



*Old in the
gray*

CHRISTINA LEE

IN THE GRAY

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BLURB

Foster

I moved to a new city for a librarian job at the university, and though I'm enjoying the change, it does little to dispel the dull grayness of my world. When my dog, Oscar, forms an instant bond with a man living in a yellow tent, my surroundings begin to feel more vibrant and full of possibility. I'm first drawn to Lachlan's soulful eyes, and then to his kind nature and resilient spirit. I want to know more about him, and Oscar seeking him out on our daily walks provides me with that opportunity.

Lachlan

One split-second decision leads to losing everything and living on the streets. Still, I'd choose my current conditions over being harmed by someone I loved. The only bright spot in my struggle to survive is the handsome stranger and his dog. Despite how compassionate Foster seems, I don't want any handouts. I need to stay safe and stand on my own two feet after what I've been through. But when I find myself in a bind, I allow Foster to rescue me, if only for a night.

Our circumstances couldn't be more different, and yet I'm drawn to Foster in ways I hadn't expected. When our attraction skyrockets, Foster assures me that finding comfort in

each other doesn't hurt anyone. But when it becomes something deeper—meaningful conversations and mind-blowing intimacy—it occurs to me that I might've met the right man at the wrong time. Story of my life.

*CW: Discussions and depictions of domestic violence, mental health struggles, and experiencing homelessness.

LACHLAN

SPRING HAD FINALLY ARRIVED, which made being in the elements more bearable, at least until the heat scorched the concrete beneath me. I'd been houseless for the better part of a year, couch surfing at first and then living on the streets in downtown Cleveland when those options ran out. I had no family, no friends, and no place to call my own. Not anymore. All I had was my tent and the clothes on my back, plus a few extra amenities.

It was still a bit nippy this morning, so I pulled my blanket tighter, hoping to sleep for an additional hour before more businesses opened their doors. I'd tossed and turned until well after midnight because of how noisy the surrounding restaurants and bars got on weekend nights, and soon enough I'd need to pack it up and get out of the path of foot traffic.

When I heard a noise outside my tent, I stayed still. Sometimes drunk guys tried to mess with me, but that was normally after closing hours. Surely, they were all tucked into their comfortable beds in the suburbs by now.

The brushing sound against the nylon wall happened again, so I carefully unzipped the tent flap to peek out, and was relieved when all I saw was black fur. I hoped the mutt didn't decide to take a piss on my makeshift house because it would

be hard to get the smell out. It was difficult enough keeping my belongings safe and clean.

I breathed out when the dog and his owner passed by me, the woman giving me the side-eye. I was used to the pity or annoyance in strangers' expressions, so I kept to myself—mostly. I didn't panhandle like others did and not because it was beneath me. Everyone had different reasons for living like this—or should I say, surviving. I'd trained my body to eat only the one meal a day provided by a nearby shelter and rationed their donations well enough to keep me chugging along.

When a dog on a leash rounded the corner, I couldn't help noticing his owner, a handsome stranger with a gloomy expression, like just the effort of walking weighed him down. Or maybe he had a lot on his mind. I knew the feeling well.

They didn't look familiar, so maybe they were new to the area or the man had changed their route. When the dog began tugging toward my tent, I stiffened.

Christ, not another one.

“Oscar,” the owner warned as the dog made a beeline toward me. What the hell?

I considered zipping up and hiding, but his tongue was wagging along with his tail, which told me he was friendly. I couldn't help being curious about what would happen next. Dogs normally inspected my tent, but this one seemed intent on inspecting *me*.

He tugged so hard that his owner struggled to hang on, and I heard him swear under his breath. On instinct, I stretched my arm out so the dog could sniff my knuckles.

“Sorry about this. He seemed determined to get up close and personal with you.”

It was hard not to notice his crisp khakis and button-up white shirt, even as his expression had turned to exasperation.

“I don’t mind.” I smiled as the dog licked my palm. “He’s a good-looking boy. Golden retriever?”

“Irish setter.”

“Aha.” I brushed my hand down his back, smoothed the red fur that was a close match in color to my late mother’s hair. I’d inherited my father’s light eyes and dark hair, though Mom always said she could see a hint of auburn in mine in direct sunlight. Likely to make me feel better. “Makes sense.”

“Thanks for being cool about it,” he said, releasing a steadying breath.

“You don’t see many of his kind around.” I scratched behind his ears as he tickled my cheek with a flick of his tongue. “You must’ve been bred. Bet you’d do well at the AKC dog show—top of the class.”

The owner’s eyebrows ticked upward, maybe because he hadn’t expected a man like me to hold any sort of relevant conversation. But I’d seen it too many times to count. I twisted the braided-leather bracelets on my wrist, something I did when I was nervous or irritated.

When the man seemed to surreptitiously take in my ragged beard and grown-out hair, I couldn’t help wondering what he saw when he looked at me. He had the advantage of a clean shave and a shower, so it was a bit unfair.

But what did I care what a random stranger thought of me? My injuries had healed. I glanced down at my banged-up fingers—well, mostly healed. I probably wouldn’t be able to

hold shears steady again. But despite some bleak days living on the street, I'd gotten my life back. I couldn't give that up, not after what I'd been through. No doubt the solitude affected me at times, but it was worth it for the freedom.

"Believe it or not, Oscar came from a shelter," the stranger said. "I saw that sweet face, heard the name they'd given him, and knew it was meant to be."

"Kismet?" I smiled at him, and when he smiled back, it seemed hard-won, but what did I know? It was still a nice gesture from a stranger.

"Anyway, thanks again."

"No problem." I gave Oscar one last scratch underneath his chin. As I watched them walk down the street to the coffee shop, I vaguely wondered what the dog's name signified to the owner.

He tied Oscar's leash to a nearby tree and headed inside. Oscar whined for his owner, and though I felt compelled to walk over and keep him company, it was unlikely that would go over well. He might accuse me of theft or something. People had thought worse of me, even giving me a wide berth on the street.

Regardless, it was time to fold up my tent and make my daily trek to the shelter for breakfast. It was clear across town, but it got my heart rate pumping and provided me the exercise I needed to endure my days on the hard concrete.

By the time I finished storing my possessions in my rolling cart, the man had retrieved his dog and left. Might've been the first and last time I saw them, so I felt grateful for the civil conversation as well as the animal's affection. It kept me tethered to humanity.

I squatted down to tie my sneakers and wiped off a streak of dirt, glad they'd held up through the winter. Gripping the cart handle, I was on my way. It had one rickety wheel, but I'd been fortunate enough to swipe it from a dumpster, so I wasn't going to complain, not when it essentially carried everything I owned. Which was the reason I never let it out of my sight.

I got to the Hope Memorial Bridge, where the guardian statues loomed over the city, just as the sun had striped the fluffy clouds in golds and pinks. It would've been easier to walk over the Detroit-Superior Bridge—who knew Cleveland had so many bridges—but I enjoyed the walk across West 25th Street to the shelter, located on the upper side of the Flats. Sometimes there was leftover fruit from the West Side Market that vendors discarded in the trash. Perfectly good peaches or apples that were slightly bruised. It was like finding a treasure trove of sweetness. As long as the security guard didn't spot me loitering outside.

A line had already formed at the shelter entrance, but I didn't mind. I had nowhere else to be. I was hungry, though, and the smell of eggs and bacon wafting through the open doorway made my stomach rumble. I'd lost a lot of weight in the past year, but wearing layers helped keep me warm, even if it made me an easy target. The cart was a dead giveaway too.

“Found these plastic bags blowing in the wind,” a woman said, lifting one of her feet toward a man I recognized from the nights I'd spent under the Main Avenue Bridge. “Kept 'em dry last night.”

We were all down on our luck, and some days I didn't have the energy for small talk, but we did try to share news or resources. Especially when it came to our safety.

A couple of days ago the buzz was about a man who'd been attacked while sleeping under the Soldiers' Monument in Public Square. He was a vet himself, even had dog tags visible around his neck, but it didn't seem to matter. Again, an easy target.

Soon enough the line moved me inside the doors, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd get to eat today. The truth of shelters was that for all the good they provided, food and beds were on a first-come-first-serve basis. If you were lucky enough to get shelter for the night, you were also afforded a shower and clean clothes—the rumor was so that bedbugs wouldn't spread among the residents—but it was obviously also a luxury.

It wasn't until I had to fend for myself on the streets that I realized how particular I was about my belongings getting dirty or stolen. Honestly, I'd rather sleep in my tent with my own blanket and pillow than one of those beds—as long as the weather held up. But even then, the rain could help wash away the grime with a little soap, and the snow could provide water as long as it wasn't yellow.

I gripped my tray as I moved down the line toward the eggs and coffee, planning to savor them more slowly today. I found myself thinking about that dog again—and, okay, the owner too; he had a deep, distinguished voice. I wondered what he did for a living and if he was visiting the city or lived downtown.

In another life, I might've even flirted a little if I knew he was so inclined. I did a bit of that with my customers when I worked in a salon, just for the fun of it. When I pretended not to have a care in the world. But I was hiding something then too.

“Nice to see you again,” a social worker named Tessa said as she passed through the room, greeting visitors. The staff made themselves available if you wanted to discuss amenities, their employment program, or scour through donations, which was nice. They usually had extra soap and toothpaste on hand, along with socks and undergarments and vouchers for a nearby laundromat to wash our clothes and sheets—or whatever was rummaged up to sleep on each night.

Some nights it wasn't more than a stray grocery bag; however we could make do.

Sitting down with my meal, I said a silent thank-you and tried not to inhale my food. Afterward, I'd get in the next long line for the public restroom. The waiting for this or that could sometimes take up most of my day, but I wasn't going to complain. Not when the sun was shining and the weather cooperating. It was the little things.

FOSTER

“COME ON, BOY.” I clipped on Oscar’s leash, closed the door behind me, and led him to the elevator. I was running a bit late because it’d been hard to get out of bed the past few days. The cloudy day didn’t help. But I forced myself, knowing Oscar was waiting. I had him to thank for keeping me going. My job as well, since it paid my rent and all.

I’d moved to downtown Cleveland in the fall to take a position at the university library. The city was smaller than Chicago, the rent was cheaper, and those factors suited me better. It was perfect, really. Though I’d quickly learned that change was still hard, even a change for the better.

