on shaky legs and enters the room. I chug the rest of the whiskey, giving him a few moments to get ready for me.

When I open the door, he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, completely naked—his face flushed and breath uneven.

I walk up close, so his eyes are level with my dick. “Get on all fours.” He drops his face into his hands and groans. “Just do it. You have nothing to hide from me.”

He adjusts himself so he’s on his hands and knees, with a perfect arch in his back. “Spread your knees apart.”

He does, and I get the perfect view of his pink ring of muscle between the smooth globes of his ass. The bruise I left on the right side looks awful—such an ugly contrast to the rest of him, and I fucking love it.

He wiggles his butt a bit and makes a whining noise, causing my attention snap back to him. “C’mon, Liam.”

“So impatient to suck my dick, aren’t you?”

He nods his head without looking at me, shame clouding his features. I pull my sweats down to mid-thigh, and jut my hard cock right in front of his face.

“Well, go ahead then,” I tell him. I squeeze the base in my fist and guide the head to his lips, painting them with my pre-cum. I should’ve known I was attracted to him on that very first day we spoke to each other.

FOURTEEN

TEDDY

Fuck. I must be dreaming. The way the round head of Liam's dick shoves past my lips sends a thrill through me. It's almost like he's using me for his pleasure, using my mouth exactly how he wants to. I groan around him as the velvety skin of his cock brushes against my tongue slowly. While peering up into his eyes, I secure my lips around the hardness and take control.

I may be inexperienced, but I know I can make this good for him. I sink to the base of his dick, giving my throat a moment to adjust around the large head obstructing my airway, but his hips jut forward eliciting a gag from me. I pull back, then let him sink deeper again, burying my nose against the curled mane of hair scattered around him. I *love* his scent. I consider just staying there and inhaling him for a while, but that'd probably be too weird.

His eyes sear into me with so much lust-addled affection, and his fingers tighten in my hair, making my scalp sting as he guides me back and forth.

"God," he groans. "I wish you could see yourself. You look like a dirty fucking angel with your golden skin and blond halo of hair, and dark, swollen lips wrapped around

me.” He throws his head back, showcasing the wide column of his throat.

I whine around his cock, nearly blowing my load from his words alone. I pull off his dick and rest back on my legs, pushing my lower lip out in a pout. “Can you please just fuck me already?”

I squirm, unable to stay still at the thought of him filling me up again. He drags his gaze over me slowly until he meets my eyes. He plants his palms on the bed on both sides of my thighs and leans in. His lips graze my cheek and trail downward, stopping to lock onto my jawbone. Goosebumps raise the hairs on every inch of my skin and my breath shudders. He continues his assault, tenderly dragging his lips down my throat all the way to my collarbone—nipping at it with his teeth. A strangled moan escapes me, and my hips buck forward, grinding against the bed of their own accord.

He lifts his hand and wraps it around my throat, making sure I look him in the eyes. The confidence he exudes in that simple movement sends heat rippling through my body, and I gasp.

“You know you’re mine now, right? You understand that? All of this”—he drags his gaze over my naked skin again—“belongs to me.”

It’s almost too much to take—my heart aches with the intensity of it all. “H-how?” I stutter, and he loosens his grip only a fraction. “How can you say that when you told me you weren’t gay.” My lip trembles in anticipation of what he’ll say. There’s no way he feels the way I do in this moment—like the world could implode on itself, but as long as he was looking at me like this, I’d be okay.

He tightens his grip again and leans in, brushing his lips against my ear as he whispers, “You have always belonged to me, in all the ways that mattered.” I shudder as my heart flutters painfully in my chest.

He withdraws and shoves me to the bed, where I lay with my feet planted widely apart, legs spread open. His knees hit the bed and he gets right in between them, looking down at me. He pushes my legs back, forcing my knees to my chest. Holding them there, he grabs my dick and gives it a few rough strokes. “This is my dick.”

His hand nudges lower and rubs against my hole. “What difference does it make that you don’t have a pussy? This hole can be my pussy if I want it to be—although it’s tighter than any pussy I’ve ever felt before.”

God, why does he say things like that. My hole throbs against his palm, and I whimper. I cover my face with my hands, refusing to look him in the eyes now. My hands are wrenched from my face, and he hovers over me, his hard cock pressing into my groin.

“You asked, angel. I’m just answering your question because you deserve to know. Your parts don’t matter to me—as long as they’re all mine. If that makes me gay, then so be it.”

I catch my lip between my teeth. “You know we can’t go back to normal now, right?” I rasp, still not sure that he fully understands the magnitude of this.

His wide tongue darts out and licks across my lips and over my cheek, all the way up to my eye; it feels so possessive. “This is our new normal, angel. This is it for us, and you know it because I’ve never let you get away from me, and I never will.”

It's everything I ever wanted to hear him say but somehow, my brain won't register it as the truth. There's no way I've gotten this lucky; nothing ever works out like this for me.

He reaches over to the nightstand behind him and grabs my lube from it—I hadn't even realized he put it there. He slathers it all over his cock and rubs it around my hole, dipping one finger in, causing my hips to jolt from the bed.

He removes the finger and my ass chases after it. Blood rushes to my cheeks at how embarrassingly needy I am for him. He doesn't make me wait long, thankfully. The large head of his dick quickly replaces his finger, nudging against my hole. When he breaches it, the white-hot sting makes me gasp.

But now that he's in, he presses forward with purpose.

The moan that rips from his throat is downright primal. *From now on, one will ever hear that but me.* I'm the only one who can break him apart like this.

He starts pounding into me, making my moans grow louder and louder.

"See," he groans, breath heaving. "You're wetter than any pussy out there. You hear those sounds? You have the wettest pussy, angel." The words tumble from his lips as quickly as he drills his hips against me. "My pussy. My hole. My everything."

I can't take it anymore—I grip my own dick tightly, jacking myself off just as fast. Breathy moans fall from my lips in a dizzy plea while his words echo through my head. My climax slams into me with no warning, and I spurt all over my stomach. He keeps fucking into me though, and I whine. *It's so sensitive.* Almost painfully so.

His hips meet my ass, and they stay there—pressing into me as he grits his perfectly straight teeth, and spills inside.

We stay that way for a few moments—his hips still twitching against me as the last waves of his orgasm wash through him, my chest rising and falling rapidly. He pulls out of me slowly and my hole protests. I can already feel the slight burning and total emptiness. I whimper, “Hate when you’re not in me.” And then I stiffen as I realize I said that out loud. *Oh god.*

His eyes flick up to mine and he rubs his thumb over my hole in a soothing way. “Maybe I’ll get you a plug or something,” he responds, softer than ever.

“A plug?” My eyes nearly fly from my head.

“You wouldn’t want me to stuff you full of my cum and then plug your hole? We could go to a party, and no one would even know that I’m technically still inside of you.” He smirks fondly.

Holy fucking shit. I sit up and scoot off the bed to hopefully hide in the bathroom, but I stop abruptly as something tickles my inner thigh. I drag my hand over the area, and it comes back wet with his cum.

“Bend over.”

“What?” I yelp.

“Bend over, hands on the couch. I want to see it.”

“But—”

“It’s mine, and I want to see it,” he demands. So, I do. I bend over, and he nudges my thighs apart. My neck prickles with embarrassment—I’m on full display, my spent cock hanging shamelessly between my legs, and my hole smeared

with cum and lube. He grips both of my cheeks firmly, pulling them apart, and I look over my shoulder to see what he's doing.

He's just *looking* at it, taking in every inch, like it's a Picasso painting or something. I squirm out of his hold because I can't take it anymore and he chuckles.

"It's all red and puffy and swollen like your lips." He hums.

My brows shoot up and as I speed-walk to the bathroom, I ask, "Are you always so... dirty like this?"

He stretches his arms above his head, causing his muscles to bulge and ripple. "Nope, just with you, angel. Guess I'm just comfortable with you."

It makes sense after so many years of friendship, I suppose.

"And I like how it makes you turn red all over. It's funny because you don't even realize how dirty *you* are."

I cringe at myself remembering what a writhing mess I was only a few minutes ago. I grab a rag and run it under hot water before cleaning myself up with it, making sure he can't see me. *Not like it matters.* I prepare another towel and approach Liam who's lighting up a joint. He extends his arm to grab it from me, but I jerk back. "I want to do it."

A wide smile lights up his face. "Okay, angel." He watches me the whole time I clean his soft dick, and then he takes the rag from me and tosses it into the basket. I collapse onto the bed unceremoniously and nestle into his side, inhaling his mildly sweaty and manly scent—exhaustion making all my usual concerns nonexistent as I cling to him.

“Never really cared much for cuddling either,” he rumbles, interrupting the calm quiet.

“We’ve always cuddled, but with clothes on,” I mumble into his side.

“I like how you talk all softly to me when it’s just us.”

I don’t know why I always take on the slightly childlike voice around him, and it’s kind of embarrassing. I press closer to him than humanly possible, hiding my face by his armpit, and I fall asleep just like that.

“Your hair looks fine, Teddy. We’re just going to Dame’s place; you don’t need to get all fancy with it.”

I spin away from the mirror and approach the door to slip my shoes on. “This is the first time anyone will see us... as a couple,” I mumble the last part.

He scoffs. “Damon and Ben already know. Ant is the only one who doesn’t, unless Ben told him.”

“He hasn’t.”

“In that case, Ant may be a little pissed off, but whatever. He’s been hot-headed a lot lately,” Liam muses.

I stand up straight and look at the object of my obsessive desire. He’s clad in all black—jeans that ride low on his hips, a t-shirt tightly stretched across his pectorals. He’s wearing his gold watch and his long dreads are loose. *He’s so fucking hot.*

“You’re so fucking hot, Liam,” I blurt before I can stop myself.

“Oh yeah? You can thank my mama for that.” He smirks. And that simple statement sends panic zinging through me.

“Um... speaking of Ms. Janet.”

The smirk falls from his face as he grabs his board. “Do we need to tell her?” he grouses.

“I mean, I don’t want to any more than you do. But we have to at some point. We can’t just be two single roommates forever; she’ll catch on sooner than you think.”

“Forever, huh? I like the sound of that.”

I grab my board, and we simultaneously drop them to the ground and kick off. Skating alongside Liam is one of my favorite things— we’re well matched in speed and skill. It’s something that has always brought us closer, it’s like second nature to us.

The warm evening air whips through our hair and we coast at a chill pace the whole way there. When we arrive, we don’t bother knocking, just let ourselves in. I doubt they’d hear it over the loud music blaring throughout the apartment. It’s a good song too— “Lydia” by Highly Suspect.

Elation floods me and a huge smile splits my face in half. Having the whole gang together in one place rarely happens anymore since we’re all so busy with college and work and *life*. I spot Ben sprawled on the couch behind a thick cloud of swirling red smoke from the LED lights, a dopey smile pasted on his face. I rush over to him and plop down on his lap; he immediately wraps his arms around me from behind and rests his chin on my shoulder. It’s a good thing Damon got over his stupid jealousy issue because I’ll never stop acting like this with Ben. It’s just how we are.

I’m obviously the softy of the group.

Liam shakes his head at us and heads to the fridge to grab a beer.

Before long, we're all piled onto the couches and passing a blunt around. Damon and Liam are sitting together probably talking about work, which is like a different language to me, so I tune them out, and Ant is next to me and Ben. I notice the barely there bruise on his cheek, and concern washes through me. "You gonna explain what that's all about?" I ask, pointing at it.

He frowns angrily.

"Yeah. Please share with the class, man," Liam interjects.

Ant rubs his hands over his face. "Jasper's a fucking prick. That's all."

"I mean he definitely can be, but what did he do to you? I didn't even know you were friends," Damon says, sounding just as confused as we all feel.

"We're not," he grumbles agitatedly, then stands up and grabs the vodka from the table and upends it.

Ben and I look at each other at the same time, shock written all over our features. He's completely flustered and so different from his usual self. He's the reliable one, the calm and smart one of us—things don't usually work him up like this.

"Have you slept lately, man?" I ask, noticing his bloodshot eyes and the dark bags rimming them.

He scoffs. "All I do is fucking work and go to school. I barely get to sleep. And it doesn't help that—" He stops short as the front door swings open.

And guess who graces us with his presence. Jazz—who’s sporting a black eyeliner, like me, and damn, it looks good on him. As soon as his eyes find Ant’s, a wicked grin spreads across his face and Ant’s frown deepens. He storms off and opens the sliding glass door to the balcony taking the bottle of vodka with him. Ben stands up, rushing after him.

“What’d you do this time, Jazz?” Damon demands as if he’s talking to a child.

He lifts his hands in a placating gesture. “It’s not really my business to tell. He’s a big boy, he’ll be fine. Don’t worry your pretty heads,” he says sarcastically. “Tough crowd. Sheesh.”

I still don’t know him very well, but I do know one thing—he’s the type of guy who’s always intimidated me. One of those ultimate players. Guys and girls want him, and he fucks them all. His family is probably the most well off out of all of us, so he always dressed nice as fuck, and it might be a rumor, but I heard that his dick is pierced. I grimace at the thought.

He takes the spot Ant just vacated next to me.

“Is it true that your dick is pierced?” I ask him with a quirk of my eyebrow.

“Teddy!” Liam chides.

“Would you like to see?” Jazz smirks. I thought Liam had the creepiest smiles, but this guy looks like a vampire or something with his pale as snow skin and sharply angled face. He reaches down to unzip his pants.

“No. No. No. I’m fine, I was just wondering, you don’t have to show me,” I say quickly.

“It’s definitely pierced, I’ve seen it with my own eyes,” Damon chimes in.

Liam doesn't look too pleased with the direction of this conversation, so I smile at him apologetically, shrugging my shoulders. "What? I was just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat, and you're kind of like a cat, aren't you? Small and cute, draping yourself all over everyone," Jazz muses, until his eyes fall on Liam's sneer. "Oh! Did I miss something? You and him?" he asks, looking between us.

My mouth falls open in astonishment. "I am not like a cat! And yes. That's my boyfriend." It's the first time I've ever said the words out loud and a small smile creeps across my face.

Liam leans forward, planting his elbows on his knees, looking Jazz in the eyes. "I know you're used to getting whatever you want, but you won't be getting him. I suggest you don't speak to him like that again, alright?"

Even though Liam is trying to be calm and friendly about the whole thing, it's very obvious that he's not fucking around at all. His face is set in stone, his brows in a hard line.

Jazz's lips curl into another sinister smile. "Oh, you have nothing to worry about, man. I've got my sights set somewhere else currently."

"Great," Damon says sarcastically. "Who's your newest victim?"

Jazz grabs his chin in mock thought. "Hmm. So there's this guy. He punched me in the face the other weekend."

I gasp, "Ant's not even gay!"

The crazy fucker just laughs like there's a joke I'm not in on.

“For fuck’s sake, Jazz! Just leave him alone. Play your games with someone else,” Damon groans.

Jazz shakes his head, clearly amused. “Guess he hasn’t told any of you what happened. I’ll keep it to myself then.”

I glance over at Liam only to find him already staring at me, and he must’ve tuned out of the conversation because the way he’s looking at me is anything but friendly. It’s insane how he can do that—how he can make fire lick my veins from across the room with a simple facial expression.