It was the middle of the spring semester, and by now, I had gotten pretty acclimated to the city. If only my mental health would catch up. But what did I expect? I’d likely have to take antidepressants my whole life.

I’d been walking the same route with Oscar for weeks. We’d pass the same buildings and street corners every morning. But yesterday was different. The coffee shop I normally went to was shut down due to a gas leak, so I decided to try the new one, about two blocks from my apartment, that a coworker had mentioned.

I'd spotted the man in a yellow tent the moment I turned on Euclid Avenue. But I would have anyway, given Oscar's beelining for him. He was a friendly dog, but acting like he knew the man was just plain strange.

Since my regular coffee shop was still closed this morning, I walked in the same direction, knowing there was a chance the man from yesterday would be camping there, but maybe not. Maybe he moved around. I couldn't be sure. I'd seen my share of destitute people in plenty of cities, and I sometimes gave money to panhandlers. Maybe I should ask what they did with it, strike up a conversation like I did with the man yesterday—though, let's be honest, I wouldn't have had Oscar not made such a fuss.

Guilt crowded my stomach. He'd seemed good-natured for a man who lived in a tent on a city street. It had to be a stereotype that most homeless people were strung out and used the money they got for drugs. Or was the current terminology *houseless* or *unhoused*? I had read in a recent newspaper article that certain phrasings were preferred over others, placing the *ownness* on the city's lack of affordable housing rather than on the person who didn't have reliable shelter.

The man in the yellow tent looked around my age, and I couldn't help wondering what'd happened in his life that led him to these tragic circumstances. Made sense to think of him as *experiencing* homelessness—rather than the idea that he'd caused it himself.

As we rounded the corner and the tent came into view, Oscar immediately began pulling on the leash. Goddamn it. I considered turning in the opposite direction, and just as I made the motion, Oscar planted his feet and wouldn't budge. "Stubborn dog."

Maybe the man wouldn't come out of his tent this time. I'd have hated to disturb him again, so as we approached, I kept to the building side and away from the curb, but Oscar kept tugging toward the tent. I finally gave up and let him lead me, hoping he'd only sniff the area and be satisfied.

I watched helplessly as Oscar inspected the tent. When I tried to move him along, he pushed his snout at the nylon fabric near the flap.

“Oscar, *no*,” I hissed.

But it was no use—the man had already stirred and was unzipping the flap.

Before I could apologize, I was rendered momentarily speechless by the beaming white smile that lit up his entire face. And he had such striking blue eyes that not even his shaggy hair and beard could mask them.

“Hey there. I see you're visiting me again.” His voice was soft, almost reverent as he reached out to pet my dog's head. “Oscar, right?”

Oscar pounced when he heard his name, propping his front paws on the man's knees and licking his face. When he laughed, it was throaty and so full of joy, I was almost jealous that he could feel happiness so deeply. Maybe my dog being completely annoying wasn't the worst thing after all.

“I have no idea why he's so drawn to you,” I said, and his face fell. “That's not what I...he doesn't usually go right up to people like that.”

“Must be the Irish roots. Not that I look the part, but Oscar's coat reminds me of my mother's coloring. Which might sound strange to point out, but it was the first thing that came to mind.”

I forced a smile, trying to steal some of that joy. “Yeah?”

He averted his eyes as if he’d told me too much. Maybe he was afraid I’d call the police on him or read into his confession.

“Oscar’s namesake is Irish too. A famous poet and playwright.”

His eyes brightened. “As in Oscar Wilde?”

I nodded. “One of my favorites.”

“Ah,” he said to Oscar, brushing his coat. “I think your owner is probably a fan of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.”

I stifled a gasp, though I didn’t know why I was so surprised. “You guessed right.”

“How scandalous,” he replied in this teasing way that made my eyes flash to his.

“For its time, yes.”

“And even for today in certain circles.” He gave me a knowing look that made my stomach feel funny.

“True.” Oscar Wilde was known for being flamboyant and unconventional—historians’ way of not coming right out and calling him gay. He was imprisoned for homosexuality, and some believed the conditions ultimately led to his death. He’d been brilliant and witty in his writing, and I couldn’t help blurting out, “Have you read *The Importance of Being Earnest*?” It was a famous play about two men leading a double life, and it made me giddy to think I’d found someone who understood its meaning, even if it was a random person on the street.

“I have,” he replied. “My mother had a bookcase full of classics, and I’d use a flashlight to read them at night under

my covers. Her favorite was *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and... she probably had her reasons.”

I looked off into the distance, remembering that the plot was about a woman who'd suspected her husband of cheating but in the end was proven mistaken. Very curious.

“She pored over the pages so much that it fell apart, even the tape she used wouldn't hold. She eventually tossed it before I could read that one. But I did enjoy his books of poems.”

I smiled. “Wow, you know your stuff.”

Red dotted his cheeks. “Only because of my mother and her love of books. Obviously, you do too.”

“I'm a librarian, so...” I dipped my head. “Speaking of which, my day's going to start soon. I need to...” I motioned toward the coffee shop and tugged on Oscar's leash, feeling awkward to end the conversation so hastily.

“I'll watch him for you while you run in. I mean, if you want.” He looked away as if expecting a flat-out no. “I'm not going to take him or anything.”

I felt bad for hesitating, but it wasn't because he was down on his luck. Despite our pleasant conversation, I didn't know him, so to trust him with my dog...

“Never mind. I shouldn't have asked.”

“No, I appreciate it.” I glanced at the coffee place, which was roughly fifty feet away, then handed over the leash. “Be right back.”

I strode toward the shop, thinking I'd hear Oscar whining for me like he did when I had him wait outside, but it didn't

happen. As I pulled open the door, I glanced back to see Oscar lying down in front of the man.

I waited in the short line to put in my coffee order, feeling out of sorts. When I got back outside, Oscar was letting the man rub his belly.

I chuckled. “Well, someone has a new favorite person. Uh, here, I brought you something too. A coffee and a blueberry muffin. Hope that’s cool.”

Wariness flitted through his expression. Did he not want my offering?

“You don’t have to take it. I just thought...”

“No, thank you, it’s very kind of you.” He reached for the cup and bag. “It’s just... I’ve had strangers offer me food that’s been tampered with.”

My jaw dropped open in horror. “You’re kidding!”

“Not even close.” He laughed hollowly. “So it’s hard for some of us—for me—to accept food from strangers. But your dog seems to trust you, so I will too.”

I smiled, relief settling in my gut. “I assume you’ve had pets?”

“I did, as a child.”

I watched as he took a sip of coffee and seemed to savor it.

“Oh, there’s sugar and creamer in the bag too, if you—”

“I like my coffee black, so thanks. This is really good. Nice and strong.”

There was so much on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I wasn’t sure what could be perceived as rude.

“Well, I better get going.” When I reached for the leash, our fingers brushed, making my stomach feel all topsy-turvy. The whole scenario was so unexpected.

He swallowed thickly. “Thanks again for the food. I appreciate it. I have nothing to give you in return.”

“Watching my dog was enough.”

He nodded solemnly. “Anytime.”

Before we headed back home, something made me turn to him. “My name’s Foster, by the way.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Mine is Lachlan. Told you—Irish. Oscar and I have something in common.”

LACHLAN

I WARMED my hands by the fire lit inside an old washing-machine drum. Yesterday had been chilly with a mix of snow and rain, so I'd taken to the Main Avenue Bridge to wait out the miserable spring sleet with the others last night.

The awful weather must've also been the reason why I hadn't seen Oscar and Foster the past couple of days, and I couldn't blame them.

I hated to admit that they were the brightest part of my day. We had gotten into the habit of Oscar staying behind with me—I might even call it a form of animal therapy—while Foster went inside the shop for our coffees.

I took whatever he offered, even though I didn't want to get in the habit of relying on it—that would be dangerous. And I certainly didn't want him to feel obligated. But the barista-made concoction beat the weak stuff at the shelter, and the muffin helped staunch the hunger pains on my walk over the bridge. I never ate it all, though. I always saved some, for days just like this.

The past two weeks, I'd learned that Foster worked at the CSU library, was very well-read, and was likely gay, if our Oscar Wilde conversation was any indication. Not that it

mattered. I didn't exactly have my life together and was still reeling from a bad relationship.

But no lie, the man was devastatingly handsome with his stylish fade cut and five-o'clock shadow. Add the nerdy glasses he wore sometimes, and it was hard to look anywhere else. What could I say? The man was interesting and easy on the eyes, and if that, along with dog slobbers, got me through my day, who could blame me?

I also recognized the pain in his eyes and was more than curious what caused it.

Thankfully this morning was dry, so I could get back to my routine. Might've sounded silly coming from a person experiencing homelessness, but predictability gave me a sense of purpose.

The slush on the streets had melted due to the warming temperature, and as the sun shined through the clouds, I felt lightness returning to my drearier thoughts. I wouldn't have to spend another night under the bridge, which had almost felt claustrophobic with the number of people who'd arrived to seek shelter.

I was too far away to greet Oscar and Foster that morning, so I headed to the shelter instead. I hadn't had much to eat yesterday and could use the sustenance breakfast provided.

Afterward, I met with the social worker about job opportunities for the first time, since residents got first dibs for everything, especially the housing waiting lists and training programs.

"Now that I know a little more about your past employment experiences, I'll keep an eye out," Tessa said. "It's likely you'll have to start at entry level again."

“I don’t mind,” I replied because it was true. Besides, getting any sort of leg up felt like a long shot, so I wasn’t holding my breath.

The problem with finding employment was that it was next to impossible without a stable address and transportation. Sure, there was the bus, but you needed money for that too. Still, the shelter tried their best using their contacts, which I appreciated.

I thanked her for her time as she ushered me to the donation room, and I was able to leave with some toiletries and bottles of water.

By the evening, I was exhausted from the shitty sleep under the bridge and looked forward to setting up my tent, which had come to represent a safety zone. I’d swiped it from the garage of my childhood home when I’d shown up to beg for my father’s mercy after leaving Clint, even though we never saw eye to eye. The house reeked of cheap beer and musty furniture because he was rarely sober enough to take care of himself, let alone the house. I’d only stayed a few nights before the bastard picked a fight with me and told me I had to go.

After my mother passed away, I barely got through high school living in the same house with him, and I wondered why she never left him. Thankfully, I got cosmetology credits through the high school program and was able to stand on my own two feet with my first job in a salon after graduation.

By the time I got my tent up, the streets had only gotten busier with cars and people. Sometimes I lost track of days, so it must’ve been the weekend. Since I was close to the theater district, the restaurants and bars would be full.

Before settling inside my tent, I watched the street for a while, taking note of my surroundings. I made eye contact with a couple of others who'd set up camp on the street tonight—one in the doorway of a business that had already shuttered its doors, and another who was using a large box as shelter. Groups of people passed between us, chattering away about their plans. I envied them sometimes because even though I knew it wasn't necessarily true, it sure seemed like they hadn't a care in the world. But I was old enough to know nobody's life was perfect and what they presented to you on the outside didn't always match the inside.

I'd pretended for years that Clint wasn't callous and intimidating, and toward the end, when our arguments became more physical, I already had an escape plan in place. It just didn't work out quite the way I'd pictured.

Burrowing inside my shelter for the night, I felt on edge and had trouble sleeping, so I unzipped the flap to keep watch as the bars began letting out.

Sometimes I could almost sense trouble brewing, and the hair at my nape tingled as I heard the drunk voices before they turned the corner toward us. It was a large group, at least eight men, heading in the direction of the parking garages.

I noticed how the man in the doorway pulled up his hoodie and tried making himself smaller so he'd be invisible to them. I scooted farther back in my tent and didn't make eye contact as they walked by us.

“Look at these pathetic losers,” the loudest one said, and when a couple of others laughed, I stiffened. Not that I hadn't heard that shit before, but we were outnumbered if they decided to pull anything. “Probably heroin addicts.”

I held my breath until the last man passed by, trying to hold my tongue, knowing it would only make things worse if I said something. Did he even realize how hard it would be to keep up such an expensive habit? Idiot. Not that some of us weren't addicted to drugs, but alcohol and weed were way cheaper. Not to mention, if some people messed with our food "for fun," I didn't even want to imagine what they'd put in drugs simply to make a fast buck.

I was about to zip my tent, when I heard quickening footsteps, like someone was running, and then there was shouting. I shot out of the tent and spotted the man in the doorway now lying on the ground, writhing and holding his face in his hands. I looked both ways but didn't see anyone else. "What happened?"

"He...he..." He was groaning and rubbing his eyes.

"Did he hit you?" My gut churned, and I tightened my jaw.

I glanced around again as the man from the cardboard box inched over to us.

"The man sprayed him in the eyes with something. I saw him."

I crouched down. "What did he spray you with?"

"I don't know," he replied in an anguished voice. "Pepper spray or maybe tear gas?"

"Hang on." I jogged back to my tent and retrieved a bottle of water from my visit to the shelter that morning. "Let's flush out your eyes. Try to stay still."

He lay as still as possible, his hands balled in fists at his sides and his lids screwed shut. As I poured the water, he blinked rapidly, allowing the liquid to help cleanse the irritant

away. After a few more times, it looked like the sting had begun to subside.

“Did you see who did it? Was he part of that group of loud men walking by?” I asked as he sat up.

“He might’ve been,” the cardboard-box guy replied, and the assaulted man nodded. “But it happened so fast, it was hard to tell.”

What would possess someone to do that? But it was a rhetorical question I didn’t utter aloud. I’d seen more cruelty in my life than I’d ever dreamed of.

We exchanged names, then sat on the stoop practically all night, until his vision was mostly back to normal. Regardless, would any of us have truly been able to sleep? What if the assailant returned? Joe’s eyes remained red, and though Darius and I thought he would be okay by morning, we couldn’t be sure. But there was no way to take him to the emergency room, and even then, how would he pay?

We could’ve alerted the police, but it was better to remain invisible when it came to the authorities, so they would continue to look the other way while dealing with actual crime in the city. And there was plenty to keep them occupied. Tessa recently told me that the state was in the process of passing what was called the Homeless Bill of Rights. It would help people without a permanent place to live become a protected class. As it stood now, we weren’t harassed much on public property by the police or shop owners unless someone complained. No one mentioned anything about cruel, drunk men using a weapon in the form of a spray. We weren’t a disadvantaged group to them, just a pitiful nuisance and vulnerable enough to mess with because there would be few, if any, consequences.

Eventually, Darius returned to his box for some shut-eye, but I could tell that Joe would not be able to rest after what happened. I convinced him to move with me to another location on a side street that looked quiet and safe. He lay down on his ratty blanket, and I agreed to keep watch for a while, before finally succumbing to sleep myself.

FOSTER

I WAS in the university library, helping a student pull old journals for a research paper in her communications class. Times had certainly changed since I attended college. As a student, I practically lived in the library so I could access resources and find a quiet place to work.

But as the world modernized and more things became available online, we had to change with the times. Students still gathered here for quiet places to work, but the help they needed nowadays was at the touch of their fingertips. The librarians were still looked to for their wealth of knowledge, and each of us had an area of specialty. Mine was the arts, which meant I had access to plenty of historical references, and sometimes students wanted to look at actual books and journals, likely because they felt tangible.

“All set?” I asked her, and she absently nodded as she pulled her laptop closer.

I made my way toward the arts sections to reshelve a couple of books, and when I passed by the *Ws* in the rows of fiction, it reminded me of Lachlan. He hadn't been there the past two mornings, and I wondered if something happened to him. Or had he decided to change locations? Would I ever see him again?

Now I regretted not taking Oscar for a longer walk during the sleet storm to see if Lachlan was okay, but on top of the miserable weather, I'd also been in the midst of a depressive episode. I had practically slept all day Friday after calling in sick. It happened once or twice a year, when the med I was on didn't touch the core of the numbing feeling that came along with my worst days. It was essentially up to me to push through with the help of the methods I'd learned in therapy. But it was difficult and exhausting to get my body and mind to cooperate.

That said, I had no idea why I was so intrigued by Lachlan, but maybe I was only concerned for his well-being. Something about his deep, soulful eyes that were warm and expressive but also world-weary. I could only imagine and would've loved to ask more, but I'd been afraid he'd think I was prying.

Glancing at the shelf, I found Oscar Wilde and slid out one of the two copies of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I paged through it, suddenly realizing I was smiling. I brought it back to my desk, checked it out, and slipped it in my bag. For what reason, I wasn't exactly sure. I just enjoyed the story Lachlan told about his mom.

I wondered why he'd never bought himself a copy or checked it out himself—before experiencing homelessness, of course—when a memory of my previous job at a public library in Chicago flooded my brain.

Shelterless men and women would come inside to get warm or read at one of the tables. I felt guilty now about listening to employees complaining about their stench or loitering, and that I did nothing to push back. Apparently, we were all ignorant and unsympathetic in certain scenarios in our lives. *When you know better, you do better*, as my mom would

say. Maybe they just wanted a quiet, dry place for a few hours, or the escapism a book offered.

I glanced at the clock and saw it was coming up on noon.

“Be back in an hour,” I said to my coworker. She waved as she picked up the help-desk phone. I grabbed my coat and walked down a flight of stairs into the cool spring air.

Doug, my friend from college, had relocated to Cleveland five years ago—he was in the medical industry—and he’d been instrumental in convincing me to make a change. We worked close enough to make plans happen sometimes, so we’d agreed to have lunch today.

We met at the corner of Euclid and 18th Street and started walking toward a food truck in the theater district.

“So what’s new?” I asked Doug.

He told me about his nursing job at the Cleveland Clinic, then pivoted to his new girlfriend, who happened to work there too. “How about you?”

“Eh, same old, same old,” I replied as we got in line for tacos. I couldn’t help looking around the street for Lachlan, but I didn’t see him or his yellow tent. “Students are gearing up for finals and summer break.”

A man standing against a nearby building was holding a sign that read Need Food to Feed my Family. There was a hat at his feet for change, and passersby threw in what looked like quarters and dollar bills. He thanked them profusely as they did.

“Think that dude’s for real?” Doug asked, following my line of sight. “We could always test it out by bringing him a taco.”

“It’s better to give them money so they can make their own choices. People can be cruel and tamper with their food.”

His eyebrows bunched together. “How the hell do you know that?”

“On my morning walks, Oscar has sort of...befriended a guy who lives on the street.”

“What do you mean?” he asked as the line inched forward and we placed our orders.

Once we moved toward the pickup window to wait for our food, I said, “Oscar immediately connected with this guy who’s around our age, and constantly seeks him out on our walks, loves visiting with him, so we talked a bit. I still don’t know his exact circumstances, but he’s friendly and loves Oscar.”

“You need to be careful,” Doug said in a scolding tone as we got our food.

“Why?” Though I probably knew his reasons. All the usual stereotypes of the unhoused population being on drugs or mentally ill. That last one especially stung since I happened to have a mental-health issue myself.

Doug hitched a shoulder. “You just never know.”

“There’s nothing wrong with showing compassion for someone who needs it.”

“True,” Doug replied, then walked over to the guy holding the sign to throw spare change in his hat, as if feeling guilty after our exchange.

We devoured our tacos while we walked back to the university, and then said our goodbyes, agreeing to meet for dinner soon.

On my walk the following morning, my stomach flooded with relief upon seeing the yellow tent. The flap was open, Lachlan's feet sticking out. Of course Oscar noticed instantly and began tugging hard on the leash. I let it go, knowing he'd head straight for him.

"Heads up," I called, and Lachlan's excited grin made my chest balloon.

Oscar was so enthusiastic with his kisses, he practically knocked Lachlan backward.

He laughed as he kissed his snout. "I missed you too."

"Are you okay?" I asked, approaching them. "I haven't seen you around."

His eyes widened as if he was surprised I'd even notice. "There was an incident the other night, so I moved locations for a few days."

"What sort of incident?" I asked as Oscar lay down by his feet.

"On weekend nights the restaurants and bars are hopping," he said, and I nodded, knowing full well. "Sometimes when those establishments close for the night, there can be groups of drunk people who harass the houseless population."