He’s always reminded me of a lion, with his angled eyes and strong cheekbones. His mane of hair and the way he carries himself, head held fucking high. Anyone could feel the dominance constantly emanating from him.

I wet my lips as my heart begins to race. I wish he’d pounce and attack me right now in front of everyone.

The sliding glass door slams open and Ant stomps inside, face set in stone.

“I’m out,” is all he says before retreating through the front door. Jazz scoffs next to me.

Liam stands up, downing the rest of his beer. “Well as enlightening as this evening has been, T and I are gonna head out too.”

I stand up quickly and turn to Ben, who looks like he’s just seen a ghost, and give him a tight hug. “Is he okay?” I whisper.

“I don’t think so,” he mutters.

It’s extremely unsettling seeing Ant like this. I just hope that whatever’s going on gets fixed soon. We *all* need him.

FIFTEEN

Liam

God damn, I'm thankful to be out of there— it's funny how T thought we'd be the center of all the drama tonight. Guess no one was really that surprised about us. I can't believe I've been so fucking blind this entire time. Thinking back on things, it seems like it should've been obvious. The only reason I can think of as to why I didn't notice is because I thought it was normal. Our overly close friendship suited me because I wanted it to be that way.

He's been a little chihuahua constantly under my feet for the past ten or so years— the only one who's dealt with my shit voluntarily for that long.

I don't think anyone could spot a single vulnerability within me until they see me with Teddy around.

Going out as a couple tonight was eye-opening. I've always had a sick sort of satisfaction in knowing that no matter who we're around, I'm always the most important person to him. I know him better than anyone. It's even better now, though. Tonight, as I watched him smile and laugh with our friends, all I could think of was the way he took my cock last night. How he lost all control and was completely at my

mercy. No one else has done that for him before, and no one ever could.

“Angel,” I shout, getting his attention as he flies ahead of me on his board. “Let’s do something. I don’t wanna go home yet. Let’s go to the beach.”

He cocks his head back to me. “Do you wanna see my secret spot?”

I smirk. “Pretty sure I’ve seen it already, but okay.”

His curly head shakes back and forth, and I know he’s rolling his eyes at me.

“If I take you there, you have to promise to not tell anyone about it,” he says seriously.

“Who the fuck do I even talk to other than you?” I laugh. “Don’t worry, T. I won’t tell anyone.”

I guess our trip just got longer and sweat is already making my shirt cling to my body annoyingly, so I pull it off and toss it at his head. He rips it from his head without swerving or anything, and still manages to shoot me a menacing glare. I’m constantly impressed with how good he got at skating; it took him way longer than me, but you wouldn’t be able to tell looking at him now.

He keeps my shirt balled up in his right hand the rest of the way there.

Eventually, we turn down a street lined with houses, and at the end of the street, it seems like a dead end, but he brings his board to a stop and lifts it from the ground.

“We need to go through there,” he says, motioning to the left where a thick forest is.

I quirk my brow at him but follow, anyways. The salty smell of the ocean wafts into my nose, so I know we're close. He lights our way with the flashlight on his phone, and soon we break through the trees into a clearing. He stands still, a hopeful expression on his face as he waits for my response. I step forward to the small cliff and look out over the water. There're massive houses on the other side of the intracoastal, with docks and boats in their backyards. The water is pitch black, only lit by the moon hanging in the sky.

“How did you find this place?”

“I don't know, just stumbled across it, I guess.” He shrugs sheepishly. “This is where I was all weekend when you thought I was missing.”

I turn around, glaring at him. “You slept on the fucking beach the whole time?”

“I was drunk the entire time too. Had a full Jack Sparrow moment,” he states matter-of-factly. He walks over to a flattened palm tree that juts beyond the cliff. Reaching under it, he pulls out a sandy glass bottle. “Why's the rum always gone,” he says in a shitty pirate accent.

“That's vodka,” I deadpan, dragging a hand down my face.

He shrugs and puts it in his backpack. “Need to remember to throw this thing away. Have some imagination, Liam.” He laughs.

I cross my arms over my bare chest. “T, I would've left the hotel for the weekend and stayed at Dame's so you didn't have to sleep on the beach. That's just fucking ridiculous.”

“I like it here. I came here because I knew no one could find me, no one could've bothered me.” He points at the palm tree. “I slept right there.”

“Under the tree?” I ask, confusedly.

“No. On the tree.”

“How... how the fuck can you even do that? Your back must be killing you.”

“Not at all, it wasn’t so bad.” He shrugs.

Such a weirdo. *My weirdo.*

“Well, what do you think? You like it? I’ve never brought anyone here before,” he mumbles, shoving his hands in his pockets.

I nod my head. “Don’t ever show it to anyone else.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. Don’t wanna blow up this spot, because I’m pretty sure we’re trespassing right now.” He laughs.

I reach into my pocket for my pack of cigarettes and pull a joint from it. I spark it and beckon him to me with a finger. I grip his throat firmly, tilting his face up to mine. His breath shudders as he watches me take a long drag from the joint. Securing my lips over his, I blow the smoke into his mouth. I thrust my tongue between his lips, dragging it around lazily. His face slackens, legs going weak as he melts against me.

I can cripple him with only a kiss. The thought settles in my chest, making me stand taller.

In one swift motion, I lift him up and he wraps his legs around me instantly, clinging tightly. I ease us down to the sand, so he’s planted firmly on my lap.

“Take your shirt off. Wanna see those golden tits,” I command.

He groans, covering his face. “Why do you say stuff like that?”

“Cause look how hot it gets you.” I drag my hand across his crotch and take hold of his rock-hard cock behind the material.

“I can’t believe any of this is actually happening,” he breathes.

I unzip his pants, freeing him and taking him in my hand. “This ain’t real enough for you, angel?” His hips automatically jerk forward, a moan falling from his sweet lips. Letting go of him, I lean back, planting my hands on the ground behind me. “Touch me how you’ve always wanted to.”

He looks down at my exposed form sprawled below him. His eyes feather across my skin before he hesitantly leans forward. He flits an open palm from my sternum to the smattering of hair below my navel, further tracing his finger along the pronounced muscles leading into my jeans. “You’re so fucking perfect, it’s insane how anyone could look like this, like a God or something.”

I scoff. “Says you. You’re the angel. I’m a mere fucking mortal at your feet.” His eyes go comically wide. “When will you finally see the hold you have on me?”

He jolts forward, crushing his lips to mine hurriedly. I let him take the lead. He sucks the bottom one into his mouth, licking and nipping at it. His hips rock against mine, seeking friction, so I unbutton my pants and line our cocks up. He pauses his assault on my lips and I bring my hand to his mouth. “Lick. Make it wet, so I can make us feel good.” His cheeks heat, but he closes his eyes and drags the flat of his tongue across my palm. He gets lost in it, licking up and down

and back and forth. I withdraw my hand and wrap it tightly around our cocks, stroking slowly.

He rocks on top of me, swiveling his hips around, head tipped back in ecstasy. I watch him through half-lidded eyes and wonder, *how did I get so fucking lucky?* The way the moonlight filters through his hair like a golden halo—he looks like a painting. *Beautiful.*

His thighs begin to quiver at my sides, signaling his impending release. He squeezes his eyes shut tighter. I look down and let spit fall from my mouth onto the round heads of our dicks, and use it to glide my hand up and down faster. Moans tumble from his lips, and I clench my teeth harshly, letting my eyes fall shut as the pleasure reaches its peak. Soft hands startle me from my haze as Teddy caresses my face and presses his lips to mine. He kisses me like it's the last kiss he'll ever have—softly and reverently. A garbled whimper leaves my throat as he throws me over the edge and I release all over my hand. Teddy moans loudly into my open, panting mouth as he releases, too. His cum mixes with mine as I drag my hand lazily over our sensitive cocks. He shoves his head into my neck, attempting to calm his rapid breaths. My arms wrap around him, holding tightly as I lean back, laying flat on the sand beneath us.

The weight of him on my chest is as soothing as the indigo sky blanketing us from above. Teddy's breaths begin to even out and mine do as well, but my heart thunders painfully in my chest. I lock him in my arms as tightly as I can, suddenly consumed with feelings far heavier than I'm used to.

I have to protect him. I need to keep him safe from all of the bullshit in this cruel world.

He deserves to always feel like this—needed and wanted. Someone as pure and ethereal as him should be treasured and elevated above anything else. I silently vow to do that for him forever.

“C’mon angel. I don’t wanna sleep on the beach, let’s go home,” I mutter.

“But it’s so far away,” he whines softly, nuzzling closer to my neck.

“Then we better get moving.” I slap his ass with my clean hand and shove him off playfully. He peels himself from me and rubs a hand across his exhausted face.

I make my way down to the shore and rinse my hands and face quickly. “The water’s cold as fuck, it’ll wake you up.”

He groans, “Let’s just go.”

I snort at his grumpiness and grab my board, following after him. When we reach the pavement, he drops his board to the ground and off we go. He skates like a fire’s lit under his ass, and I power behind him at the same pace.

By the time we make it to the hotel, we’re sweaty and sticky and panting. As soon as I open the door, cold air slaps us, and I let out a sigh.

“Shoes off outside, don’t be tracking any sand in,” I remind him.

He rolls his eyes. “I wouldn’t dare, Liam.”

We remove our shoes and knock off any sand left on them before bringing them inside. I head straight for the shower. “Come on,” I tell him.

“You want to shower together?” he hesitantly asks.

“Yup, let’s go. I’m ready to crash.”

“Me too, but that will make it take even longer because I won’t be able to keep my hands off of you.”

“Don’t worry. I have enough self-control for the both of us,” I assure him.

He follows behind me, mumbling something about how evil I am, and starts removing his clothes. I turn the water as hot as it’ll go and step in first, and when I turn around, I find T staring at me with wide eyes.

“I’ll never get used to being able to look at you like this.” He sighs.

My cock is half-hard and heavy between my legs, so I grab it firmly and give it a long stroke. “What about like this?”

His mouth falls open on a whine, “That’s not fair.” He steps into the shower, and I immediately grab the soap and start washing him, not messing around. His eyes shoot daggers at me when I spend a little too long around his ass—lathering the soap in his crease with two fingers.

Ignoring his frustrations, I wash myself with quick efficiency while he watches raptly, his dark red lip secured firmly between his teeth. As soon as I finish, I turn the water off and hand him a towel. We dry off simultaneously and I can see the exhaustion in his eyes. He doesn’t bother putting any clothes on before cozying himself face down under the blankets, one leg pulled closer to his chest. I slip in bed and nudge my leg under his own and watch him fall asleep. The soft angles of his face relax, and his cheeks are puffed out, making him appear to be pouting. I can’t help but smile at the sight of him.

My golden fucking angel.

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SIXTEEN

TEDDY

It's been a while since I last spoke to my mom. *Months.*

The move from her house has been gradual. I never walked up to her and officially declared that I was leaving. No. It started years ago, when I first met Liam. It quickly went from only hanging out to skate after school, to me staying over in his tiny hotel room every weekend. It was difficult for me because I knew I was imposing on him and his mom, but that feeling was better than what I faced at home.

Back then, when the minutes approached the ringing of final bell, signaling the end of the school day, most kids were excited to finally go home. They would pack their backpacks early, annoying the teacher by interrupting the silence of the classroom with the obnoxious sounds of zippers and books slamming shut.

I *dreaded* it—my stomach would plummet into an inky black pit of anxiety. It was physically painful and so taxing after days and years of dealing with it. I was constantly exhausted from being on edge. I'd leap for any opportunity to not go home, or to at least put it off. So, when I met Liam, of course I clung to him like a lifeline because that's what he was for me. My last hope.

My mom tried to play at being annoyed at first. She would ask me where I had been and with who. She'd tell me that I must be lying because I don't have any friends. I would get punished. My punishments were her way of using me as her own personal slave, though. *Scrub every tile in the kitchen with this toothbrush. It's not good enough. Are you fucking stupid, or do you just think I am? Do it again. And again. And again.*

She would sit there drunk and high on cocaine and watch me scrub for hours, and I had to look into her bloodshot eyes and slackened face and show her respect. She didn't deserve it, but I did it anyway. I quickly learned as a young kid that the best thing for me to do was to not say anything at all. *Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am.* That was it. It didn't matter that it was one in the morning, and I had to be up for school in a few hours. It didn't matter that I had homework to do—I'd just have to do it before or after class.

Coming home ended in pain and staying away ended in pain as well—it was an exhausting cycle. Eventually, though, she seemed to start ignoring me all together. I think she realized that if I was never home, her life was easier in some way. That's when she got much worse. The men started coming in and out, and I had to worry about her safety *and* mine. It's the strangest thing to absolutely loathe someone but instinctually care about their safety—a small tug constantly in the back of your mind no matter how much you want it to go away. How could I still care about someone who made me wish I never existed?

Soon enough, the weekends at Liam's turned into weeknights as well, and during the summer, I pretty much lived there. I'd spend as much time away during the day as I could and nights too. It's the reason I ended up partying so

much. I'd crash at any party and stay the night or go home with someone and sleep there. That lifestyle always put me in uncomfortable situations, but it made me feel better because I was bothering Liam and his mom less. They didn't ask for a lost kid to take care of, but his mom treated me like her own anyways.

Liam was the only reason I hung on—I hate to think of what I would've done if he hadn't been there for me through it all.

I look up at him from my place on his chest. An overwhelming feeling of gratefulness washes over me, constricting my heart, and I plant a kiss on the corner of his mouth.

“I think it's time to check on my mom,” I mutter hesitantly, not wanting to speak it into existence.

He narrows his gaze at me in concern. “I don't think you should, angel. You already know how it's gonna go.”

I swallow loudly, trying to wet my rapidly drying throat. “I know, but I just need to make sure she's alive at the very least. You don't have to come with me.” I reluctantly peel myself from his warmth and walk over to the wardrobe, pulling out an outfit. When I turn around, Liam's back is against the headboard, arms crossed over his chest. His pectoral muscles look even larger when he does that. I lick my lips and start pulling my clothes on.

“I'm coming with you,” he says with finality.

“It's fine, really—”

“Stop.” I stop clumsily jumping into my skinny jeans, almost toppling over. “I'm coming with you because who

fucking knows what you'll end up finding at that piece of shit's house. I know how you get."

My eyes widen in shock and blood rushes up my neck. I love when he gets all growly and commanding like that. I nod my head at him because arguing with Liam is useless.

We had to take a bus and skate a little to get to my mom's place. As soon as we come to a stop in front of it, the thick humid air becomes suffocating without the constant wind from skateboarding. Liam's face is set in stone, as he takes in the house my mom lives in now. He hasn't had a chance to see it since she moved the last time, and it's definitely an eyesore. I lift my shirt and wipe the sweat from my forehead, so it doesn't drip into my eyes and trudge forward.

The house is a little bit larger than a shed. It's a studio apartment so there's only one large room and a bathroom. I've seen some nice studios, but this one is more like a pile of shit. The grass and weeds nearly reach my knees, and the stench of hot, rotten garbage assaults my nose as we get closer. Right next to the front door, there are garbage bags that have been ripped to shreds, probably by stray cats or rodents—their contents scattered throughout the yard.