"Damn, I had no idea." I felt sick to my stomach.

"In this case, someone decided to spray one of us in the face with an aerosol. Not sure what it was."

My hand automatically went to my mouth. "I'm so sorry."

"He ran off before any of us could ID him. Not that it would do any good," he muttered, brushing his hand over

Oscar's coat.

“Wouldn't the police investigate?”

“Maybe, but...we've learned it's better not to draw too much attention to ourselves. As long as I clean up my tent by the morning, they don't bother us.”

Given his response, it was likely the police were never contacted.

“Is your friend okay?”

“Yeah, I had some water, and we flushed out his eyes. But he was pretty shaken up, so I stood watch for him the last couple of nights in another location so he could get some sleep.”

“That's really kind of you.”

He shrugged. “Not sure what else I could've done.”

“Is there a shelter that might've taken him?” When his expression remained neutral, I gathered he must've heard the question before. “Or is that pretty ignorant of me to ask?”

“Nah, it's okay. I had all the same assumptions before this became my reality.”

When I crouched down to pet my dog, I got a close-up of the shadows under his eyes. It must've been a couple of harrowing nights.

“Mind sharing those assumptions with me? I'm open to learning.”

He held my gaze for a long moment, those eyes burrowing deep as if looking for any underpinning of phoniness. Seemingly satisfied, he nodded. “I would pass houseless

people on the street and wonder—are they on drugs? Mentally ill? Why don't they just go to a shelter?"

I winced, giving myself away. "Why don't you set me straight?"

"Why do you care so much?"

I swallowed thickly. "Because you're a human being. And my dog is obviously very fond of you, so I figure he knows something I don't."

When he grinned, it was as if the skies had opened and poured sunshine down on him. He was very handsome and charming, I'd give him that. I couldn't help thinking what he might've looked like without the shaggy hair and beard.

"The shelters are very helpful if you can get a bed. But they fill up fast. They do offer meals and other services, but the residents get first dibs. The truth is...I like my tent and keeping track of my stuff. And sometimes the shelters have bedbugs, but it's not because we're dirty—though cleanliness can be hard to maintain. If you get a bed, they have rules like showering and clean sheets, but sometimes it's hard to stop community transmission."

"That makes sense." And it seemed he liked this location—maybe he had his reasons. Hopefully the assault was a one-off from a shitty, drunk guy.

"I happen to be a clean freak." He looked away. "Though you'd never know it."

"I can tell by your sneakers." I looked down at the black-and-white pair on his feet.

His eyes flashed to mine. "You can?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, they're cleaner than mine."

When he let out a robust laugh, it was the greatest sound.

“Where did you use to live—before?” I asked hesitantly. This conversation was important, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

He smirked. “Before sleeping near a trash can?”

My face felt hot. “Well...yeah.”

“Akron. But I grew up in Cleveland, so...”

Were his parents still around? Did they know he was without a home?

“Do you have any family or friends to—”

“You can only rely on their hospitality for so long, especially when you’re a total mess.”

My pulse spiked at the admission. “Why were you a total mess?”

I saw the moment his expression shuttered, and his shoulders seemed to curl inward as if the subject was painful. “Nah, I won’t bore you with the details.”

“What if I’m not bored?”

He had trouble looking me in the eye when he said, “Normally, you have to get to work by this time.”

That was when I noticed the braided-leather bracelets on his right hand, and directly below, his banged-up fingers. Two of the knuckles looked swollen and crooked. My stomach lurched.

“You’re right. Guess I lost track of time.” I stood and wiped imaginary dirt off my knees. “Want some coffee this morning?”

He held up a hand. “No, I’m good for today.”

I couldn't help feeling like the energy had changed between us. I might've inquired too much, pushed too far, and I needed to respect his boundaries. I'd try not to make that mistake again. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if I could help him in a different way—money, somewhere to live until he could make it on his own—but from the little I knew about him, he'd be too proud and private to accept any of that.

“If you're sure.” I frowned as he nodded. “Oh, before I forget...I brought you something.” I reached into the inside pocket of my coat and took out the book. I'd hoped I'd see him again one of these mornings.

“Holy crap, you're kidding.” He reached for it, brushed the front cover as if it evoked a memory, before carefully opening to the first page, which was stamped with the CSU symbol. “It's from your university library? I...I can't...”

“Sure you can. Just return it to me when you're finished.” I winked. “And if you want to read anything else, I have my own little collection of books at home.”

“I...well...thank you.” I could see the gratitude in his eyes and was so damned glad he'd accepted the offer. “How about that coffee?”

I grinned, feeling like we'd found common ground again. “Coming right up!”

LACHLAN

WHAT WOULD Foster think if he knew *why* I was living on the streets? The shame I felt for not standing up for myself sooner, for being too scared to make a move... I glanced at my knuckles, wishing I'd stayed at the hospital that night. I was embarrassed to admit that living on the streets was sort of a relief because it was just me and the elements, and that was my singular goal—to keep myself dry and safe and fed for one more day.

I shuffled in line with my tray and was served soup and a sandwich. “Thank you.” I made sure to always show gratitude because the volunteers were hardworking and donated their time. Tessa’s cousin, Officer Holt, sometimes showed up to lend a hand. He was friendly and engaging and probably the only police officer any of us felt comfortable around. Mostly.

I sat down at the end of a long table and listened to others’ conversations, absently nodding here and there so I didn’t appear rude. But there were other things on my mind that morning, and as soon as I finished my food, I slid the tray aside and pulled out the book Foster had given me.

I’d have to read it in the daytime because I didn’t have a flashlight, let alone one attached to a phone anymore. But I was excited to get started, and as I traced my fingers down the

front cover, memories of my mother came flooding back. How she'd hide out, reading in my room, her legs propped on the window seat, when she wanted to avoid dealing with my father on the nights he came home drunk. Sometimes he'd shout her name before passing out in their bed. He was much easier to reason with in the morning.

"Where'd ya get that?" asked the woman sitting beside me. Her bony hand reached out to touch the edge of the book.

"Oh, um...someone lent it to me."

"Lucky. The ones they have here are already picked through, and if I go to the library, I can't check anything out."

I nodded in sympathy, almost telling her I'd ask if she could borrow it next. Not a good idea. Foster didn't know her, and the book didn't belong to him. It was the reason I needed to be extra careful with it. Not that the other users had, given that the front corner was already bent and creased.

Just as I finished the first page, Tessa approached and asked me to come to her office when I was done. I was too curious to continue reading, so I stored the book in my cart, cleaned up my tray, and walked down the hallway to her open doorway.

"There's a recent job posting I thought might be of interest to you."

I sat in the seat across from her. "What is it?"

"Shampoo assistant at a downtown salon. It's entry-level stuff, like keeping the stations supplied and sweeping after cuts."

"I remember all too well." I winced. "What happens when they find out I was a top stylist at a fancy salon?" Until I was let go for my erratic behavior and multiple absences. When

she shrugged, I asked, “Won’t they wonder why I’ve been living on the streets?”

“Hey.” She leaned forward, empathy in her gaze. “You’ve got to start somewhere.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

She pulled out a form from her desk drawer. “Just fill this out and head over there with the application in hand. The manager already knows to expect you.”

“What about an address for the application?” If my driver’s license wasn’t expired, I might’ve gotten away with using my last known address. But Akron is nearly an hour away from Cleveland, so it would only raise more questions.

“The manager is aware that you’re using the shelter’s address for now.”

I tugged on my beard, feeling out of sorts. Did I want this? Was I ready to enter that world again? It didn’t feel like me anymore. But maybe it would after a few weeks.

“All right.” I forced a smile. “Thank you for vouching for me.”

“Of course.” She slid a pen to me. “You’re free to shower and use our employment-resources room. There’s bound to be something that fits you.”

Well, that was an offer I couldn’t refuse. I carefully filled out the form, hoping my shaky handwriting wasn’t a strike against me. Then Tessa led me to a room I recognized from their job-training program. There was a rack of donated clothing where I found pants and a shirt in my size.

Then I was off to the restroom facilities I’d once used as a resident. You were only allowed a three-day stay unless your

case qualified for longer. I was familiar with the shower room, so I knew where to retrieve the shampoo, soap, and a fresh towel.

I could've trimmed my beard, but it kept me warm. Same for my hair, which had grown to near shoulder-length. It would look better after a proper shampoo. I could even use a comb and hair gel to make myself more presentable.

It would be better than the soap-and-bottled-water bath I gave myself every few days—though the latter at least helped me feel human and refreshed. I slipped out of my sneakers, remembering how Foster had noticed my keeping them clean. The other layers of clothing followed, and I carefully arranged them on a nearby folding chair.

And God, I could've stayed under the spigot with the warm water running down my skin for hours. I washed my body twice and even used conditioner on my hair.

I reluctantly twisted the water dial, dried myself off, and changed into the secondhand clothes that felt new without all the street grime.

Tessa smiled when I walked into her office. “You look good.”

After she gave me the address, she wished me luck.

“Thanks,” I muttered, feeling anxious all over again.

I rolled my cart back over the bridge and to West 6th Street, where lots of the trendy bars and restaurants were located. The wind was wicked today, so I pulled my coat closed, wishing I'd dressed in more layers. But that would've ruined the whole vibe.

Who was I kidding? The shabby jacket and cart already did. That point was further emphasized when I rolled up to the

salon and noted the elegant sign and upscale lobby area beyond the glass doors. In my former life, I would've held my head high as I rattled off my accomplishments, but now I just felt like a fish out of water.

When I finally got up the nerve to step inside, the receptionist didn't miss how I'd parked my cart near the door so I could keep my eye on it.

She looked me up and down. "Can I help you?"

I glanced around the expansive, modern establishment, the energetic chatter from the stylists and their customers echoing through the open-concept space. "Yes, I'm here for—"

"A cut?" Her gaze took in my hair and beard. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm actually here for a job. Tessa Payne sent me from the shelter." I looked toward the sidewalk, wishing I was still on the other side of the door. "I, uh, used to be a stylist myself until I fell on hard times."

I hated that I wanted to explain myself to her. To somehow excuse my scruffy appearance and makeshift closet on wheels.

And Christ, my hands were shaking as bad as my voice.