Liam's skin is probably crawling and we haven't even seen the inside yet. A shudder runs down my spine as I give the doorknob a try, and it springs open. I shake my head sadly, a million bad thoughts running through my mind in the blink of an eye. *Anyone could come inside. They could rape her, beat her, rob her.* There's that feeling again in the pit of my stomach, like a clawed hand has seized it in its grip, squeezing painfully.

The inside is so much worse than the outside. I gasp in horror. Every square inch of the floor is covered in trash and

clothes. The only piece of real furniture is a stain-covered mattress at the far end of the room. My eyes take in the countless plastic vodka jugs. It's the same brand she's always drunk because it has the most vodka for the least amount of money. They're everywhere. Liam kicks shit out of his way only to reveal a swarm of roaches. I gag, nearly throwing up, but I manage to swallow it back down. The buzzing of what has to be hundreds of flies is the only sound in the room.

“What the actual fuck, T,” Liam gapes.

“I didn't know it had gotten this bad,” I stutter and clear my throat.

Feeling a little lightheaded from trying to hold my breath as much as possible, I squeeze my nostrils together with my fingers. Breathing shallowly through my mouth, I follow behind him as he clears a path. She's not in the bed and the bathroom door is wide open, so he guides us toward it.

“Fuck,” He says roughly, and turns around. “Don't look.”

“W-what do you mean?”

I peer around his broad chest anyway, and spot her bruise covered leg wrapped in fish-net stockings and six-inch tall heels. I gasp and slam my hand to my mouth, my heart pounding against my ribcage. I push past Liam and see her there, sprawled out on the grimy floor, her head laying in a puddle of vomit. My eyes quickly cloud with tears as I fall to my knees. “M-mom. Mom.” The words tumble from my aching throat. I lean forward and press my fingers to the pale skin of her neck.

She's alive.

I choke on a sob and scramble off her. “Her heart's beating,” I sniff, wiping at my eyes. Liam pulls me to his

chest, pressing his lips into my hair and shushing me for long minutes until I stop trembling uncontrollably.

“What do we do?” I ask, pulling away from him. When my eyes land on her again, I flinch.

“We need to try to wake her up,” he says, sounding unsure.

He moves around me and plants his feet on either side of her body, bending over. He starts shaking her softly. She doesn't budge, so he says her name and gets more forceful. “Diana. Diana. Diana.” He gets louder each time.

I stand there uselessly, chewing a hole in my cheek, feeling more thankful than ever that he came with me. I don't have the strength to do this—to raise my voice and shake her violently. I fear her even in her sleep.

I'm so hungry; my stomach feels like it's eating itself. It's the weekend so I can't eat breakfast and lunch at school like I usually do. Other kids talk about how gross it is, but I don't see anything wrong with it.

Desperation brings me to her door that's been shut for the past two days. She might have food in there, maybe some old McDonalds or something. I've already looked through all the cabinets in the kitchen, using a chair to climb on the counter to see into them. Nothing. There's usually at least rice; I know how to cook that on my own, but I guess it's all gone now.

My heart speeds up as I turn the knob. She's sleeping, her snores let me know she probably won't wake up if I make too much noise. In the darkness, I see a paper bag on the nightstand next to her bed and my mouth salivates. I tip-toe across the room; excitement gets the best of me and my foot hits something, making it slam into the nightstand. The sound of a plastic jug.

Mom jolts from her sleep and reaches out, locking her fingers around my wrist. Her nails dig into my skin, and I hiss in pain. "S-sorry Mom, I-I was just hungry," I stutter, barely able to drag in a breath.

Her grip on my wrist grows tighter, but she's not looking at me. She's looking past me, toward the open closet on the other side of the room. Her mouth hangs open in wonder. "Baby, what is that?" she asks, sounding confused.

Fear prickles at my spine as I follow her gaze, craning my neck to see. "It's n-nothing, just your closet," I whisper.

Her eyes widen in fear. "No it's not. No. No. Go look."

She sounds terrified and it's making me scared. Every hair on my body stands on end as I take a few cautious steps toward the dark corner. I swallow deeply and reach out my trembling hand, shutting the door with a relieved sigh.

"See, Mom. It's nothing, it's okay," I reassure her hesitantly.

"It's up there," she says, pointing at the ceiling. "I see it."

I look up and see nothing.

"Get it," she demands, voice turning stern.

Oh no. "Mom, I'm not tall enough, I can't reach that high," I mumble.

"Go get a fucking chair then! Get it out of my room!" she yells, face twisted in anger.

I gasp and run from the room as fast as I can. I grab the chair I used to climb on and drag it to her room. It's too heavy and it's taking too long. She's going to be even angrier. I try my hardest to get the chair to her room quickly, but when I finally get back, she's asleep again.

My shoulders relax and I quiet my rushing breaths, so she doesn't wake up again. I close her door softly and drag the chair back to the kitchen. Fear makes me quiet as a mouse as I make my way back to my room. I shut the door and lay on the bed, pulling the covers over my head. It's not bedtime yet, but if I go to sleep now, I won't be hungry anymore.

A loud, wet cough brings me back to the present. My mom's grabbing at her chest as she lifts from the ground. My lower lip trembles, and I don't feel relieved anymore—I feel sick.

“About damn time,” Liam says to her. He grabs her hand and pulls her to a sitting position. “What the hell have you been doing, Diana?”

She blinks blearily, taking in the disgusting scene around her. “I-I don't know what happened. I remember coming home from work in the morning... and that's it,” she says, voice hoarse.

Liam shakes his head. “You need to take a shower.” He motions to her vomit-soaked strands of her hair.

She nods. “Yeah. You're right.”

I clear my throat. “Do you need any help, mom?”

“Please.”

I rush forward and pull her up to stand and navigate her in the tight space to sit on the toilet. “Grab me a drink, Liam,” she groans.

“Already?” He scoffs.

“I'll get sick if I don't drink soon, so get me a fucking drink or I'll do it myself,” she seethes, voice turning cold as ice.

I flinch at the tone, an automatic response that I can't control. Even now. He turns around, mumbling under his breath and rummages through the piles of trash near the mattress, looking for a bottle with some left in it. I turn on the shower letting the water get hot and undo her heels. Liam comes back, shaking a bottle in his hand. "Here," he grunts, thrusting it toward her. She glares at him but takes it anyways, uncapping it and downing the rest of its contents. Bile rises in my throat at the way she drinks vodka like water.

He turns around and leans against the wall outside of the bathroom. Mom drops the bottle to the floor, and the sound of the plastic hitting tile makes me flinch again. I grit my teeth together, trying to shake the feeling away.

She unclips her bra and slides her thong off. I keep my gaze fixed on the wall to give her some form of privacy. "Help me to the shower," she says. I lean down and let her throw her arm over my shoulder as her other arm covers her chest. Her skin is so pale it looks transparent and paper thin; I can see the blue network of veins in her chest and every bone of her ribcage. They jut out sharply, almost like they'll rip through the fragile layer of skin.

Fire licks at the back of my eyes, but I blink it away and help her into the shower. She slumps against the wall, using it for support. "I've got it from here, Teddy," she breathes.

I gulp and nod, taking the few steps out of the cramped bathroom.

Liam drags his gaze over me as if he's assessing me for injuries. They're only on the inside, though, and he knows that. When he meets my eyes, his stern expression goes soft. Firm hands grab my face and he brushes his lips against mine. My eyes fall closed, and he plants a kiss on each one of them.

“I’m going to check if she has any garbage bags and try to pick up a little. You can wait outside if you want,” I mumble. He looks at me like I’m stupid. “Or you could help.” I shrug.

There’s a small countertop with a sink and two cabinets beneath it by the front door. She always keeps them under the sink, and luckily that hasn’t changed. I hand one to Liam and take one for myself. We get to work, picking up the trash and throwing all the clothes into a pile in the corner of the room. Everything is infested with roaches, and I yelp every time one touches my hand. It’s so fucking nasty, I don’t understand how she can live like this—our house was always spotless growing up. Thankfully, it’s a small space so it doesn’t take long. We’ve filled a couple garbage bags each, so we reluctantly set them outside with the other ripped up ones. It’s better than them stinking up the place in here.

The floor is all cleared away, so I grab the broom and start sweeping. Liam’s standing at the front door, puffing on a cigarette, anxiously twisting a dread between his fingertips. I’m not entirely sure he’s ever seen this much mess in his life since he and his mom are both clean freaks. Mom steps out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She looks much more awake but not alive. She lets out a surprised “Oh” as she steps across the threshold from the bathroom.

“Do you have a mop? I saw bleach under the sink.”

She sits down on the mattress and drags a brush through her matted blonde hair. “No, there’s no mop,” she says.

“It’s okay. I saw a towel I can use,” I mutter and rummage through the pile of laundry. When I finally find it, I spin around and see her watching me with tired eyes. She doesn’t look embarrassed at all. It tells me all I need to know—this is her rock bottom, and I don’t think she’s even realized it yet.

That, or she doesn't care. Sadly, all I can think is that I'm happy I don't have to rely on her for anything anymore.

I grab the bleach and splash it straight from the bottle onto the floor and throw the towel down. I stand on it and shuffle it across the tile using my feet. It's not the best way to clean a floor, but it's better than nothing. When I reach the front door, I toss the towel aside and step onto the porch next to Liam.

"Just came to check on you. What are you doing for the rest of the day?" I ask hesitantly.

"Probably gonna go back to sleep. I have work tonight," she groans while laying her head back on the pillow.

"Same club?"

"Same club," she confirms.

I nod dumbly because there's nothing else to really say at this point and shut the door.

"She needs some fucking help." Liam sighs.

We grab our boards and start in the direction of the bus stop. "There's nothing we can do. She's a grown woman and if she doesn't want help, then she can't get it. We can't force her; that wouldn't work anyways."

He nods. "Yeah, I know. I've never respected her for what she's done to you, but it's still shitty to see a person that deep in the trenches."

"I never thought I'd see her like this either. Maybe I can get in touch with a family member or something. I don't know. I just want to go to sleep and forget this ever happened."

He turns his head to look at me and says, "We'll figure it out."

Either I'm the shittiest person in the world or this is how I handle trauma, but at this point. I want to wash my hands of her and never see her again. *It would be easier than watching her slowly deteriorate.*

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SEVENTEEN

Liam

“Angel?” I whisper.

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to hit this joint?” He rolls over and rubs at his sleepy eyes, then reaches his hand out blindly. I chuckle and place it in his fingers.

He wraps his cherry red lips around the joint, inhaling deeply. “What time is it?” he rasps.

“Eight. You slept for like seven hours.”

He opens his eyes all the way now and runs a hand across his chest. “Damn,” he says surprisedly.

“You needed it though.”

He nods and I roll over, propping myself up on his chest. “Fuck, you’re heavy,” he jokes.

I smirk and dart my tongue out across his nipple and it peaks instantly. He tugs on my hair to pull me closer, so I help him out and move up his body. I spread his plump lips with my thumb, and he catches it, locking it between them. Blood rushes to my cock, causing it to thicken against him. He sucks

on it playfully. I drop my forehead to his and pull my thumb from his mouth.

“Don’t play with me like that,” I groan.

“Oh... you actually thought that was hot? I thought it was just some cheesy pornstar thing—”

I smash my lips onto his and fuck my tongue into his mouth, dragging it from cheek to cheek the way I love. He moans around my tongue—a real one this time. His legs wrap around me, pulling me closer as he rubs his hard cock against mine.

I break the kiss and trail my lips across his jaw, down his neck, and nip at his collar bone. He hits the joint again, and I instinctively seal my lips to his, letting him blow the smoke into my mouth. I exhale the smoke on his neck, still wet with my saliva. He gasps and reaches out to the nightstand putting the joint in the ashtray.

“I bet it never felt this way with anyone else,” I whisper hotly into his ear. Goosebumps break out across his skin as he shudders.

“You know it hasn’t,” he whimpers, his hips twitching upward in search of friction.

“I know, baby.” I sit back on my legs and slide his rainbow briefs down his legs. “Spread them wide open for me.” There’s none of the usual hesitance from him.

I squeeze his balls, cupping and pulling at them, and latch my mouth to his inner thigh. I suck and pull on the skin with my teeth, hard enough to leave a mark. He hisses from the pain-laced pleasure. Even though he’s an angel, I don’t take it easy on him. I never will because I know he wants my all. He

wouldn't want me to hold back the torrent of desire he causes within me.

I release the bruised skin and dip down to his hip, dragging my tongue across the smooth, golden skin toward his dick. I haven't been this close to it before—or any dick for that matter. But I don't care; I'm going to make him feel amazing after today.

He's blocking it all out, but I know today was one of the worst days of his life so far. We'll both remember it for the rest of our lives, and I wish I could take it all away from him. No one should ever have to see their own mother like that; we're not built for that kind of shit. My nostrils flare in anger just thinking about it. Why do the worst things happen to the best people? My angel doesn't deserve none of that shit.

“I'm gonna suck you now, T,” I tell him.

He gasps, “A-are you sure?”

I smirk and grab him in my hand. The dark pink head is dripping pre-cum. “You're always so wet for me, angel.”

His brows lift in shock, and he groans as I close my mouth around him. I swirl my tongue around the head, focusing on his slit and the tender spot underneath it. His legs reflexively close around me, locking my head between his thighs. It urges me on, making me take him deeper. I slide my lips down his shaft until he hits the back of my throat.

He moans and writhes beneath me as I slide up and down until my lips reach the base of him. I stay there for a moment allowing my throat to adjust.

“Oh my fucking god, Liam,” he yells, and I feel his cock grow harder and throb against my tongue like he's about to

cum. I pull off quickly and squeeze him in my hand, preventing him from coming.

“Not yet, angel. I want to eat this pussy, too.”

His hands fly up to cover his face on a long groan, but he relents, grabbing the backs of his thighs pulling them up to his chest.

“You love it when I talk to you like that, don’t you?”

He refuses to meet my gaze, but hums in agreement. I chuckle against the fleshy skin of his ass and pull it between my teeth. His hips lift from the bed, nudging me toward where he really wants me. So, I give him what he wants. I drag my flat tongue from the bottom of his crease to the top.

I press my lips to his hole, nipping and licking at it, and it drives him crazy. Indecipherable noises cascade from his lips and his ass meets me with every thrust of my tongue. My golden angel loves getting his pussy eaten.

His hole is soft, so I slide my finger next to my tongue working it into him.

“More, baby. Give me two,” he begs. The endearment sparks something within me, and I give him what he wants. The second finger meets only a slight amount of resistance, but I think he likes the stretch because he moans in relief. I lick around his hole while thrusting in and out. I quirk my fingers inside of him to reach his prostate, and my quick movements obliterate him. He’s a whining mess beneath me, tugging at my hair to the point of pain.

I fucking love it so much—him. Completely at my mercy.

I grab my own dick with one hand, still thrusting into him with the other, hitting his spot over and over again.