She stood. "Let me get the manager."

When she walked away, I suddenly felt like I had an audience. Curious glances, *wary* glances, were coming from all directions.

Fuck this.

I grabbed my cart, opened the door, and walked out, sucking in the fresh air as I tried to get as far away from that place as possible. I'd explain to Tessa that it didn't work out. She probably wouldn't be surprised.

I walked around the city, finally settling on a bench in North Coast Harbor. The air had warmed, and the wind had died down enough that I was able to enjoy the temperature and waterfront view. A tugboat and freighter were passing through the channel just beyond the Lake Erie breakwater.

Fishing around in my cart, I pulled out my styling set. Unzipping the storage pack, I fingered the different scissors and shears, wondering if I'd ever be able to use them again, even on myself. Up to this point, there were way more important things to worry about. But being back in that environment, however briefly, had stirred a longing inside me—to be useful, productive, accepted again.

I considered chucking the set in the nearby garbage can, but then thought better of it. Storing them away again, I tugged the book out instead.

Getting lost in the pages, I read for a couple of hours undisturbed. It felt glorious, as if the real world had melted away and I was in my little cocoon of make believe. Sort of how I felt tucked inside my tent at night. Like as soon as I zipped up that flap, nothing bad could happen to me; reality wouldn't intrude.

At least not until the following morning.

FOSTER

“Do you have surveillance cameras facing the street?” I asked the coffee-shop manager the next time I saw her behind the counter.

She glanced warily at me. “Why?”

I hitched a thumb over my shoulder. “There was an assault the other night on a man living on the streets.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.” She looked away in discomfort. “Are the police investigating?”

“I...I don’t think so. But I thought if your camera showed the crime—”

She held up her hands. “I won’t get involved unless the police require it of us. They’d need to contact our security headquarters and—”

After that, I stopped listening because it was no use. They hadn’t made a report, and the businesses around here would be reluctant to get involved. Besides, Lachlan might frown on me engaging the manager. But I couldn’t imagine how helpless they must feel as a random person with the intent to hurt them was on the loose. It might’ve been a one-off, but the assailant needed to be held accountable.

I got our coffees and muffins and pushed through the door to the sidewalk.

I stood there for a moment, watching Lachlan interacting with Oscar. I swore if I walked in the opposite direction, that dog probably wouldn't even notice I was missing, he was so enthralled by that man. And in a way, I was too.

My depression being worse of late, I looked for any creature comforts in my day. And Lachlan had become one of them. Somehow, he brought the vividness back to the trees and flowers lining the curb, and his yellow tent was like a beacon of light, as if Lachlan was proving to the world that he existed—loudly.

When I saw the adorable connection he had with my dog, I was still standing in the gray, but the edges had turned more brilliant, a silvery-golden metallic that made my existence feel a little less dull.

“Everything okay?” he asked as I finally approached them. “You were looking at us strangely.”

I must've looked like an idiot standing there. “Just marveling at how the two Irish lads get along famously.”

He grinned. “Maybe it's more than that.”

I handed him his stuff. “What do you mean?”

“You said you got him from a shelter, right?” When I nodded, he said, “Maybe he senses something in me. I know what that feels like, to be tossed aside.”

My breath caught. “Tossed aside?”

“That's not technically accurate, but you get the idea.”

“Not really,” I replied, sipping my coffee and averting my gaze so he didn't think I was prying.

“Honestly, I’m the one who tossed him aside—Clint, my ex-boyfriend. I finally got brave enough to leave. But he’d stopped caring about how he made me feel a long time ago. That’s where the tossed-aside reference fits in. I just didn’t see it. Or didn’t want to.”

“I’m...” I dislodged the boulder in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d choose living on the street than with him any day.”

My gut churned. There was more to that story, I was sure of it. I crouched down to scratch behind Oscar’s ears while what he’d confessed registered.

“I left my boyfriend as well,” I admitted. “It was long distance and just wasn’t working anymore. I’m way better on my own too.” It was just as well because we were pretty different. Robert was way more outgoing than me.

His eyes met mine. “I bet you’re wondering how I got from there to here.”

“Even if I was, it’s none of my business.”

He swallowed thickly and focused on my dog instead. “His coat is so shiny. You must be getting him groomed. I considered that line of work once but decided to groom people instead.”

“Wait, what?” I blinked. “Is that what you did in your former life? You were—”

“A stylist at a posh salon.” He squared his shoulders. “And I was damned good at it.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I tried to picture him in that other life, but it was hard to reconcile with this one because he seemed so different, so humble. Yet there was a proud, stubborn streak

in him too. *Listen to me, acting like I know him well enough to cast judgment.*

He rubbed his hand over his jaw. “Don’t let my own grooming habits fool you. It hasn’t been a priority. Plus, the beard keeps me warm.”

“It would,” I replied, trying not to stare. “Though I’ve never been much good at growing any facial hair.”

I brushed my knuckles beneath my chin, feeling my five-o’clock shadow. That stubble was as far as I’d ever gotten, but the flip side was that shaving came easy.

“A beard might ruin your nerdy-librarian status,” he said, and I barked out a laugh.

“Is that how you see me?” I held my breath, awaiting his answer. Why it meant so much, I couldn’t unload right then.

“Brainy guys with glasses used to be my type,” he finally said, not meeting my eyes. “Until I met one who took advantage—used it to manipulate and twist things. Made me feel like the bad guy.”

“Fuck him,” I bit out, and his eyes widened. “I’m sorry he made you feel that way.”

“Never again,” he replied, determination in his tone.

God, I wanted to throat-punch that man, and I’d never had violent thoughts like that before. Did he even realize what he’d put this fragile, kind man through?

Well, *fragile* wasn’t exactly the right word. Strong and brave was more like it. Maybe only his heart had been fragile, and I could totally understand that.

“Anyway, I used to tell customers who had trouble growing facial hair that it might be genetics,” he said with an

air of authority, giving me an insider's view of his former profession, "but stress and mental health can do a number on you too."

My breath sputtered out, and I had to look away because he'd come too close to my truth. My battle with depression had affected lots of things in my life.

I went for a change of subject. "I see you've got some gray in your hair too—just like me. Maybe we're around the same age?"

When he studied me, from my forehead down to my chin, my face warmed. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Forty-one."

"I'm thirty-nine. My dad went gray early too."

"Do you look like him—with your coloring?"

"Yeah...unfortunately."

That response likely explained some things. Maybe he really didn't have anyone to turn to. He must've felt so alone. And it could've had everything to do with his ex. *Damn.*

Lachlan said, "The Irish roots come from my mother's side. She died when I was a teen."

I frowned. "And your father?"

"He's still the same bastard he always was."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He gave a curt nod. "Your parents?"

"They live in Chicago—that's where I'm from. They're still married, and always super involved in my personal life."

"When will you finally meet a nice man to marry?"

“So they’re accepting? Of your sexuality, I mean.”

“Yeah. I know I’m lucky.” I winced. “Some people don’t have that.”

“My mom was amazing,” he said wistfully, and when his eyes met mine, I smiled, happy he’d had that at least. “Which reminds me…” He reached behind him into the tent. “I started the book.”

My stomach flipped with excitement. “Yeah?”

He nodded. “I can only read during daylight, for obvious reasons, so I might be a bit slow getting it back to you.”

My stomach dropped. I hadn’t thought of that. That he might not have access to artificial light. “I could get you a book lamp or—”

“That’s not why I mentioned it,” he replied sternly.

“I was only suggesting—”

“I appreciate the offer, but please, *don’t*.” His cheeks were red, and his eyes had shuttered.

“Understood.” I got up so as not to crowd him, feeling guilty for even suggesting it. But his meaning was clear: *I don’t want any handouts. I can fend for myself.*

“Thank you,” he whispered.

I stared helplessly, afraid to make another wrong move. Maybe I had done too much, gotten too close. I was probably too invested at this point. But I couldn’t seem to help myself.

“I’m pretty fond of one of the quotes from the book,” he said, getting back to the subject at hand, and our eyes connected. “*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.*”

My mouth went dry. It was as if he was telling me his situation was temporary, that he still had aspirations. That he was indeed existing loudly, and suddenly I wanted him to recount all his dreams in vivid, bold detail.

LACHLAN

“I’M sorry it didn’t work out,” Tessa said when I stopped by her office after breakfast. But I could tell she either didn’t believe me or knew something disappointing had happened.

I certainly didn’t want to appear ungrateful. I hadn’t meant to squander the job opportunity. I just felt too out of place, but given my circumstances... “Maybe if another opportunity arises in a salon that isn’t so...like too much of a reminder of my old life.”

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline, but she didn’t push for details, and I appreciated that. “Noted.”

Returning to the main room, I felt a restless tension in the air as people tuned to the television mounted in the far corner, the volume turned up. It was normally set to The Weather Channel, and currently, they were warning about a wicked thunderstorm coming off the lake today.

I heard rumbles of people planning to shelter under the Main Avenue Bridge, but I’d been through many storms by now and wasn’t nervous. Unlike the sleet the other day, this sounded like it would blow through fast. My tent repelled rain pretty well, and no way I wanted to spend another night smashed together like sardines while we all waited it out.

I tuned out the chatter, considering where I might take my book to read this afternoon before the rain set in. I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed getting lost in fictional worlds, so maybe Foster would offer to bring me other things to read.

No. Bad idea. He'd done enough for me already, and I'd probably gotten too attached to his dog—and to my friendly exchanges with Foster as well. I couldn't believe some of the things I'd shared with him. But he didn't seem taken aback—maybe a little angry with Clint—and that had surprised me. Had even made my chest tighten in this strange way. But I didn't need anyone to save me or fight for me. That was my job, and never before had it felt so evident. I had given up plenty of things for Clint, who was a controlling jackass and had taken advantage of my blind trust in him.

Guess that saying was true, that your parents were reflected in your romantic partners—namely, my father. Maybe it was the universe's way of helping you work through some childhood trauma, or maybe it just felt all too familiar or comfortable, so you put up with the bullshit. Damn, that was messed up. Never again.

Foster treated me like a human being, like I had dignity, and that meant the world to me. Not that he was a romantic partner. Christ, no way I needed my thoughts to head in that direction. I had trouble as it was because he was so easy on the eyes.