“Come for me, T,” I groan. My hand flies up and down my rock-hard cock and he reaches for his own, giving it a few tugs before cum shoots from the perfect head of it. Everything about him is so perfect.

“I fucking love you... so much,” I roar as my climax slams into me, toppling me over. I collapse onto his toned stomach as I release all over him. His abs ripple beneath me with his shuddered gasps. “You’re just... you’re everything,” I pant against his sweaty skin.

I roll my head upward to look at him. He’s red all over, from his chest to his neck to his cheeks, and pants. His eyes are glassy as he gapes down at me through heavy lids.

“W-what do you mean?” he stutters, blissed out.

My fingers are still buried deep in his ass, but I leave them there, rotating them around. His legs tremble on a whimper. “I mean I’m going to be by your side ’til the end of time. You’ll never be alone again; you’ll never get rid of me.”

“I don’t want you to ever go,” he mumbles, uninhibited affection lacing his tone.

Fire licks against my heart at his words. I believe him, and it’s as terrifying as it is gratifying. I swirl my fingers once more and pull them from him. Leaning back, I inspect the area. His hole is bright red to match the marks I left on his thighs with my hands and mouth, and a few ropes of my cum decorate him there. A satisfied sound rumbles in my chest.

“Ugh,” he groans. “Why do you always have to look? It’s so embarrassing.” His hole clenches and releases with his words.

“I like to see what I do to you. I like knowing that you have these marks under your clothes—that no matter what,

you're still feeling me.”

“Weirdo,” he bristles, but his eyes are dark with lust.

He grabs his phone from the nightstand and starts flicking through it while I gather the things to clean us both up. A satisfied smirk rests on my face as he opens his legs up wider and continues scrolling on his phone while I clean him with a damp cloth.

“Do you wanna go to Danny’s? Apparently, there’s a big party tonight,” he muses noncommittally.

I collapse next to him on the bed and he rolls over, draping his leg across mine, pressed right up close to my side. “Is that what you really want to do tonight?” I ask, just to check.

He shakes his head against me. “No. I don’t want to move from this spot. Now that I think about it, I don’t think my legs would work anyway.”

I squeeze his ass cheek roughly and he rocks against me. “So that’s all I had to do to get you to stay in one place for more than an hour?” I say while shaking my head.

“Shut up.” He yawns. “I’m going back to sleep. Put on a show I can listen to.” His soft, sleepy voice is in full effect.

I roll my eyes. He’s always slept with the TV on. I need the room to be pitch black when I sleep, so I leave it on until he starts snoring lightly and turn it off.

“I don’t think I should go,” Teddy groans from the couch, face ashen with fear. He just repainted his nails black, and his narrow fingers are all spread out as he waits for them to dry.

“It’s just lunch, T. She’ll be in a good mood; she always is after Sunday service, you know that,” I remind him while clasping my watch around my wrist.

“Sunday service was probably a good reminder for her to hate homosexuals,” he mumbles under his breath.

“It’s you and me forever, right?” I ask, pinning him with my gaze.

“Yes.”

“Then what difference does it make?”

He works his lower lip thoughtfully. I have no intentions of telling her about us today, but I’ll have to eventually—I’ve come to terms with it. I’ve never been a coward, and I won’t start now. “Get dressed,” I tell him and head outside.

The small school bus that the church uses is parked, and people are gathered around it. It looks like they’re giving away backpacks full of school supplies alongside the bread and pastries they usually hand out. I didn’t even realize school was starting again. Damn, where does the time go.

The woman who lives in the room next door follows behind her son as he excitedly rummages through his new backpack that’s almost the same size as him.

“Come on, Mikey,” she says to him. “You can look at it all when we get inside.”

“Fine,” he says dramatically.

She notices me watching them and smiles. “He’s starting pre-k this year.” She sighs.

I’ve never gotten a good look at the kid, but his wild blond hair reminds me of Teddy’s. I nod. “Looks like he’s excited.

I've been meaning to tell you, feel free to let me know if we're ever too loud or something."

She looks at me appreciatively. "Oh, not at all! Everyone here's pretty respectful luckily. The other one I stayed at wasn't like this at all," she grimaces.

"Yeah, there's some shady spots around here. Let me know if you ever need anything, though. You want my number? I work a lot, so it'd be easier to get in touch this way."

She blinks up at me a few times. "Uh, yeah. Sure. Wow, I'm sorry. That's just really kind of you."

"It's no problem."

The door opens behind me and Teddy steps out wearing the most boring outfit I've ever seen on him. I shake my head and type my number into her phone.

She looks down at it. "Thanks, Liam. I'm Maddy by the way."

"Nice to meet you, officially. Remember, hit me up if you need anything at all."

She waves bye to us and corrals her son back into their room. "What was that about?" Teddy asks curiously.

"She's a single mom, and her son is starting school this year. I figured I'd let her know I'm around if she ever needs help with anything." I clear my throat. "There's a few people who stick out in my memory, people who helped my mom when I was growing up in a hotel just like him. They'd watch me so she could pick up another shift at work, or they'd grab stuff from the store for us. It probably seemed so insignificant to them at the time, but it meant everything to us."

“You’re such a softy,” he teases. “I’m surprised you reached out to her; she must’ve talked to you first.” He laughs.

“Well, that’s all my kindness for the day,” I deadpan, rolling my eyes.

“Better save some of that good mood because we’re about to walk into a shit storm of epic proportions.”

“You don’t have to change your appearance for my mom. You know that, right? You can wear all your colorful shit—it doesn’t matter what she or anyone thinks,” I say.

“I don’t usually care, but she’s your mom. I don’t want her to hate me...” he mumbles.

“Teddy, I don’t think anyone could ever hate you.” I look him directly in the eyes, so he can see just how much I mean those words. His entire life, he’s struggled with this self-deprecating mindset, and I don’t understand why. Sure, he was picked on a bit when he was a kid, but that’s only because bullies take advantage of those who won’t defend themselves. There was never anything wrong with him, and there never has been. He acts like I’m so perfect—I can tell how he puts me on a pedestal, but standing next to him makes me feel small. I could never light up a room of strangers like he does, his compassion and empathy far surpass mine—mine’s almost nonexistent. He’s always inspired me to come out of my shell and be the best I can for him, and now that encompasses more than friendship.

We approach the restaurant—it’s a local taco place we’ve been going to for as long as I can remember. The door’s wide open, and the air inside is just as warm as it is outside. The large industrial fan toward the back doesn’t do much to help cool the place down.

“Hola Liam,” Mrs. Gloria shouts from behind the counter. “Oh! Teddy’s here too. Of course,” she says jokingly.

“Hey, Mrs. Gloria,” he responds with a bright smile while we navigate toward the table my mom’s at.

“It’s about damn time, Teddy,” my mom chastises before he can even sit down. She’s looking at him fondly, though.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry,” he squeaks.

“You look really nice today, Ma. You’ve got a dress on and everything.”

She laughs. “Flattery won’t help y’all this time. I want to know what you boys have been up to that had you staying away for so long.”

“I just saw you last week!” I exclaim exasperatedly.

“Mhm.” She hums. “And what about you?” She turns to Teddy. Her eyes are hard in a way that says she doesn’t want any more excuses from either of us.

Teddy picks at the skin of his fingernails beneath the table, tapping his foot wildly. He opens his mouth to say something, and then closes it again.

“Ma, he’s just been—”

“I’m gay!” he interrupts, the words tumbling from his mouth in a rush. My stomach drops for a split second, and I risk a glance at my mom. She’s gone utterly still, lips pursed, and brows set in a hard line.

“I’m sorry. I’ll just go,” he stammers, and I reflexively reach out and grab his shoulder, pushing him back down to his seat. His wide-eyed expression feels like a punch to the gut, and I swing my gaze back to my mom.

She clears her throat a bit. “I suppose you already knew?”

“Yes ma’am,” I say, purposefully being respectful but straightforward. Teddy’s hand is trembling where it rests on his thigh, and pallor has sucked every ounce of gold from his skin.

My brows furrow in anger. “What? Does this change how you feel about him? He’s like a son to you.” She remains tightlipped and picks up her glass of water as if I hadn’t said anything. No wonder I’m such an asshole. She takes a few sips and meets my eyes.

“Do not ever talk to me like that again; I am your mother,” she says sternly. “I need time to process this whole... all of this.”

I scoff. “We’ll just excuse ourselves then.” Gritting my teeth so I don’t say anything more, I stand up at the same time as Teddy. His eyes are permanently glued to the ground as we exit the stuffy restaurant—all his sunshine’s now dimmed by storm clouds, and I don’t fucking like it. Not at all.

EIGHTEEN

TEDDY

Ms. Janet... she's tough. I know this about her. She's not one to make rash decisions or say things she doesn't mean. She just has this commanding air about her; I suppose it may be because she's always been a mother figure to me. She has that same power over me, and she's just used it like a blade. I guess, the worst part is that I can't truly tell how she was feeling—it's unnerving. Her and Liam both have impenetrable masks they put up with a snap of their fingers. What I do know, though, is that reaction wasn't a good one. The outlook on her acceptance of me or us seems gloomy.

I heave a sigh, feeling myself deflate along with it.

“Here,” Liam says gruffly, handing me a lit cigarette. I take it thankfully and inhale a deep drag. “She'll come around, T. There's no way she won't, and this doesn't change anything.”

I peer up at the sun filtering through the palm trees. We're at my special spot again. I skated away from that place as fast as I could with Liam following right behind, and ended up here. “Doesn't it though? I mean that wasn't the worst reaction possible, but it definitely wasn't promising.”

“I don’t care what she thinks. I’m an adult, and I don’t need her approval,” he says evenly. It’s a lie. He might’ve convinced himself of that, but I know it would gut him.

“She’s the most important person to you. Of course, her opinion matters, Liam, and I won’t blame you for that.” I say, with my expression relaxed and calm, but I can feel a lead weight sinking into the pit of my stomach. It’s nothing new though... everything about this situation has been precarious. It doesn’t even feel real to me, it has to have been some kind of fever dream. *Liam wants me the same way I want him?* It doesn’t even sound right in my head.

He stands, pulls his shirt over his head, and shoves his pants to the ground, revealing miles of rich brown skin covered in black tattoo ink. “You can keep telling yourself that bullshit or you can come swim with me. This conversation is pointless. I said exactly what I mean, and that’s the end of it.” He turns around and treks down toward the shore.

He’s so infuriating sometimes. He may mean whatever he says now, but things change. A good thing never lasts, everyone knows that. Something does stick out in my memory, though— he stood up for me back there. A lot of guys would’ve ducked for cover, but Liam took a tone with his mom that I’ve never heard from him before. I noticed how angry he was on my behalf; he’s always been that way—quick to stand up for me. But I have to wonder if he’d keep the same energy if her reproach was aimed at him instead.

I scrub my hands against my eyes and rise from the sand, ditching my clothes before heading after him. The water is warm enough as usual down here. Liam’s already fully submerged, way out toward the middle of the waterway. I dive under, slicing through the water gracefully and propel myself

toward him. When I rise through the surface, I smooth my hair back from face.

“Come here,” he demands, and of course, I obey instantly. I throw my arms around his neck and wrap my thighs around his middle. Unsurprisingly, he manages to keep us both afloat with little effort. It’s impressive and only serves to make me admire him more than I already do. I peer up at him through wet lashes. *It’s breathtaking how much depth brown eyes have in the sunlight.*

“I told you it’s you and me ’til the end, and I meant it,” he says, determination thickening his tone. “No matter how fucked up our path is, we will get there.”

I lean back and brush my thumbs over his eyebrows, clearing away the water droplets residing there. “You can’t blame me for being wary of things,” I respond softly.

“You’re supposed to trust me. I’ve never done you wrong—*ever.*”

He’s right as usual. “I do trust you,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

“Then keep it together, and we’re gonna be just fine.” The intense look he aims my way makes my breath shudder, and at that very moment, he seals his lips to mine. His large hands press against my back, molding us together as he treads water beneath us. His kiss is gentle but still claiming—nipping at my lips, teasing me. Everything becomes fuzzy in my mind as I lose myself in him.

He breaks the kiss, burying his head in my neck. “Would it make you feel better if I just go ahead and get it out of the way. I’ll tell her right now. I don’t want this to come between us.”

My mouth falls open as the realization slams into me. *He really would*. If I said yes right now, he'd call her and tell her this very moment.

I squeeze him a little tighter. "I think we've had enough stress the past couple of days... we can hold off for now."

Problems have been piling up around us lately, and I feel myself nearing yet another breaking point. There's no real reason to bring that on sooner. The knowledge that he would tell her at the drop of a dime is enough for me. There's hope in that, and it settles firmly in my heart like a little seed. Maybe, just *maybe*, things aren't as hopeless as they've always seemed.

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NINETEEN

Liam

“It’s about a thousand fucking degrees out here,” Damon complains. After living here our whole lives, you’d think we’d be used to it by now. “I’m convinced that it’s just getting hotter every year. Climate change is a bitch,” he continues.

I shed my shirt which has been clinging to me like a second skin for the past few hours. I change into a new one around lunch time every day because they get drenched so quickly. We clean up the last of our trash and load up the windows we removed from the customer’s house into Luke’s trailer while he argues back and forth with someone on the phone. He has no chill, whatsoever, and of course the heat doesn’t help his mood.

“Alright, boss. We’re heading out,” Dame calls to him. He waves us away, brows furrowed as he deals with whatever bullshit someone’s spouting to him through the phone. We settle into Damon’s car, and he cranks the A/C up to full blast. I make sure to lean forward so my back doesn’t stick to the leather seat.

“I think it’s time for a new tattoo,” I muse. The idea has been brewing inside of me for a while now, and I feel compelled to get it out and onto my skin today.

“Oh really? You know Jazz does some cool shit.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Since when? I’ve never heard a thing about it.” It’s not like I ever paid much attention to him anyway, but it still comes as a surprise.

“Yeah, man! He keeps it quiet mostly because his parents are dicks, but he actually has real talent. I’ve seen some of his work and he should be working in a real tattoo shop with that kind of quality. Hit him up, I’m sure he’ll give you a good deal.”

“We don’t even know each other like that.” I think back to the last encounter we had— I basically threatened him in the nicest way I could manage.

“Doesn’t matter. Nothing gets him going more than tattooing someone. I’m telling you, just call him. You have his number, right?”

“Why would I have his number, Damon? Not everybody’s as fucking friendly as you,” I joke.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Your friendliness only extends to Teddy.” He rolls his eyes with a teasing smile splitting his face.

“Just give me his damn phone number,” I cut him off before he can start reaming me about Teddy. It gets old after all these years—hearing the same shit about him and I. It’s even more annoying to me that everyone saw this coming before I ever did.

He whips into my parking lot like a lunatic as usual and holds his palm out for my phone.

“Just tell me the number,” I say as I begin to add the new contact information.

“You’re so fucking weird,” he grumbles before rattling off the digits to me.

I pull some money out of my wallet and hand it to him. “Gas money.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I don’t want your money. It’s not even out of the way for me to pick you up.” It’s true, but I’ll be damned if I owe anyone anything. He doesn’t have to drive me to and from work every day, but he does because at the end of the day, Damon’s a cool-ass person.