It was definitely best to head to the public library if I wanted to read any more books. After I finished the one he'd lent me. On that note, I headed out.

I felt the first raindrop as I was sitting near the water fountain in Public Square. Supposed it was time to hunker down in my tent to wait out the impending storm. I briefly

considered setting up right there, but I liked my little spot near the coffee shop best. And not only because of friendly strangers.

By the time I got there, my hair was damp, but I didn't mind. It was a good way to rinse the dust away.

When I was finally tucked inside my tent, I pulled the book out again to make sure it hadn't gotten bent or damp. A crack of lightning and then booming thunder startled me. It sounded so close. The book fell from my fingers, and I carefully unzipped the flap to check my surroundings.

The sky had turned a dark gray, the air thick with humidity, and I heard another rumble of thunder in the distance. I counted the beats like Mom had taught me to calculate the miles between me and the storm. Turned out, it was pretty close. I could've easily gotten stranded somewhere.

Just as I had that thought, the clouds decided it was time to wring out all the water they had collected, and the storm intensified. It seemed I was solo on this block, likely because the others had taken shelter elsewhere. Maybe I should've as well.

But I also liked being in my cocoon as the torrential rain pelted the nylon material, making the color a muted mustard. Storms always made me feel like the world had stopped spinning, giving me a reprieve from my worries for a little while.

I lay down and listened to the water hammering the makeshift walls. It was steady and didn't let up for the better part of an hour. So much for the forecast being accurate. That was when I felt a drop of water hit my cheek, followed by another and another. A corner of the tent was leaking, and my blankets were getting wet. Shit. Maybe I should've thought

this through better. But it was no use now. I'd be able to dry them as soon as the sun came out again. It wasn't like I hadn't slept in damp surroundings before.

I sat up and felt around the seams of the tent. Not only was the roof leaking, but the ground surface was getting saturated. I was in for a long night if this rain continued.

When I heard the sound of a dog barking in the distance, I grew still to listen, immediately feeling sorry for any animal out in the elements. If he came close, I might let him inside my tent until the storm passed.

A moment later there was scratching outside my tent, along with whining, so I figured the dog was desperate. I quickly scooted forward to unzip the tent, only to find a very drenched Irish setter.

"What are you doing here?" Oscar was still attached to his leash, so he must've gotten separated from Foster. I patted the blanket. "Come on, boy."

As soon as he was inside the tent, he pounced, licking my face and getting me wetter than I already was. Still, I couldn't help laughing. "Okay, calm down. No doubt Foster will be looking for you. I'd take you to him, but I have no idea where you live." Foster was probably desperate to find Oscar and scared for him in this storm.

But Oscar wouldn't relax inside the tent, pacing and whining. Was he scared too? Had something happened? Maybe he wanted me to follow him.

I lifted onto my knees, considering letting him lead me, when I heard someone yell, "Oscar!"

FOSTER

MY DEPRESSION HAD LEFT me exhausted today, and as soon as I made it through a late day of work, I couldn't even keep my eyes open. After I got home and fed Oscar, I'd fallen asleep on the couch.

The only reason I had roused at all was the crack of lightning through my window. I didn't even know it was raining. That was when I heard Oscar whining by the door.

"What's wrong? Do you need to do your business?" I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Ugh, great timing."

I was still groggy from my nap when we got outside, which was probably why Oscar's leash slipped from my fingers when he began tugging. Before I knew what was happening, he was gone.

"Oscar!" Umbrella in hand, I jogged against the gusty wind in an attempt to catch up to him. The streets were eerily quiet except for the sound of pattering rain.

"Oscar!" I called again, rounding the corner toward the coffee shop.

"He's here!" a voice yelled back, and that was when I spotted the yellow tent. What in the hell was Lachlan doing

out in this weather? I'd expected him to seek shelter elsewhere, but maybe he couldn't find any place to go.

It was hard to navigate the sidewalks as it was, the puddles quickly turning to streams. My sneakers were drenched, my socks sopping wet. Even my umbrella was having trouble staying upright with the gusts whipping around the buildings, creating a wind tunnel effect.

When Lachlan stuck his head out of the tent to wave me down, he seemed a little shaken, either from Oscar seeking him out or the weather conditions that were getting more dangerous by the minute.

I began jogging his way, unable to avoid the bigger puddles. Not like it mattered.

"There you are!" I said, crouching down to get a better look at Oscar inside the tent. My dog looked mighty cozy with Lachlan, now that he was out of the rain.

"How did he get loose?" Lachlan asked.

"He was whining at the door when the storm hit, so I thought he had to do his business." I tried to temper my exasperated tone. "As soon as we got outside, he began pulling on the lead, and it slipped through my fingers. Before I knew what was happening, he was gone. Ran a couple of blocks and all the way to you, apparently."

He scratched his head. "Why would he do that?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say he was concerned about you." That theory certainly made the most sense. Oscar was pretty attached to Lachlan by now. "Animals can sense danger."

"Danger?" he asked, as if he didn't fully understand how treacherous this storm might get for him. Or maybe for *us*, since we were all out in the elements now.

I waved toward the sky. “Bad weather. And this storm is wicked.”

“I’m fine in my tent,” he said evenly, though his shaky hands gave him away. “Just a few little leaks.”

That’s when I noticed he looked damp. I wasn’t confident his tent would hold up much longer.

My hand splashed in the puddle forming between us. “The streets are flooding, and your tent will be washed away. This rain is not supposed to let up for hours.”

“So I’ll move,” he replied as a wind gust threatened to carry my umbrella away again.

“Come stay with us tonight.”

“No, thank you. You don’t have to—”

“I doubt Oscar will leave you.” I motioned to my dog, whose tail was thumping.

“If this is about your dog—”

“It’s not.” Christ, did he really think that? Somehow, I needed to get through to this stubborn man. “The truth is, I was napping and didn’t know how bad it was outside. I’m concerned about you. Please, just until the storm passes. One night. I have a guest room.”

He stared at me, from my damp hair to my soaked shoes, as if weighing whether to put his trust in me. And I got it, totally, after what he’d been through, but I hoped he knew I meant well. If he stayed out here any longer, his tent would undoubtedly be swept away. As it was now, the water by the curb looked more like a moving river.

He took in our wet surroundings. “Okay, fine.” He began gathering his things. “Thanks for offering.”

I breathed out in relief and reached for Oscar's leash, encouraging him to exit the tent and give Lachlan more room. I was able to move him under a store awning to wait, and then I watched in awe as Lachlan got busy stuffing his things into a rolling cart. It was a smart way to store his belongings, even if at the moment it barely did anything to keep his stuff dry.

At one point he gasped as he jostled stuff inside the cart, then glanced at me before turning his back to maneuver something. Once he backed out of the tent, he began tearing it down. It wasn't complicated, but he certainly knew how to do it speedily. Maybe being pelted with rain helped. I stepped up to offer shelter under my umbrella as he turned with his rolling cart in one hand and the handle of the tent bag in the other.

"Ready?" I asked, and he nodded, still looking uncertain.

There was really no time for debate in these conditions. As we turned the corner, a crack of lightning made us both jump, and a branch from a nearby tree fell onto the sidewalk. It wasn't large, but still a clear warning to get to safety.

We picked up our pace without uttering another word, and when we got to my high-rise apartment building, his shoulders tensed. I had no idea why, but if he wanted to talk about it, we could do that in the lobby. I closed my umbrella under the awning, unlocked the door, and then we were finally inside.

"No doorman?" He looked around the lobby, which was fairly plain with its beige walls and muted blue carpet.

"Nah, pretty sure that amenity would make my rent higher."

I led him toward the elevator, and when we stepped inside and I punched the button to my floor, he blurted, "I ruined your book."

“What do you mean?”

“It’s soaking wet.” He motioned to his cart. “I don’t know if I can save it from falling apart.”

So that was what the ruckus was earlier when he was gathering his stuff. There was a swirl of different emotions in his eyes, ranging from fear to guilt.

“I don’t care.”

“But it belongs to the library, where you work.”

I hitched a shoulder. “It’s not the only copy, and besides, it’s seen better days.”

He shook his head adamantly. “I...I can pay—”

“Don’t burden yourself with it. I can—”

“Maybe there’s a way to save it,” he insisted as the doors opened, and he followed me into the hallway.

“Let’s take a look after we get inside.”

LACHLAN

WAS I REALLY DOING THIS? The truth was, Foster had been right about the storm.

And I felt awful when I saw that his book had gotten wet from the leak inside my tent. Now I would owe him for that as well as his hospitality, and there was no way I could repay him. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I followed them around the corner to his apartment door, my feet feeling wooden,

like I was moving through a dream. I'd been relieved to find there was no doorman, who would undoubtedly give me a hard time. They were notorious for keeping their entryway free of vagrants like me.

"You seem tense," Foster said. "About more than the book."

"It's just... It's been a long time."

"Since?" He brandished the key and fit it in the lock.

I twisted my bracelets. "Since I've been in someone's home."

Damn, that was tough to admit. But the reality made me breathless. Such a simple thing that felt monumental now.

“How long?”

“Maybe...eight months? Time blurs together after a while. Feels like eight years.”

I had relied on different friends to put me up in the beginning—Clint’s friends. I had lost contact with all of mine from high school long ago. But they’d been torn, especially after seeing my injuries and hearing Clint’s lies about what had gone down.

Then I’d shown up at my childhood home. After my father asked me to leave, I stayed in a hostel until my money ran out. My first night on the street was rough. Heartbroken, I’d cried myself to sleep.

Foster frowned as he opened the door and urged me to step inside. As he removed Oscar’s leash and stored his umbrella, I took in the apartment.

It was clean, a simple open-concept place with a gray couch, large-screen television, and a kitchen island with stools. The apartment I shared with Clint had modern furnishings as well. It’d been almost a year since I even had a place to call home.

But who was I kidding? It had never felt like a true home. Nothing had since my mother had passed, and even before that, it had never felt safe enough.

“Nice place.” It was the polite thing to say, and it was true.

But at this point, a broom closet would feel amazing, which Foster must’ve realized because he looked uncomfortable as he muttered, “Thanks. Let’s get you settled.”