“You’re wasting your breath,” I say as I deposit the money into his center console with a smirk, and slam the door behind me before he can refuse it again.

When I enter our room, I can’t help but want to lay down and sleep until tomorrow. The week’s exhaustion is hitting me in full force, and it would definitely be a better time than making small talk with Jazz while he drags needles across my skin for hours. I shove the idea to the side because this tattoo is far more important. Decision made, I send a text to Jazz.

Me: It’s Liam. Heard you do tattoos. You down to do one today?

I sit down and unlace my boots before setting them by the door. On cue, my phone pings.

Jazz: Always down for some needle on skin action. I’m free in an hour.

Another message from him follows, telling me an address. I look it up quickly on my phone. *Fuck me*. That’s a long way without a car. I can already feel the irritation coiling inside of me. I’ve saved up a lot of money since working for Luke, but it’s not enough for an apartment and a car. I’m looking at one or the other, and as much as I want to get out of this shitty

hotel with paper-thin walls, right now, a car is looking a lot more important. I make a mental note to talk to Teddy about it later when I get back and send him a text telling him I won't be here when he gets off work.

I take a quick shower and hustle out the door, so I don't miss the next bus. There's no way in hell I'm going to skate all the way across town, especially not after the exhausting work week I've just had.

I get off at my stop and put my board down. I know this area but only vaguely. It's a nicer part of town—one with big houses, manicured yards, and shiny cars adorning every perfectly pressure washed driveway. I skate on the sidewalk narrowly avoiding the sprinkler systems that seem to be going in every yard and come to a stop in front of his house.

One thing I learned long ago is to not let this kind of thing make me uncomfortable. Always maintain confidence. Even though I feel out of place here, and I don't know what it's like to live so comfortably, it doesn't mean I should be jealous or hateful about it. In my experience, it's usually the families who look perfect from the outside that have the most fucked-up shit going on behind closed doors. *That's what I tell myself.* We're all humans.

I give the door a firm knock because the house is so damn big who knows if he can even hear me. The door is pulled open by Jazz.

"Damn dude, did you skate all the way here?" he asks, looking at me crazily. "I would've given you a ride." I would never accept a ride from him, but that would be offensive to say.

"It's no big deal. I took a bus," I respond and follow him upstairs. I work on houses like these all the time, so it doesn't

surprise me that the inside is just as grand and expensive looking as the outside. He leads me into a room at the end of a hallway, and my eyes are immediately drawn to all the posters and artwork covering the walls. Then, I notice a massive flat screen TV and a full gaming computer set-up.

He must notice me eyeballing his shit because he says, “Do you game?”

“No. Never really got into that.” What I don’t mention is that my mom couldn’t afford any of it, so I never pressed the issue.

He assesses me with a gaze that’s a little too intense. “So what do you want to get done today?” I explain to him in detail what I want, and he latches on to the idea right away, showing me different font ideas he has for it. Talking to him right now is a stark contrast to the perception I’ve always had of him. Gone is the jokester. He’s all serious and professional.

“Alright, I’m sorry I don’t have a tattoo chair, but you can lay back on my couch if that’s okay with you,” The way he says it lets me know it’s a soft spot for him. It’s none of my business, and from what Dame said, I’m sure it has something to do with his parents.

“Yeah, no worries,” I reassure him and take off my shirt before laying down. He begins to prepare everything, and as far as I can tell, he follows all the proper procedures I usually see being done in shops. He has gloves and little cups for the ink to go in and a tall lamp behind the couch that he adjusts over my torso.

My chest is almost completely covered, but there’s a gap right above my sternum and that’s where I want to get it. My chest will finally be complete after this. He free-hands the design with a marker, and it looks flawless. “Damn, Jazz. This

is really fucking good,” I say, and I can’t help the smile permanently stuck to my face after seeing it.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he jokes, crossing his arms over his chest. “Lay back down and let’s get started.”

At first, there’s only the loud buzzing sound of the tattoo machine and fire licking against my flesh. I let my eyes wander, taking in everything on the walls. “Did you draw all that?” I ask.

He wipes at the raw skin on my chest and looks up, running his gaze across the walls longingly, and nods his head. He goes back to inking my skin, concentration setting the features of his face into hard lines. He looks almost angry.

“What’s this tattoo about?” he asks curiously, clearly trying to change the subject. I eye him for a minute, unsure if I really want to talk to him about it. Something about getting tattooed always makes me want to talk, it’s therapeutic in a way—which is strange because who wants to talk about deep shit while a needle is pounding into their skin?

“It’s for Teddy,” I state simply. And he better not give me shit for it. His thick, black eyebrows lift, and he shoots me expectant look. “I know it’s bad luck or whatever to get a tattoo for a person you’re dating.” I hate saying *dating*, it sounds so juvenile. It doesn’t even begin to encompass everything between him and I, but I continue anyway. “We’ve been friends for ten years and now we’re together. It’s still new—this whole thing, I mean. But I know I could never regret this tattoo. I could never regret him.”

He wipes me and looks up, meeting my gaze. “I believe you. Can’t say I’ve ever felt that way about anyone, though. Probably never will. It’s funny because I would never do something like this—mark my body for someone forever. But

I honestly can't look at you and say what you're doing is wrong or stupid," he says thoughtfully. My brows furrow because once again it strikes me as odd that he can show this kind of depth. He's always had this mysterious, cool guy act going on.

"Never say never. It may surprise you someday just how a person can walk into your life and change it forever." I think back to those early days when I first saw Teddy sitting on the curb, watching me skate like my own little stalker. My heart feels warm and heavy beneath my chest, right where Jazz is engraving the most meaningful tattoo I'll ever get.

A smirk lights up his face. "Never took you for a sappy kind of dude." And I guess his mask is back on now. He morphed right in front of my eyes from chill to dickhead.

"Never took you for a troubled secret artist," I shoot back.

"You shouldn't talk shit to the troubled artist putting ink into your skin. You never know what could happen," he muses, but I get the feeling that he takes his undercover tattoo business way too seriously to ever put something bad on someone.

After a few moments of comfortable silence, I ask, "Did you patch up whatever shit is going on between you and Ant?"

He scoffs. "What's there to patch up? We had a threesome ___"

"You, what?!" I interrupt. *Holy shit.*

His forehead creases with aggravation. "Oh, he still hasn't told you? I thought you all were the best of friends," he sneers, rolling his eyes. "Whatever. Ask him. Even though he's a fucking asshole, I'm not interested in sharing shit he so obviously wants to be kept a secret."

I narrow my eyes at him. For a second, I consider losing my shit since he thinks it's okay to talk shit about one of my friends around me, but something makes me bite my tongue. I can tell there's more to it, something personal. Jazz is perpetually unbothered; he never gets worked up like this. I decide to leave it alone.

He schools his features and goes back in, putting in the final touches on the tattoo, and finally announces that it's done. "Take a look," he says.

I approach the mirror. My heart beats faster the closer I get, and when my eyes land on it, they burn. The tattoo is simple but still beautiful—it reads *My Golden Angel* in a tattoo style script with black and gray shading around the letters. It's perfect. Not a single wobbly line. "It's better than I imagined," I say, barely able to keep the emotion from my voice.

Jazz pauses his clean-up and meets my eyes. "I'm glad you like it, and I'm happy I could do it for you." His eyes soften only slightly, but the meaning is there in the depth of his gaze.

"Maybe next time I'll let you do one of those creepy-ass drawings," I say, motioning to his walls.

He smirks. "You'd be fucking lucky to get one of them on your skin."

An exchange of money and a fist bump later, and I'm on my way home.

TWENTY

TEDDY

“There you go! You got it!” I shout excitedly as the little kid next door, Mikey, scoots around on my longboard.

I was nervous when I got Liam’s text; he’s not one to make sporadic plans. He does the same thing every day, sticking to a precise schedule—especially during weekdays when he’s working. So, I did the best thing to calm my nerves. I smoked myself into a weed coma on our little front porch area. As I sat there dazedly staring off at the palm trees and loud traffic, body wrapped in the warm comforting blanket of weed, the little dude bounced toward me, hand in hand with his mom.

He immediately noticed my board that I had been using as a footrest and latched onto it. I told him he could *play* with it as long as his mother was okay with it. She seemed relieved and more than happy to have some time to herself. She had drawn him in for a hug and looked over her shoulder at me saying, “If he gets to be too much, just send him inside.”

I’ve been watching this kid run back and forth, jump around, talk and talk nonstop for the better part of two hours, and I’ve come to the conclusion that this is how people must feel when they’re around me. Some might see that as a bad thing, I always have, but one thing I can say for certain is I

haven't stopped smiling since he got here. And that's worth something, I think.

I hear the rough scratch of wheels powering against asphalt and my eyes immediately track Liam as he rolls to a stop in front of me. He grabs his board up and clasps his other hand around my throat, bringing me in for a searing hot kiss. He licks into my mouth with such possessiveness that my knees begin to shake.

"Love you, angel," he breathes, words soaked in adoration, as he lets go of me. I nearly collapse after the intensity of that greeting. I gulp and try to regain my composure.

"Where have you been?" I ask, voice cracking.

"Was at Jazz's house." My brows furrow in confusion. I didn't even think he liked Jazz, certainly not enough to kick it like friends. "He tattooed me. Never knew he did them, but Dame recommended I give him a shot, and damn. I'm glad I did."

His eyes are bright, and there's an electric quality to his movements. I narrow my eyes at him because he's just acting unusual at this point. "Well, let's see it!" I say expectantly.

"Send the kid home, come inside, and I'll show you." He has a secret smile on his face as he heads into our room.

Okay then. "Hey, Mikey, I'm going to turn in for the night. We can play again soon, though."

"Aw, man!" he complains, but he picks up the board and trudges over. I walk him the few steps to his place and reach out to knock as he rips the door open, words spilling from his mouth about how much fun he had.

I shut the door behind him and rush back to my own room, anxious to see this tattoo that's got Liam acting like a different

person—a cheery person. The thought doesn't even sit right in my brain.

I push the door open and find Liam in the bathroom, shirtless, looking at his chest in the mirror. I wrap my arms around his middle from behind and lay my cheek against his broad, hard back. He hugs my arms around him before turning around. “Take a look,” he says, voice rough and gravelly.

My eyes find the shiny skin easily and they widen as my mouth falls open on a loud gasp. “Oh my God, Liam! No fucking way!”

“Yes way.” He chews at his plush lower lip a bit, the only sign that he may be a little nervous.

My Golden Angel.

The words grow louder in my head, as does the rapid beat of my heart. I take in every detail in the tattoo until my eyes grow blurry and my chin trembles. *For me. He got a tattoo for me. Because I'm his golden angel, and he loves me.* The tears welling in my eyes cascade down my blazing hot cheeks. I look up at him through bleary eyes. “Is this for real? I feel like this is a joke,” I say through the sobs wracking my chest.

“It's real. It's permanent, just like us. I told you I'm never gonna go away, and I meant it,” he says the words confidently, not a lingering doubt to be found. He pulls me to him, holding me close to his side, letting me get it all out.

All these years, I've longed for this—for him to love me the same way I have always loved him. For so long, I've endured the pain of loving someone, wholly convinced that they could never love me back. I had to watch him fuck other people, had to watch other people give him the smiles and the laughs I so desperately wanted to give him. I had accepted the

fact that it'd never happen for us. I tried to move on, tried to give myself to other people, but it never worked. Nothing could remove him from my heart, and I secretly didn't want him to go. And now, here he is, holding me like I'm precious. Like I'm the most important thing in his life, my memory engraved in his skin forever. It's fucking surreal. Things this perfect don't happen to me. They just don't. But I'm looking at the embodiment of my hopes and dreams, right now, in the flesh. I finally have him.

My sobs fade into whimpers. Finally with a crack of a smile, I say, "Look I have one to match." I lift my shirt and point at the tiny, circular cigarette burn scar. "It'll probably fade soon, but I can get a tattoo to say *Liam was here*."

He laughs loudly, and my smile grows wider. "Yeah, no. Please don't do that."

"Try and stop me." I shoot him an evil smirk. I'm joking of course, well, at least I think I am. I wouldn't mind putting *Property of Liam West* on my forehead if I'm being honest with myself. He shakes his head at me.

"I don't think that came out nearly as threatening as you intended it to," he teases.

"Hush!"

"Come on, I want to talk to you about something serious." He walks over to the bed and collapses back onto the pillows. His eyes fall shut as he exhales deeply.

I follow after him and curl around his side, sniffing his spicy, manly scent openly now, without a care in the world. "Can't we just sleep instead." I pout.

"No. We need to discuss this, it's been heavy on my mind, angel." He sighs exhaustedly. "I've been living in hotel rooms

my entire god damn life, and I think I can finally make it out of here. I've been saving up money, hoping that if I show enough money to pay out the rent for a few months, they won't mind my lack of a credit score. There's nothing wrong with someone staying in a hotel until they can get on their feet, but I don't want to make it a home like my mom always did. I want a real place to call my own, one where I can buy furniture, and never have to worry about how many people have slept on my bed or sat on my couch before me." He visibly cringes but continues. "And you're coming with me. You're going to move in with me and never worry about not having a place to lay your head ever again. No more sleeping on the beach or crashing at people's houses. Fucking never again will you deal with that shit." His breathing is labored by the end, the words coming out forcefully.

I don't even need to consider it, and I don't mind that he's telling me what I'm going to do. I've always let him tell me what to do because he only ever wants the best for me. I've always been okay with following his lead. "Of course, I'll come with you. But I don't make nearly as much money as you do, so I don't know how you want to split up the bills. We can work it out when the time comes. I have one condition though," I say, propping myself on one elbow.

He opens his tired eyes. "And what would that be, T?"

"You have to let me decorate however I want to. It'll look so nice, just give me free rein."

The corners of his mouth curve upward into the cutest little smile ever. "You can put as much colorful shit into our place as you want to. As long as you're there, I don't care."

Drapes and blankets and tables and rugs drift through my mind, and excitement bubbles up in my chest.

“I can hear you thinking from here. Go to sleep, T,” Liam groans and hugs me tighter.

The past week has flown by in complete calm—every night spent, wrapped around Liam, moves me further and further from the *this is too good to be true* feeling, and firmly into *this feels right* territory. He adores me. I can tell by the way I catch him observing me when I laugh or even when I yawn. I can tell because he wraps one of my curls around his finger, toying with it while he falls asleep. He calls me his *golden angel* when he fucks me. I’ve heard those words warped by growls and groans and moans. Heat spreads deep in my chest as the memories flash behind my eyes.

The door chimes, interrupting my thoughts. I glance upward to greet them, and a smile spreads across my face. “Mad!” He walks over to the counter in that lazy stroll of his, and I walk around to meet him with a hug. He squeezes tightly before releasing me. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I needed some blunt wraps and smokes,” he says slyly, a grin on his face.

“Well, shit, I thought you came to see your favorite person.” I shrug. I know he came here for a reason, but I’ll play along with his dumb jokes. It’s so nice to see him again. Every time we go awhile without talking, I assume he’s in jail or something.

“You know I did, Teddy. I do need that stuff, though.” He laughs. I turn around and grab his cigarettes and head toward the blunt wraps.

“You want a whole box, right?” I ask.

“Mhm.” When I come back to him with all the stuff, he assesses my face closely. “How’s the Liam situation?” he asks. The weight in his words surprises me; it’s hard for me to believe how close Mad and I have become over time. Closer than I’d have ever expected.

“Things are better than I ever thought they could be.” I can hear the dreamy lilt in my voice, and blood rushes to my cheeks. He grins and it meets his eyes, making the corners turn up—it’s rare to see him smile like that.

“Good. Just cause you’re all cozied up now doesn’t mean you can’t pay me a visit every once in a while, though,” he says looking at me pointedly. “I planned a mansion party next weekend for the end of summer. I expect to see you there.” I haven’t heard a single thing about this which really goes to show just how *cozied up* I’ve been lately. The idea of a mansion party is appealing though, and knowing Mad, it’ll be next level.

“I’ll definitely be there. And I promise I’ll come see you soon,” I assure him. I bag up his stuff and he goes on his way. A few minutes later, I get a text from him with the address. I pocket my phone and anxiously endure the rest of my shift.

I take a different route home after work so I can stop and get Liam something I saw in a shop’s window the other day. I had been skating by, music blaring through my headphones when I noticed it. Immediately, I went inside and checked the price, but of course. I didn’t have enough. Today was pay day, though, so I swing open the door excitedly, and the thick, earthy scent of incense surrounds me. Not bothering to look at anything else in the store, I grab the necklace from its display. It’s a citrine crystal that’s shaped like an anatomical heart on a simple chain. I look at the tag attached to it. “Citrine holds the

energy of the sun. Happiness, courage, hope.” *It’s perfect.* I pay for it and am on my way as quickly as possible—a stupid smile plastered on my face the whole way home.

When I open the door, I’m blasted by the heavy weed smoke, a dense fog swirling through the room. A wicked saxophone solo plays through the speaker on the table, and I recognize the song immediately—“Just the Two of Us” by Grover Washington Jr.

And then I see Liam, leaned back on the couch, legs spread wide, head tilted back. His jaw looks sharper than ever that way. All his deep brown skin stretched over toned muscles. My footsteps come to a halt as I map him from head to toe with my eyes. I swear they could burn through his skin with how I’m feeling right now from just the sight of him alone. He’s just so fucking beautiful in every way; my brain turns to mush around him, all logical thought flying out the window.

He opens his eyes slightly; he’s either exhausted from work or incredibly stoned. “Come here, angel.”

“I got you something.” My voice is weak and breathy. *For fuck’s sake, Teddy. Get a grip.* I take the few steps toward him, pulse thrumming endlessly. I don’t understand why I’m so nervous, it’s just a gift. I kneel down on the floor between his legs and rest my head on one of his strong thighs, sighing as I inhale him. Comfort washes over me the second I feel his skin against mine. His hand moves into my hair, running through my curls and resting on the back of it possessively, my mind going hazy and soft around the edges.

“You gonna show me?” he asks and I look up. He’s gazing down at me with a smile I only ever get to see. I peel myself from him regretfully and grab the little brown box from my backpack. His knees close in against my shoulders when he

leans forward, and his long hair falls around his face as he peers down at me. He opens the box, and my breath dies in my throat. I can see the flicker and slight widening of his eyes when he sees it. His Adam's apple bobs as he removes it from the box.

“It's Citrine,” I murmur. “Supposed to be for hope and happiness... it holds the energy of the sun. It's also supposed to bring abundance and prosperity. That's what they say anyway.” The words tumble from my throat in a frantic rush. I pull at my fingers on my lap anxiously.

He meets my eyes and the intensity in his dark gaze claws at my insides. “Did I ever tell you why I call you my golden angel? I don't think I have,” he says. I shake my head.

He clears his throat. “In my head, you're like sunshine. Just this beacon of light that no one can help being drawn to. You're warmth and kindness and laughter. It's intoxicating. For someone like me who always feels dull, you're like a miracle—the way you've always made me feel so much when nothing else does. Nothing or no one even stands a chance in comparison. You shine too bright.”

If I thought my brain was mush before, it's apparently nonexistent now. My chin trembles, and his face turns blurry as tears fill my eyes. I never knew... I didn't realize.

“It's such a perfect fucking gift, angel. You couldn't have picked anything better than this. I'll never take it off.”

I blink up at him and let the tears cascade down my face. “G-good,” I stutter.

He grabs my face with both hands and wipes at my tears with his thumbs. Not gently, as if I'm fragile or weak like I've

always felt. No. He handles me firmly and it's the grounding touch I need.

“Put it on me,” he commands, and I move into action. I rise to my knees, and he gathers his dreads in one hand, a few escaping around the front. I reach around and clasp it behind his neck, and the heart rests right above his new tattoo.

A devilish smirk cuts across his face as he looks down at it. “To think you ever tried to get away from me.” He chuckles. “You’re not going any-fucking-where, T.” A shiver wracks my body at the finality of his words.

“On the fucking bed. Now.”

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TWENTY-ONE

Liam

This man could never understand what he's done to me. How he came into my life all those years ago and worked his way into my heart. He turned my world upside down, and it's only orbited around him ever since. Even though he's always questioned his importance to me and how much he matters, he's always been number one. My highest priority. My person. It's always been difficult for people to read me, I don't broadcast my emotions for anyone to see, and I know how much reassurance he's always needed. His eyes hold disbelief to some degree. But there's nothing to be confused about when it comes to us. It's a sure thing and it always has been.

"Completely naked." I watch as he scrambles to undress and climbs onto the bed, his lithe form laid out in front of me, waiting to be devoured. "Damn. Wish you could see yourself," I groan. His pink tongue darts across his plush lower lip and my eyes can't seem to look anywhere else. "Stick your tongue out, angel." His brows pinch together confusedly, but he does as told.

I climb onto the bed and grip his chin between my fingers, holding him steady and wide open as I lick right across his tongue. My tongue swirls on top of his before spearing into his

mouth, licking him from cheek to cheek. Devouring him from the inside out. His eyes fall closed and his face relaxes in my grip as he lets me explore his mouth as if it were my own. “So happy this is mine,” I whisper by his ear. “Gonna stuff it full of my cock now.” Goosebumps spread across his skin, and he nods eagerly in my hold. I grab my heavy cock in one hand and smooth the head over his lips before feeding it into his mouth. When the wet heat envelopes me, my eyes roll to the back of my head. He can’t cover his teeth properly since I’m still holding his mouth open, but the slight scrape of them sends a shiver down my spine. I fucking love it, love how my cock invades his mouth, how it barely stretches around it. But he tries so hard for me.

I withdraw and release his jaw. His bleary eyes open and make a slow trek up my body, pausing on my new tattoo and the best gift I’ve ever been given. Not that I’ve been given many things in my life, but this necklace is more than I could ever want for. I have a piece of him, his warmth with me at all times now.

I grab the lube from my nightstand. “Give me your hand.” He does, and I pump some onto his palm. After pushing his legs back, I pump some directly onto his rim as well. “Work yourself open for me, angel.”

He gulps and seems hesitant at first, but he follows through and swipes his hand over his hole before slipping a finger in. I lean back on my thighs and use my slicked-up hand to stroke my cock, long and slow. Teddy’s forehead creases with concentration as he adds in another finger, and his hole closes around it greedily. His reddened chest rises and falls quickly as he pumps in and out. He watches me with his lip caught between his teeth as I fist my cock.

“Please, just fuck me already,” he rasps desperately.

“Is that pussy wet and soft enough for me?”

He moans and nods frantically. I can't last much longer like this, so I give in, moving toward him. He removes his fingers quickly and grabs my hips, rushing me forward. *God, I could never get enough of him.* The way he needs me. I line the round head of my cock with his entrance and press forward. A gasp leaves his lips, and he pulls me down to him, searching for my lips. Soon enough, I'm pounding into him. I always try to take it slow at first, and it's a serious feat considering how my brains wired to want to be as deep inside of him as I can. In every hole. I shove my tongue down his throat and bottom out in his ass.

With both hands digging into the mattress on either side of him, my necklace hangs between us. He takes me by surprise and catches the citrine heart between his teeth, looking through his lashes at me. His brows slant, and he pants as his hand works his dick furiously. A moan rips from his throat as his climax barrels through him.

“Oh fuck, angel. Oh fuck. It's yours, all yours,” I pant and my hips stutter as I release inside of him. My arms shake and I collapse down on to him, burying my nose into his neck. He wraps his arms and legs around me, holding me as my heart throbs painfully in my chest. Sometimes it's just too much. Too overwhelming for someone like me.

After a while, his soft voice breaks through my haze. “Let's take a shower, baby.”

We peel ourselves apart and make it to the shower. He takes his time washing us both, tenderly and methodically. We stand there, under the steaming hot water in each other's arms

for a while afterward. I never had someone take care of me before him.

It dawns on me that I trust him enough to let go of the tight grip I maintain on controlling everything. I trust him with it all, no hesitation. Teddy's head rests on my chest now and he's holding the necklace, his thumb smoothing over its carved surface. "Oh! I almost forgot to tell you," he says excitedly. "Mad came by my store today and invited us to his end of summer party. It's at a mansion! I told him we'd go."

"You sure that's a good idea? After the last party he had..."

"That wasn't a party—just a get-together at his house. That was dumb on my part, but this should be fine. There will probably be hundreds of people," he rationalizes. I still feel unsure about it, but the truth is that I wouldn't have thought twice about going to this party before the shooting incident. So maybe he's right and I'm just being overly protective.

"Alright, we'll go," I acquiesce. "But we just need to be extra careful. I feel like problems follow that dude everywhere he goes."

"I'll stay with you the whole time," he assures me. "We haven't gone out in a while or even as a couple, so this should be interesting."

I squeeze him a little tighter as I drift to sleep.

TWENTY-TWO

TEDDY

I've looked forward to this day all week long. I've never been to a mansion party before, only ever heard of them because, honestly, it's a rich kid thing. I really don't know what to expect, but I anticipate tons of people and tons of alcohol. What more could you ask for? I tell this to Liam as he smokes a whole blunt to the head.

"I don't really like people." He shrugs. "And I have alcohol here." I roll my eyes, but I know it's true. He would much rather sit in silence for eternity; he doesn't deal with people well. I hope no one starts shit with him tonight, I just want to have a good time and leave.

"Well, don't talk to anyone then, except me of course. Talk to me." I laugh. I see the bus coming, and I point it out to him. He puts the blunt out and slips the remainder of it into his pack of cigarettes. We find seats on the bus, and Liam's hand lands on my thigh. It rests there possessively for the duration of the ride. It's a long trip from the poor side of town to the rich side, but eventually we get to our stop. We get on our boards and skate until we hear the thrumming bass of music coming from behind some trees.

Anticipation swirls in my gut as we approach, skating past the cars lined down the street. They're everywhere—parked on the sidewalk and even in the grass next to it. I can't even imagine the shitshow it'll be when all these people decide to leave the party because most of the cars are blocked in. We weave through people and vehicles, and a thrill shoots through me. This seems like the biggest party I've ever been to.

We pick up our boards and when we reach the long winding driveway, which seems to be where mostly everyone is, I'm surprised by how many of them I recognize. From what I can tell, people from both sides of the tracks are here. High school kids, college students, and even people who look too old to be at this party, but then I remember that Mad is at least thirty.

To the left of the driveway is a large pond with fountains in the middle and a makeshift stage has been set up behind the dock, so people are gathered all around the pond dancing and jumping around. Weed smoke fills the air and basically everyone is getting drunk or doing drugs. I just saw a guy snorting a line of *something* off of a girl's back.

“Holy shit,” I gape.

“Holy shit is right.” Liam nods. We haven't even made it to the mansion yet and this place is going crazy. A hand lands on my shoulder and I come to an abrupt halt.

“Hey, man! Teddy, right? You wanna do a beer bong?” a random guy—whose name I can't remember—asks excitedly. I glance at Liam who just shrugs.

“Sure, why not.” I smile and follow him to where a circle of people has gathered around with one purpose—to chug beer. I watch as a girl finishes up her beer bong like a champ, without gagging or anything, just a loud burp. “Hell yeah!” I

yell and give her a fist bump as she swipes her other hand across her mouth.

“Teddy’s up next!” someone says. *How does everyone know my name?* I know I’m outgoing and get around to a lot of parties and shit, but I never feel like I make an impression on anyone. I’m ushered forward and given a tube that’s connected to a large funnel. The guy who offered me the beer bong is holding it up for me and pours the whole beer into the funnel. I turn the valve and put the tube on my lips just in time for the beer to rush into my mouth. I guzzle it down in like three seconds with ease, and my eyes automatically search for Liam. He’s standing there with a proud smirk on his face, big arms crossed in front of his chest.

He grabs my arm and pulls me toward him. I slam into his chest, and he kisses me hard. “Throat GOAT,” he says.

“Throat what?” I ask confusedly. What the fuck does that even mean? A laugh bursts from him and it makes me smile. I like to think I can remember every time I’ve made him laugh.

“GOAT means greatest of all time, T, and you are definitely the throat GOAT.”

My cheeks redden and I shove his shoulder. “Shut up!”

He only laughs louder, and my dick starts to fill with heat as all the blowjobs I’ve given him flash through my head. We stick around this group, and they keep thrusting beers into my hand every time I finish one and before I know it, I am definitely fucking drunk. My vision swims and Liam’s hard edges look very soft, and I can’t help but keep touching him. He lets me cling to him and run my hand across his skin whenever I want to—which is often.

“I think we should go find Mad and let him know we’re here,” I whisper-yell into his ear. I want to see him before I get too fucked up, and I think we’ve been here for at least an hour now. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s probably in the actual mansion or over by the stage. I can’t see him mingling too much out here. So I grab Liam’s hand and lead the way.

As my eyes scan the crowd—just in case—I see all kinds of crazy shit going on. One girl is sitting in the grass while someone is in front of her with light up gloves; he spins his fingers in her face forming all sorts of intricate patterns. She’s probably on some type of hallucinogen, so I know it looks magnificent to her.

Pretty sure I’ve seen a few people literally fucking in the shadows by the woods. I think I’d fuck Liam in the woods too, if I’m being honest with myself.

We manage to make it to the mansion without being stopped too many times. I look around and see Mad sitting on some outdoor patio furniture surrounded by his usual entourage of people, but there’s caution tape blocking us off from going over there. “Mad!” I yell and wave my hand. His head perks up, and he motions us over as he comes to meet us. We step over the tape, and I give him a bear hug.

“I didn’t know if you guys would actually make it,” he muses.

“Teddy’s very persuasive,” Liam says from my side. “This is a pretty serious fucking party, man.” It’s nice to see Liam talking to Mad like a normal person when I know he harbors some level of resentment for him. I appreciate it, because I truly do care for Mad.

Mad launches into a long explanation of all of the planning that went into it and how he paid some rich kid to use his

parents' mansion for the night. It's a little troubling because something gives me the feeling that said parents aren't aware of the massive banger of a party happening on their property right now. I take in Mad's expression, and he doesn't seem as excited as I thought he would be.