I glanced at my sopping wet clothes, my brain foggy as I stood in this man’s apartment. A tiny part of me still feared

that all this was a setup and I might be taken advantage of in some way.

“How about a shower and then something warm to change into?”

Instead of waiting for a reply, he strode down the hall. I stayed back as I listened to him opening and closing a door, and then he appeared with two towels. Warm, fuzzy towels. The ones at the shelter were thin and scratchy.

“You can leave your shoes by the door.” When I didn’t move, Foster sighed. “I’m not trying to... I know it might be hard to trust me, but I’m truly only trying to get you warm and safe, and out of the elements. Only for one night.”

Our eyes met, and all I saw was concern in his. He had always been kind, and in my gut, I knew I could trust him. I’d made the mistake of not listening to my gut before.

Oscar leaned against my legs as if to give me an extra push, and when I reached down, I encountered wet fur. I couldn’t believe he’d run all the way to my tent to find me.

“Good boy,” I said, then slipped out of my shoes.

Relief flitted through Foster’s eyes as he handed me the towels. “While you’re in the shower, I’ll get us dry too.”

“O...kay.” I glanced down the hall, not knowing where to start. What was wrong with me? I certainly knew how to use someone’s bathroom.

“I’ll get you situated.” Foster walked down the hall, and I followed, noting the two bedrooms. The bathroom was roomy enough, with contemporary fixtures. “Feel free to use the shampoo and bodywash and whatever else you want.”

I set the towels on the vanity as he stepped back into the hall. I locked the door behind him with shaky fingers, that same wariness creeping up my throat. There was nothing wrong with being cautious.

I stared at myself in the mirror. Christ, I looked like a man who had survived the Alaskan wilderness or something. My hair and beard were stringy and unkempt, my eyes wild, my torso much thinner than before. It made me wonder why Foster thought he could trust *me* inside his home, given my disheveled appearance. For all he knew, I would steal something out of desperation and use it to get cash.

I would never dream of such a thing, though I'd been close to shoplifting plenty of times just to eat. I didn't necessarily fault the others who did or panhandled for money because desperation could make you do unthinkable stuff. But those methods weren't sustainable. I had come up with my own ways to survive, and so far, they were working for me. Even if it involved relying on the generosity of strangers in dire circumstances.

I turned the faucet handle on the shower, then stripped out of my clothes, shivering as the cool air hit my skin. The steam from the shower was tantalizing, and once I stepped under the spray, the hot water felt like heaven dousing my hair and rolling off my shoulders.

I stood there like that for far too long, until I remembered it would be a good idea to wash my hair and skin. It felt strange reaching for his bodywash, but as soon as I began rubbing it onto my chest and arms, the smell overtook my senses. Like fresh linens and old books mixed together. I smiled to myself because that fit Foster perfectly.

But then my stomach turned as I remembered the ruined book. As soon as I was done with my shower, I'd pull it from my cart and see about drying it out.

Trying to step it up, I washed my hair with his vanilla shampoo before finally turning the knob, reaching for a towel, and stepping out. I hoped I didn't use up all the hot water.

I tied the towel around my waist, realizing I didn't have any clothes to change into, and just as I was about to call for him, there was a knock. "I'll leave these sweats outside the door for you. And they're yours to keep if you want them."

"Thanks." I opened the door and gathered them in my arms. Slipping them on felt like pure luxury, even though I had to tighten the drawstring to fit my waist. Even the T-shirt felt soft and warm. And the hoodie? It smelled like that bodywash I'd just used, which meant it smelled like Foster. I made a frustrated sound. No way I should get too comfortable wearing clothing that didn't truly belong to me.

I walked out with my pile of dirty clothes, unsure what to do next.

"Oh, over here," he said, motioning me the rest of the way down the hall to the washer and dryer stacked inside a closet. He was also in sweats and a T-shirt that hugged his lean form. "Okay if I pop them in the washer with the other wet things?"

"That would be great."

"Cool." He opened the washer to shove my clothes inside, his cheeks striped pink, and I couldn't help wondering if he was second-guessing himself.

FOSTER

I TRIED NOT to stare at the man who normally wore multiple layers of clothing. He was thinner than me, but that might not have always been the case. His dark hair was nearly to his shoulders, his beard a bit scraggly, but no doubt, Lachlan was a striking man. And I wanted to know his story more than ever, but he was a private person, and my curiosity might scare him off. It was a miracle I got him to agree to stay the night.

He followed me to the living room, seeming uncertain of himself again.

“The storm is still raging,” I pointed out, and he padded to the window to get a bird’s-eye view of the city. Was he worried about his friends?

“I can’t believe how fast it’s coming down.”

“You might’ve been floating along a river by now if Oscar hadn’t checked on you.”

Hearing his name, Oscar rose from his pillow in the corner of the room and went over to sniff at Lachlan.

He gently stroked his fur with fingers that looked like they’d been broken and never been set. “You really think that’s what he was doing?”

I lifted a shoulder. “What else would explain it? He’s never acted that way before.”

“Suppose I should thank you, then.” Lachlan crouched down to his level, and Oscar gave him a lick on the cheek for his effort. “You, uh...said you didn’t notice it was raining?”

“No, I was napping.” I looked away, thinking of some way to explain that didn’t sound superfluous. “Sometimes after work I—”

He held up a hand. “No need to explain.”

“Yeah, okay.” I breathed out in relief. Maybe that was how he felt about some of my probing questions. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. Want something to eat?”

“No, you don’t have to—”

I motioned to the kitchen. “But I want to. I’m not much of a cook, but I can make a mean turkey sandwich.”

He frowned, likely because he didn’t have that luxury—or maybe I was reading too much into it. He stood and glanced out the window again. “The truth is, I’m used to only eating once a day, so my stomach probably wouldn’t like it.”

“Oh... I...” I stammered, my thoughts spinning. He’d had to condition himself, which made sense. Did that include the coffee and muffin I brought him? What about the days I missed?

He gripped my arm, which was when I realized I’d been pacing. I stopped to stare at him—this was the first time we had actually made contact, other than our fingertips brushing when passing him the coffee.

“Don’t do that,” he said softly.

I could feel the knots in his fingers where the knuckles were gripping me. “Don’t do what?”

“I can see the wheels turning in your head. I don’t want any pity.” He dropped his hand and stepped back. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“No, wait,” I pleaded. “I was only thinking about how you’d set up a system for yourself and how that takes a lot of finagling.”

“It’s the only way to survive.”

I swallowed thickly. “I understand now. Excuse my ignorance.”

“I don’t think you’re ignorant. It’s not something anyone would consider unless they’d been through it.”

I nodded, then motioned to the couch. “Please have a seat, and at least let me get you something to drink.”

“Water would be awesome,” he said as he chose the end cushion on the couch. “Thanks.”

In the kitchen, I poured us water from the tap. When I turned toward the room, Oscar had joined him.

“Well, aren’t you comfy,” I teased. “If you don’t want him up there, just—”

“No, I like it, if you’re okay with it.”

“Definitely.” I handed him the glass, then sat down with Oscar between us. He laid his chin on Lachlan’s thigh and got settled. Traitor. “My ex didn’t like Oscar on the furniture or in bed.”

“That’s the real reason you kicked him to the curb,” he said with a laugh.

I grinned. “Probably. I believe pets are part of your family. They bring comfort and love you unconditionally. They should at least be able to sleep on your furniture.”

“I like that,” he said as his fingers burrowed in Oscar’s fur. I thought of how he had gripped my arm. I’d admit I liked the feel of it. Or maybe I was just lonely and a bit lost. My depression messed with my head and told me plenty of lies.

“My ex hated animals,” he said suddenly. “That should’ve been my first red flag.” He took a hearty sip of water, as if regretting saying that out loud.

“I think we all have plenty of regrets.”

He glanced at me, his jaw twitching. “Have you ever had someone make you feel worthless?”

My stomach bottomed out, and I looked away. “I don’t need a person to make me feel like that. My depression does that all on its own. That was why I was napping. Because I struggle through some days when I’m in the middle of an episode.”

My chest was pounding, and maybe it was so loud in my ears I had tuned him out because there was no response.

His fingers gripped my arm again, and my gaze flashed to him. “I felt depressed my first few days on the street. Probably more like heartbroken and in shock. But that was situational. It sounds like yours is chronic. I’m sorry to hear you—”

“Oh no you don’t! No pitying me now. I don’t like it either.”

He chuffed out a laugh, and damn, his entire face came alive with color. The ruddy cheeks and piercing blue eyes made him all the more attractive.

“Guess now we’re even,” I said around a parched throat. I reached for my water glass again.

“Guess so,” he mused.

When we fell into silence, I wasn’t sure what to say or do. “Want to watch TV?”

He winced. “Feels like it’s been so long. I wouldn’t even know what’s current.”

“There are some good shows, but I have trouble keeping up with multiple seasons.” I motioned toward my bookshelf. “I’d rather read.”

He stiffened. “Shit, I forgot!”

I was confused until he pulled his leg from under Oscar’s chin, gingerly stood, then strode to his rolling cart near the door. He rummaged through it until he located the book, and I could see how soggy it was.

He guiltily glanced in my direction as he spun the bracelets on his wrist, something I noticed he did when distressed or deep in thought. “Maybe it’ll dry out?”

“Maybe. But it’s okay if it doesn’t.”

He looked flustered as he forked his fingers through his hair. “I’d like to try and save it.”

“Okay,” I replied, realizing how serious he sounded. This was important to him, and I needed to respect that. “Let’s put it near the vent and see what happens overnight.”

He nodded and followed me to the corner of the room. “Good idea.”

He opened the book to flatten the spine, then cautiously laid it near where the air was blowing.

There was a moment of tense silence before I said, “So, um, let me show you where you’ll sleep.”

He bit his lip, wariness filling his gaze, but followed me to the room. I clicked on the light to reveal a single bed, dresser, and small desk.

“Sometimes it doubles as an office, but I don’t work from home all that often.”

He stared at the bed, and I wondered when his last time lying on a mattress had been.

“Are you sure?” His voice was full of awe, and it broke my heart.