"Is everything okay? You don't look like you're having a good time," I ask him.

He sighs and looks out beyond the stage, across the pond, to where most of the people are. "I'm fine. I just feel like all this shit isn't as fun as it used to be. I just don't get the same thrill anymore, and things that used to excite me just seem fucking annoying now."

Liam speaks up from beside me, "I feel that, actually. Starting to think this isn't my crowd anymore. I mean I get the appeal, but it just doesn't appeal to *me* like it used to. I'd rather grind hard at work and make moves to give me and Teddy a better future. This shit seems like a waste of time. No offense." My heart flutters in my chest at his words. I don't know why it surprises me after everything, but it still does. Maybe it always will.

Mad chuckles. "None taken. I'm just glad you got your head right. Teddy deserves the world, you know." And now they're talking about me like I'm not here.

"And I've always given it to him."

Mad gives him an assessing look as if he's measuring the truth in his words. He says something, but I lose my focus a bit. A wave of nausea rocks through me; I feel it building from my stomach to my throat. I dry heave a few times, but it passes, and when I lift my hand to my forehead, it feels weird. It looks farther away than it should, and a trail follows it. *Did someone drug me?* No, don't think like that. Someone

probably thought they were doing me a favor and slipped a tab of LSD into my drink. It feels like LSD for sure. Most people know I love hallucinogenic drugs—well, I used to. I haven't done them in a while now.

I guess Liam has started to change me for the better. I realize that I haven't even considered taking any drugs throughout this whole party. Usually, I would've been blasted through the roof by now.

Okay, I need to get serious. I'd be hesitant to take acid at a party this big, there's way too much opportunity for shit to go wrong, and the last thing I want is a bad acid trip. I need to go somewhere relaxing and calm. Liam and Mad are deep in conversation so I wander to the side of the mansion where I find a brilliant blue pool. It's changing colors and I'm guessing that's from pool lights and not the acid. *I think*. I eye the pool testily before laying down on the ground next to it. There's a lot of people gathered around here, jumping into the water and climbing out. Doing pool things. A lot of topless women. Titties everywhere. Women's bodies truly are beautiful; I can't even believe that they make more humans beneath the skin on their bellies. I cringe internally. *Okay, maybe don't think about that, Teddy.*

I turn my gaze to the sky, that's always safe. I could look at the stars forever and ever. Someone jumps into the water near me and a bit of water splashes on my legs. It's a strange sensation—the way the cold water feels against my hot skin, tickling my leg hairs. My breathing is labored as if I can feel the weight of the sky against my chest. I'm breathing in the atmosphere. *Are there stars in my lungs?* I think I can feel them twinkling in my chest.

A tall dark form appears above me. After focusing my gaze on it, I realize it's Liam. His mouth his set in a hard line. I don't think he's very happy.

"Baby," I say or at least I think I do, I'm not sure if I heard myself say the actual word or not. Maybe, I only thought it, but I beckon him down with my hands. They don't even feel attached to my body, so I'm surprised they cooperated. He sits down on the ground next to me, and it makes me happy. I know he'd rather not get his jeans dirty like this, but he would do anything for me.

"Are you okay? Why'd you wander off?" he asks. "Remember when we said we'd stick by each other all night?"

"Someone dosed me with acid," I murmur. "I didn't know, they must've slipped it in a beer or something. All I know is I'm tripping hard, and I didn't take drugs from anyone." My words sound breathy and weird, changing octaves and speeding up and slowing down.

"Are you fucking serious? Someone dosed you without asking? I think I remember most of the people we talked to. I'm gonna figure it out, angel. Don't worry," he bites out.

"No, it's fine. They probably thought they were doing me a favor. I'm sure that's what they thought. Just be calm, I don't want to have a bad trip," I respond softly, barely a whisper. "Just stay here with me and tell me nice things."

I hear his decadent sounding laugh from a distance or it could be right next to my ear, I can't be sure. I feel something tickle my face and I open my eyes. *When did I close them?* He's laid down next to me and is hovering his face over mine. His dreads graze my cheeks, and it feels like a full body sensation.

“You look so beautiful like this, fully relaxed on the ground when hundreds of people are milling around partying. Do you want to hear a story?” he asks, and his voice wraps around me like the snuggliest blanket ever. He’s so close our noses nearly touch when I nod my head excitedly. “It starts off kind of sad, but there’s beauty in small beginnings. It has a happy ending.” He presses his lips to my forehead and electricity shoots from the spot into my brain. “Two poor boys living in the same hotel met outside one day. They looked very different from the outside—one small, one tall. The taller one took one look at him and decided he was his. He’d be his person forever.” When he pauses to land another kiss on my cheek, I gasp.

“You’re a good storyteller,” I rasp. He kisses my other cheek and every time he does, it seems like all the air is sucked out of me. The background noise seems to grow louder, and Liam notices it too. He lifts his head up, and a chill freezes my skin. I watch the expression on his face turn confused and then annoyed. Liam grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet, but they feel like jelly.

“Come on, I’m gonna take you to Mad. I’ve got to go check on something,” he says. I shrug, and he wraps his arm around my shoulder, leading me to the patio where I see Mad. A smile spreads across my face and I plop down next to Mad. My depth perception is way off the mark. Liam whispers something to Mad and walks away in a hurry.

“What’s going on?” I ask him. Things are happening way too fast suddenly. It seems like people are becoming more frantic. I think there’s way more people here now, but I can’t be sure. They kind of all blend and morph into each other.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine,” he reassures me, and hands me a bottle of water.

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TWENTY-THREE

Liam

This was bound to happen. I heard people mentioning that police are outside the property, searching people's cars. Apparently, whenever someone pulls up, the police are stopping them. The party drew too much attention by having hundreds of cars parked all over the place down the highway, and it might be time for me and Teddy to get out of here.

It still pisses me the fuck off that someone dosed him without his permission, but I've done an excellent job of not finding them and knocking their teeth into their fucking skull. Restraint. I'm doing it for T, I don't want to ruin his mind with all that negativity.

The party has easily tripled since we arrived, so I'm surprised that people are still filtering in through the gate even though I can see the blue flashing lights from cop cars. Why aren't they rushing in here to shut the party down? Maybe it's just the cars blocking the highway that's the issue, but honestly, good fucking luck with that. These idiots crammed their cars in whatever small space they could find.

Yeah, I think we should go before things get even crazier than they are. It won't be long before the police work their way inside. I turn around to head back and hear the beating of

helicopters. My eyes dart to the sky and sure enough there's two helicopters flying above us with their spotlights scanning over the party. *Oh fuck.* I take out my pack of cigarettes and throw the remnants of my blunt from earlier on the ground. Even if a cop does stop me, they'll have no real reason to detain me.

Everyone seems to freak out when they notice the helicopters. People start running in all directions like ants. I pick up the pace and trudge back up the driveway to get Teddy, but when I get there, I notice the patio's empty. What the fuck? I go over the caution tape and head toward the door leading into the mansion. The bright lights in here burn my eyes, blinding me for a second. I rub at them and look around. Then I hear it, yelling coming from my right.

My pulse ratchets up in my throat. *Please, I just need to find Teddy and leave. Please let him be okay.* I couldn't have been gone for more than fifteen minutes. I don't understand what could've happened in that short amount of time.

I follow the noise toward a set of closed French doors. "Get on the ground!" someone yells, and their voice sounds muffled as if they're wearing a mask. Oh fuck. I hear the front door bust open and boots stomping on the marble floors. I turn around and am met with at least five cops. *Can they even be in here right now? Do they have a warrant?* None of that matters.

"I think my boyfriend's in there, something's going on," I yell through panting breaths, and they rush past me kicking the doors straight in. My mind is swimming and I wish I hadn't drank at all. Everything is confusing me far more than it should, and my reactions are slow and sluggish. I didn't

realize how drunk I was until this very moment. I turn around and follow behind the officers.

“Everybody, down on the ground now! Drop the gun! No one move!”

Gun? The word echoes in my head, ricocheting painfully. I squeeze past an officer and my heart stops. Teddy is standing with his palms up, utter confusion written all over his pale face, and about ten feet from him, a person in a black ski mask has a gun trained on him. Mad is off to the side, eyes darting between them. Sweat pours from his agonized face.

“Leave him out of it,” Mad reasons. “He doesn’t have anything to do with this shit, just let him go. I don’t even know him.”

The masked person doesn’t have a chance to say anything because I rush forward. I run for Teddy. I don’t even think about how smart or dumb that adrenaline-filled decision is. As soon as my feet move, I hear it—shots go off and echo through the large room. A whirlwind of chaos ensues as I land on top of Teddy, toppling us over. Shouts and bangs turn into a loud ringing in my ears. I look down into Teddy’s wide blue eyes, frozen with fear. But then they move, cataloguing me, and I see where they stop. My shoulder.

He gasps and his face morphs in fear. A blood-curdling screams rips through him, piercing my ringing ears. I look down and my breath dies in my throat. *Blood*. My hand shoots reflexively to press against the wound to stop the bleeding, but it won’t stop. I start hyperventilating. Strong hands grip my shoulders and move me around. I start to struggle out of their grip, but Teddy’s voice stops me.

“S-shot. He’s shot. He’s b-bleeding,” he stammers, and that’s the last thing I hear before blackness creeps from the

edges of my vision and plunges me in darkness.

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TWENTY-FOUR

TEDDY

Just because the worst imaginable thing happens to you, it doesn't mean that the trip magically stops. An LSD trip can last as long as twelve hours in most cases, and mine did.

Liam was shirtless as usual. When my eyes zeroed in on the gunshot wound, panic lit up every nerve ending in my brain. My drug-addled mind grasped for reality. I thought *it's a hallucination. It's not real. It can't be*. But even now, it's all I can see. The dark crimson blood. The gaping wound. His fingers as he clutched at it trying to make the bleeding stop.

And then he was gone. His eyes flitted behind his eyelids as his dead weight crushed me into the hard floor, and all I could do was scream. My brain couldn't process any of the shit that happened last night, and it still blends and morphs together. Almost as if it was a nightmare.

The consistent beeping from the machine reminds me that it did happen, as does Liam's sleeping form on the hospital bed. I haven't slept. My eyes burn and blur, unable to focus anymore. After he was... shot, I think my face was frozen in shock—unable to blink or move. I force my eyelids closed but peel them back up quickly. Can't let myself fall asleep. I need

to be awake whenever he comes to. My mind won't be at ease until then.

Ms. Janet sits on the chair at his bedside. She hasn't let go of his hand, hasn't stopped whispering prayers under her breath, and she also hasn't said a word to me. I'm somewhat thankful, considering the fact that my throat feels like it's been worked through with razor blades, and I'm not sure if I could keep it together in front of her. The steady flow of tears at this point is reasonable for a best friend, but I wouldn't be able to disguise my real feelings for him if I had to speak. The dam would break, and it'd all crash through.

From what my fried brain has gathered, the bullet went straight through, so it's not stuck somewhere in his shoulder. The doctor says they just need to watch for infection the next couple of days and then he's free to go home. So, he's *okay*. He's not going to die like I thought when I was tripping. The thought replayed over and over burying me in the most sinister, dark trip I've ever experienced. I'll never be taking acid again—not that I did it willingly last night—but still. The opportunity for some shit like that will never happen again.

Being convinced that the love of my life was dead for hours was unbearable. Completely fucking catastrophic. I was trapped in my mind. Yelling. Screaming. I gulp and my dry throat burns. *Never. Again.*

I just wish I could touch him. I feel like a dick because I want to tell her to move from that seat and let me feel him. Feel his pulse in his wrist. Watch his chest rise and fall with every breath. But it's her son, and I won't take that from her. I'm not even sure where we stand at this point.

The door opens and in walk Ant, Ben, and Damon. I guess visitor hours have started finally. Ben immediately wraps me

in a hug, that I didn't realize I needed. Burying my nose in his neck, a quiet sob escapes my throat. He tells me it's okay, everything's gonna be fine. The words no one wants to hear when they're wrecked like this. I hear Ant talking to Ms. Janet, he's asking her the important questions. *How is he recovering? Does she need anything?* It makes me feel guilty, but the fog in my brain is only just now starting to clear. I *seriously* need to sleep.

Ben sits down next to me, taking my hand in his and laying his head on my shoulder. Damon lands next to him. Ms. Janet stands from her chair and runs her gaze over all of us. It pauses where Damon's hand is gripping Ben's thigh. A flicker of pain ignites my chest. Liam and I will forever be doomed in her eyes.

"I'm going to get some food and give you all some time with him," she mutters exhaustedly. As soon as the heavy door falls shut behind her, I shoot up from the couch and scramble over to Liam. I don't care that our friends are watching behind me. I grab Liam's hand and bring it up to my cheek and hold it there, turning my face into his palm. Tears continuously fall from my eyes, but no noise leaves my lips.

His eyebrows pull together, and I gasp. He blinks his eyes groggily and attempts to lick across his lips, but his mouth is too dry. I just look down at him with pleading eyes, afraid to break the silence in the room.

"Liam," I finally say, my voice far raspier than I expected. "Liam, it's okay. We're all here, I'm here."

His hand tightens around mine, squeezing it as he finally opens his eyes. "What's going on?" He attempts to sit up but hisses and lays back down.

“This shit burns,” he grunts. My eyes widen and I almost laugh at how fucking nonchalant he is right now.

“I’m going to call for the nurse,” Ant announces. I ignore him and continue staring into Liam’s dark eyes. I think both of us are too exhausted to get words out, but that’s okay. I can feel the intensity in his gaze.

A nurse comes in quickly and brings a cup of water. He holds the straw to Liam’s lips, and he drinks what he can. The nurse gives him his antibiotics and suggests that he take some medicine for the pain. Liam doesn’t seem too keen on that idea, but he agrees anyway.

When he leaves, Liam turns his head toward me and asks, “Did those motherfuckers get arrested or did they get away?”

“They didn’t get away, but I wasn’t really in the right state to understand what was happening,” I say. “I haven’t heard from Mad, so I’m assuming he was arrested too.” My lips turn down even more at the thought. I wish he would just clean his life up already.

“No more Mad,” he bites out. “You were almost shot because of him—*again*. You could’ve died. If I wouldn’t have run when I did, it would’ve been you with a bullet. And it might not have been in your shoulder like mine was.”

I gnaw at my lip because he’s right. Of course, he is. But I don’t want to blame everything on Mad. I know his bad traits and all the awful shit he’s done, but I know, deep down that he can change. He will. Maybe I can’t be along for the ride though. Another tear rolls down my cheek for the loss of a friend.

I press my head on his thigh and rest there. We sit in silence for a while until Damon speaks up. “So are y’all gonna

become old people now and stay in all the time like Ben and I?” It was his way of easing the tension in the room, but it weighs heavily on me.

“We’d stopped already. We were fine, but I begged him to go to this one. He didn’t even want to,” I croak. Guilt coils in my gut again.

“Don’t start that shit, T. It’s not your fault that I got shot. Shit happens. People get shot all the time around here, and you know that.” I know it’s not my fault, but it still hurts knowing that this shit wouldn’t have happened had I not been so concerned about getting fucked up at some stupid mansion party. I know that I like to socialize, and I need to be around people to stay sane. But there’s other ways to do that.

The nurse comes back in and following right behind him is Liam’s mom. She sees where my head rests on his thigh, immediately. Her face twists up in disgust or confusion, I’m not sure. I attempt to pry my hand from his and move, but he squeezes tighter.

He swallows the pills that the nurse gives him. When the nurse leaves, Ms. Janet approaches us. She grabs his other hand and kisses his fingers. “Thank God you’re okay. I love you so much. You’re so strong, baby.” The words tumble from her lips quickly, over and over again.

“It’s okay, Ma. They said I should be out of here in no time,” he reassures her. Her chin trembles as she takes a steadying breath and her eyes meet mine.

“And how are you doing, Teddy? Are you okay?” she asks and the words sound sincere enough. My mouth falls open in confusion, and her eyes widen. “What? You think I’d stop caring about you and loving you just because of your sexuality?” She scoffs, but tears brim in her already glassy

eyes. I'm at a loss for words, opening and closing my mouth like an idiot.

"I know I didn't handle it as well as I could've that day—I just needed time to think. I wanted to understand it and you, but I never even once considered disowning you."

"We're together, Ma," Liam says tiredly. "I'm not gonna hide it any longer from you or anyone else. He means far too much to me."

My teeth bite into my lip painfully to keep me grounded in this moment when everything seems to be up in the air. I look at her hesitantly and watch as a million different emotions flicker across her face. She clears her throat. "I'm just happy you're both safe. Now's not the time to talk about any of this. You both need rest." I can tell that she's upset, because the words sounded forced from her throat. "I'm gonna go home and get some rest myself. I'll be back first thing in the morning."

I clear my throat. "I'll probably stay here and sleep on the couch."

"That's probably for the best." She nods.

"You need a ride, Ms. Janet?" Damon offers, standing up and patting his pocket for his keys.

"Sure, thanks."

And just like that, there's a whirlwind of hugs and sad smiles before everyone leaves, and I'm left with the obnoxious beeping and the sound of Liam's steady breaths.

TWENTY-FIVE

Liam

A three-day hospital stay and a fat hospital bill later, and I've never been happier to lay in my own shitty hotel bed. I have to keep taking antibiotics but no more pain pills for me. I'm sick of sleeping and not doing shit all day long.

Somehow, getting shot in the shoulder has put a lot of things into perspective for me. While it wasn't fatal or anything near it, had things happened any amount differently, the outcome could've been far worse. Teddy and I both agree that we're okay with leaving that life behind us. Easy. Neither of us cared that much about it to begin with.

Before everything happened, I had a long conversation with Mad. We talked about so many things—his children, his goals and dreams. Some deep shit. I understood then why my angel likes him so much; he's complex. What you see is a dangerous criminal, but there's more beneath the surface. He's a genuine person who's just trying to get by like the rest of us.

Unfortunately, he does so by any means necessary. He lives a life consumed by anxiety about who he can trust. I can't live that way, and like the saying goes—if you lay with dogs, you get up with fleas. I won't be dragged into his bullshit ever again and neither will Teddy.

My eyes down to where his curly head is nuzzled under my arm. I can't rid myself of the look of sheer terror on his face when I collapsed onto him. It's engrained in my memory. Even when I finally woke up in the hospital, he looked as though he could hardly believe it.

I was lucky.

If chaos hadn't erupted, I may not have made it out with merely a shoulder wound.

I squeeze him a little tighter. Whenever I think that night could've been the last time I ever saw him, my heart constricts painfully. Far worse than any pain a bullet could even hope to cause. That's what finally pushed me to come out and tell my mom about us. What's the fucking point of hiding and living your life only to please everyone around you? I'll rock the boat if I need to, and that's all there is to it.

This is *my* life. And Teddy's not going any-fucking-where. So, everyone from here on out will just have to deal with it. Him and I are going to grow and claw our way out of this town that so badly wants to keep us down.

A knock sounds at the door and my brows scrunch together immediately. *Who the fuck is knocking this early?* No one ever comes to our room. I shake Teddy a bit and tell him to put some pants on. I trudge toward the door, legs heavy with disuse. Another knock.

I swing it open and my mouth falls.

"Good morning, baby." Mom smirks. She has never come over before. I got the idea that maybe she wasn't ready for me to move out when I did because she didn't help me or come visit or anything like that. My mom likes to ignore problems,

almost like if she doesn't see it, she doesn't have to deal with it.

One thought that rang loudly throughout my three days of stagnancy was, had something worse happened to me, the last memory my mom would've had of me wasn't a good one. Not by a long shot. I've always valued her and worked to not leave things on a bad note, but the one time I did...

I don't like to think about it.

"Hey, Ma. You coming in?"

She nods her head and follows in behind me, taking a moment to look around the place. "Nice and clean." She grins.

"You thought I'd become a slob the minute I moved out or something?" I open the mini fridge and hand her a bottle of water. Teddy stumbled to the bathroom as soon as I woke him up—I can hear him brushing his teeth.

"Is that Teddy in there?" she asks quietly.

"Yes, ma'am. He lives here."

Her nose wrinkles, but she remains quiet, taking a seat at the small table. Teddy opens the door, and I cup his face, placing a sweet kiss on his lips. Warmth spreads through my veins from the simple contact. He jolts in surprise, and his eyes dart to my mom. "Hey, Ms. Janet," he says, trying but failing to sound confident.

Her eyes turn down at the corners. "Good morning, Teddy. Listen, I want to talk to you two." Steeling myself, I grab Teddy's hand and lead him to the edge of the bed, so we can face her. He breathes steadily next to me and seems to have some kind of resolve.

“I just want to start by saying how much I love the both of you. Liam, my one and only son. You’ve stood by me and supported me since you were little, and I know it’s been difficult at times. But you always did it. Always showed me respect, and I’m proud of you.” Her words reach some place in a far corner of my brain. It’s not like my mom to speak openly like this about *anything*—let alone her own wrongdoings.

“And Teddy. You’re like a son to me, always have been. I’ve watched you grow up from a tiny little thing into an adult, and most of that time was spent under my roof. So, of course, when you came out to me—quite abruptly, might I add—my first question was *what did I do wrong?* I’ve come to understand some things, though. I spoke to my pastor and some friends. I know how harmful that line of thought is because by saying that, I’m insinuating that there’s something wrong with you.” She looks him in the eyes intently. “There is nothing wrong with you, Teddy. You have dealt with so much trauma from such a young age, and you are nothing but happiness. You light up any room you walk into. None of the awful things Diana put you through have soured your outlook, and that’s amazing. Something to be proud of.”

I risk a glance at him and find his eyes welling with tears, face all red. “I would never want you to think that I think any less of you. I wonder to myself how did I never notice? I understand that this probably isn’t a new discovery for either of you.”

“Being homosexual isn’t always something that you can foresee, Mom,” I interrupt.

She nods her head. “I understand that now. I also understand that you and Teddy have been closer than friends

for a long time now, and I could've seen this coming had I paid a bit more attention."

"I came out as gay first, I've known since sometime in middle school. I didn't even tell Liam until this year. The way society reacts to homosexuality made me afraid to be who I really am. The idea that someone who once loved you could completely disown you overnight is terrifying," Teddy whispers. Once again, my heart aches for all the pain he went through alone. *I could never disown him.* Not for anything.

"Well, I don't think my son could do that even if he wanted to. His whole world has revolved around you since the day you two met. I don't understand why anyone would look at something so beautiful and pure and condemn it. I think God will see that too," she says confidently.

I rest squeeze Teddy's hand tightly, and watch the tears roll down his face. "I'm thankful for you taking time to come here and set things straight. It means a lot to both of us—more than you could know. But we don't need to talk about this anymore, Ma."

"Funny you should say that because I'd like to know what the hell you two were doing at a party with guns!" Her calm voice raises to a yell, and I cringe.

"No need to worry about it. We won't be partying anymore. We're buckling down—Teddy's gonna start college and we're looking for an apartment—" I start, but T interrupts me.

"I dragged Liam to the party, it was my fault we went there. I should've just listened to him when he expressed his concerns about the type of people that might be there. So, I'm sorry, Ms. Janet," he rasps, sincerity lacing his tone. She shakes her head at him.

“It’s fine, Teddy. It’s no one’s fault other than the people who put a hole in his shoulder. Don’t beat yourself up about it, especially if you’ve learned a lesson from it. And it seems like you two have.”

She moves toward him, wrapping him in a tight hug, and the emotions he’s been bottling up for all this time melt away. His shoulders relax and his knuckles turn white against her back. I know how much her acceptance means to him, and he didn’t want to lose her—his only mother-figure. He worked up the courage to call his own mom yesterday to let her know what happened to us, and she told him he was a fucking idiot and so was I. My molars grind just thinking about it. How she sucked the light right from his eyes in a five-minute phone call. We both agreed that until she gets help, there’ll be no more contact between them. Sometimes you have to put your own sanity first.

“Come give me a hug, Liam. Don’t make me force you,” my mother croons, turning toward me.

I didn’t expect her to just be okay with everything overnight, and I can tell she’s still upset by everything. It’s apparent that she’s trying her best to not be offensive, and to understand. After a lifetime of believing that being gay is a sin, and we’re doomed, I’m surprised she’s even trying to learn and change her beliefs. She’s not a bad person—never has been. And it’s clear to see now. *She’s putting us first.*

EPILOGUE

TEDDY

“Where do you keep the tongs?” Damon yells from the kitchen. *Our kitchen.* We have an actual kitchen now with a full-sized fridge, oven, and dishwasher. Our very own apartment. Well, Ant lives here too—we’re roommates. It doesn’t matter though, he’s never here anyway what with all the work and college classes.

“They’re in the drawer to the left of the fridge,” Liam responds. The whole gang’s here, and he’s been on edge the entire time. Standing around, making sure no one wears shoes in the house and picks up after themselves. He even told Damon to keep his filthy hands off our walls. I laughed so hard, gasping for breath. He’s happy everyone’s here at our housewarming party, but as far as he’s concerned, we’re a bunch of dirty heathens.

“Liam, why don’t you sit down and have a beer with me?” I ask, hoping to calm him down.

He glances at me distractedly. “Yeah, in a minute. Dame, what’s taking you so long in there?” He gets sidetracked and charges toward the kitchen.

“He could never live with us.” Ben chuckles. “He’d be in cardiac arrest on day one. Damon leaves his dirty socks and

sweaty work shirt right by the door when he gets home every day.”

“The horror,” I gasp, and my eyes widen comically. They come barreling from the kitchen with trays of food in hand. I hop up and open the door to the back porch for them. I watch as they load a variety of things onto the grill. It’s perpetually hard to believe that I finally have a place to call home. A place I look forward to everyday. I don’t have to fear that it will be taken from me or that I could end up sleeping on the street. I don’t have to worry about having things I need because Liam and I work together to make it happen. We even get things that we *want now*, like the shiny red vintage toaster I saw at the store the other day.

We still don’t have a car, but it doesn’t matter. It’s just another goal we can accomplish together, and in the meantime, we have an amazing group of friends around us who are always willing to help.

“Anyone know if Ant’s coming?” I ask.

“He said he’s studying at the library, and he’ll be here afterwards,” Ben says. “I wish he would slow down; he’s too hard on himself.” It’s true. He doesn’t give himself a break. It’s always inspired me, but at the same time, I can see how it burns him out.

Growing up, I never truly noticed how fucked up my life was until I got to see how Liam lived. I had never spent the night at anyone’s house before that, and even though he lived in a hotel like me, it was an entirely different experience. His place was clean, his mom cooked dinner and let him eat whenever he wanted, he had clean clothes folded nicely, and they talked. They did things together. She was only ever gone for work or to run errands. *Normal things*.

It's easy to become nose-blind to your surroundings when you don't know any better. Even though Liam had a normal childhood in most of the ways that count, he finally understood that he could do better. He could have an apartment and his own furniture and not have to worry about weirdos causing issues. He can be at peace. And I know that means so much to him.

I come up behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. "I'm so proud of you. Look at all this," I whisper softly.

"Wouldn't have ever done it if not for you, angel." He spins around and hugs me to his chest.

"That's not true," I say and poke at the silvery scar on his shoulder. I don't know why I like to mess with it, but he always lets me. "You can achieve anything you ever want to."

With the way we live our lives now, it's hard to believe we ever ended up in the middle of a shooting. We both work and I take online classes; we spend a lot more time with Damon and Ben because they're likeminded.

Much to my surprise, Mad got out of jail pretty quickly after the incident, and one of the first things he did was check on us. Liam was pissed off about the whole thing, but Mad explained it to us. Apparently, after Liam left to check for cops, we went inside. He thought it'd be better to get me away from all the people since I was tripping. He didn't think he had anything to worry about, things had been going so well all night. The masked dudes came in through a side door as soon as they noticed he was inside—he didn't know who they were. Said it could be a multitude of people. But they were demanding money, I remember that much.

Things escalated because I started freaking out. I couldn't stay calm. The moment I saw the gun, I became hysterical, so

the gunman turned his attention to me. He demanded I shut up and get on the ground, but the problem was I lost control of rational thought by that point and froze up. That's when the police stormed in.

It's nice to have the rest of the pieces to the puzzle, but it doesn't make the experience any less traumatic. I've sworn off partying of any sort and limit mine and Mad's contact to text exchanges every once in a while, sadly. It's better than nothing though.

Eventually, Damon starts doling out burgers and hot dogs to everyone and we all head back inside to sit down and eat. We don't have enough chairs at our kitchen table for everyone yet, so Liam chooses to stand at the kitchen counter.

The front door opens abruptly and in walks Ant, backpack in hand. "What'd I miss? Mmm, it smells good in here."

"Nothing really. Just Liam being a weird, clean freak," Damon jokes, shooting Liam a wry grin.

"It's not so bad." He chuckles. "It's like I still live with my mom." I know his house was always spotless and we were never allowed to wear shoes inside there, either. So, it's been a simple adjustment for him.

"Put the school stuff down and come eat!" I shout excitedly. Nothing ever makes me happier than having everyone together in one place.

We shovel food into our mouths for a while then decide to drink some beers and put on a movie. I curl up next to Liam on the comfy couch I found at a thrift store. None of our couches match, but I think it adds character. I think a lot of people might take one look at us and say the same thing—we don't match. Not from the outside at least. But it's simply not true.

Liam is my rock, and I'm his sunshine. I've come to accept that I inspire him in the same way he does me, and that's something worth hanging on to.

I practically glue myself to him, but he doesn't mind. It's exactly where he wants me. "Love you, Angel," he whispers, and I press a kiss to his neck.

"I love you so much."

I glance around and all I can feel is a surge of *proudnness*. Proud of each one of my friends for making something out of our lives—lives that many people ignore. Society ignores people like us as if we're worthless or something. Just because we grew up poor or our parents are drug addicts, doesn't mean we're destined for the same fate. We can do better, and we *are*.

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Bailey is an author who loves writing LGBTQ+ romance books. She'd much rather write about fictional worlds and characters than herself, but she loves to interact with her readers!

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