“Yes, I’m very sure.” I looked down to see my dog sniffing around the room. “And don’t be surprised if Oscar tries to sleep with you. Unless you want to shut and lock the door behind you. Whatever feels comfortable.”

He crouched down to pet Oscar. “I’m cool with leaving it ajar.”

Maybe it felt safer knowing Oscar could move freely from room to room.

“Oscar will be thrilled. He’s obviously enamored with you.”

“Well, the feeling is mutual.”

When our eyes met for an elongated moment, I felt hot all over.

I cleared my throat. “Well, um, I’m gonna retire to my room. I’ve got some laundry to put away before I hit the hay.”

“Okay. I’m pretty tired, so...good night.”

“Night.” I turned to the hallway. “If you need anything, I’m right next door.”

LACHLAN

I TURNED onto my side and felt softness and heat all around me. Something was undoubtedly different, and when I flicked my eyes open, it dawned on me that I wasn't in my tent on the unyielding sidewalk. I was in a bed—a soft bed with clean sheets—in Foster's apartment.

And Oscar was sleeping at my feet. I grinned, listening to his soft snores, before my amusement turned to guardedness. I shifted to my back and listened to the sounds in the apartment that paled in comparison to the noises on the street.

It was early, and I could hear Foster rummaging around in the kitchen. Hopefully he didn't have trouble sleeping with a stranger in his guest room. I was surprised I'd even dozed off after lying there thinking about everything, including him being in the next room. I imagined him sleeping in his underwear or maybe nude... Great, now my morning wood was painful. I needed to cut it out. There was no room for those sorts of thoughts, and especially not right now.

As if I'd summoned him, there was a knock on my door and the familiar jingle of a dog leash, which made Oscar stir.

"Come in," I said, adjusting the blanket over my groin. I was grateful he hadn't just barged right in despite the door being cracked open.

“Sorry if I woke you. Just need to grab Oscar for our morning walk and coffee run.” He smirked as he took in the scene. “Told you he’d probably sleep with you.”

“He sure throws off some heat. I could use him on colder mornings.”

“He’d probably enjoy that,” he teased. “I’ll be back soon, and then I’m off to work.”

“No, I...” I sat up, and I noticed how his gaze took in my bare chest, then quickly looked away. “I should take off.”

He frowned. “Please, feel free to sleep in.”

“Maybe I will,” I replied, though it didn’t feel right.

He smiled, seeming relieved, then lifted the leash. “We’ll be back soon.”

Oscar’s tail started wagging as he jumped down and followed Foster out of the room. I listened as he grabbed his keys, and then they were out the door.

But as soon as he left, it felt wrong to be there. Was he truly trusting me alone in his place? It was a kind gesture, but I knew I’d never be able to fall back asleep.

Instead, I rolled out of bed, went to the bathroom to take a leak, then moved toward his living room, taking in everything with new eyes, since last night had felt like a dream. My gaze swung to the window, where the sun was shining. You would’ve never guessed there had been a raging storm last night. Except from that vantage point, I could see that the streets were still damp, and some puddles remained. If the warm temp held up, they would evaporate by evening.

My clothes were dry and folded on the chair, so I tugged his sweatpants down and slipped back into my pants. They

made me feel more like myself because they were comfortably worn. But his hoodie felt the same, so I slid my arms back through the material for the moment. It had nothing to do with how it smelled like him.

I felt this itch under my skin to get out of there before I got too used to all the creature comforts his apartment provided. This was not my reality. Out there was—seven stories below and in the elements.

I made the bed and folded the borrowed clothes, which was when I remembered the book. At first glance it was still ruined. I crouched down to inspect it closer. Some of the pages were stuck together and warped.

Fuck. I frowned as I stood and headed for the door, preoccupied by the damaged book. In the hallway, I turned to look back, maybe to check that my being there last night had been real, then let the door close behind me.

When I was back on the sidewalk, the world felt familiar again and my brain reverted to survival mode. I walked in the direction of the coffee shop until Foster and Oscar came into view. He was holding a carrier with our coffees and a bag of muffins.

He slowed when he saw me. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” I looked away. “I...overstayed my welcome.”

His eyebrows drew together. “No, you didn’t.”

“I just need...to get back to my life, my routine.” I didn’t want to see whatever emotion was in his eyes, so I bent to scratch Oscar behind the ears. “But thanks for helping me out last night.”

“You’re welcome.” He made a frustrated sound, and I could tell he wanted to say more but held his tongue. “Well, here’s your coffee and muffin.”

I nearly refused the offer since I hadn’t done anything to earn it, but then thought better of it. Why delay the inevitable? “Thank you. And I’m sorry about your book. If I can think of a way to repay you—”

“Don’t give it another thought.”

This time I held my tongue and just nodded.

I glanced at the debris on the sidewalk from fallen branches. The storm still felt unreal.

Foster tilted his head to the sky. “I think the weather’s supposed to hold up for a few days.”

“Glad to hear that.”

“Me too,” he replied. “Well...take care.”

“You too.”

Feeling strangely out of sorts, I watched as he and Oscar walked toward the apartment. But staying any longer would’ve only prolonged that achy feeling in my chest whenever I was around them. I couldn’t easily explain it. Was it a longing for what they had or for their companionship? Regardless, I couldn’t come to rely on it. Life had a way of punching you in the gut and then kicking you when you were down.

I found a park bench and then rearranged my cart so I could travel to the shelter today. Despite what the public believed, most houseless people took care of their stuff, even cherished it. Satisfied, I headed in that direction. When I saw the Main Avenue Bridge in the distance, I changed my route, curiosity about the storm getting the best of me.

When I inquired how they all held up, a woman said, “The flooding got really bad.” Though you’d never know it now, outside of spotting random things that had washed in from the street—a hubcap, branches, candy wrappers, and other debris.

I finished the rest of my coffee as I made my way to the shelter, my thoughts constantly returning to last night. To the three of us on the couch and how comfortable it felt just talking to Foster and cuddling with his dog.

While eating my breakfast, I glanced up at The Weather Channel, noting that Foster was correct about the upcoming forecast. It would even get warmer in the afternoons, which would be a welcome change. Maybe spring had finally shaken winter’s claws.

After I finished eating, I went to Tessa’s office to see if she was free.

“Can I put my name on the waiting list?” I asked when she motioned me in.

She glanced at her computer screen. “Which list?”

“For the halfway house. You talked to me about it a few months ago.”

“That’s right.” At the time, I was a mess, and the conversation was a blur. Besides, getting a bed was always a struggle, so I learned to make do on my own.

I sighed. “I know the list is long.”

“It is.” She scrutinized me. “Why the change of heart?”

“Last night’s storm, for one.”

“Are you okay?” Her tone was one of concern.

“I almost got washed away, but a kind stranger helped me.” I screwed my eyes shut. “And it just made me...” I trailed off, unsure what I was trying to say.

“I think I understand.” Her voice was soft and sympathetic. “Any way this kind stranger would be helpful in other ways?”

“No, I couldn’t. I don’t want to impose or rely on...”

“I’ve heard that sentiment before.” She smiled sadly. “The longer you’re out there, the harder it is to transition out of survival mode. You’re early in your journey, so maybe the halfway house can help set you on the right path.”

“Appreciate it.” Why it felt better to seek help from the shelter than from a stranger, I couldn’t unpack right then. Maybe it was a pride thing.

As I traveled back over the bridge, the guardian statues coming into view, I thought about what she’d said. There was a certain freedom in not being beholden to anyone, but you also felt adrift and disconnected from the world. And that made you the underbelly of society whether you liked it or not. Some who experienced homelessness liked the idea of disappearing from society and moving about unnoticed, but many didn’t. I could see it in their eyes. And I wondered if they could see it in mine too.

FOSTER

I COULDN'T STOP THINKING about Lachlan, how stubborn and proud he was, and wondering if I would be the same if the circumstances were reversed. He could've easily changed his location if he didn't want any interaction with me anymore, but he hadn't. We'd fallen back into the same routine, though our conversations seemed a bit more stilted, like maybe he was trying to set a boundary, or because he still felt guilty about the book.

Or maybe it was all about Oscar and he was only being polite to me by extension. But then there was the hoodie. It was only an article of clothing, but it was *my* clothing, and seeing him in it made my stomach feel all strange.

I clipped the leash on Oscar and began our morning walk toward the coffee shop like always. When we turned the corner and Oscar began pulling on the leash, I knew Lachlan's tent was there.

As usual, my pulse kicked up in anticipation of seeing him, but this morning he was zipped inside, so maybe he was getting a late start. I knew this obsession about his routine was probably unhealthy, but what was so wrong with striking up a friendship and maybe helping someone out?

He doesn't want your help, I reminded myself.

As soon as Oscar got to the tent, he began whining.

“Shh, he might be asleep.”

I heard a chuckle from inside that warmed my stomach. “I’m not. A bit nippy this morning, is all.”

I frowned, remembering how warm and toasty I’d just been in my apartment. It might’ve been spring in the Northeast, but it would take until mid-May for morning temperatures to improve.

“Hi,” Lachlan said once he’d unzipped the flap and scooted toward the opening. His unruly hair was tucked beneath a beanie, making his striking blue eyes stand out. But there were shadows underneath, and I wondered if he was having trouble with sleeping or restlessness the past couple of nights. I couldn’t help thinking that it might’ve been hard to return to lying on the hard ground after a soft bed.

“Hi.” I smiled over Oscar’s head as he leaned forward to lick Lachlan’s face.

He stroked my dog while telling him what a good boy he was, and I almost felt like I was intruding. “I’m gonna go put in my order.”

“Sounds good,” he said absently.

I walked to the shop, stepped inside, and when the manager spotted me from behind the counter, she moved to the back room. I hadn’t seen her since the last time I’d approached her, so it could’ve been my imagination, or she feared I’d ask her about the video again. Just showed how hands-off the public could be when it came to those experiencing homelessness. Lachlan had really opened my eyes to the injustices in the world, and I was glad for it.

Back on the sidewalk, I walked toward my dog and the man he was enamored with. Another houseless man across the street had a bowl set out and was holding a sign I couldn't read from where I was.

Reaching the tent, I looked at Lachlan. "Have there been any more attacks?"

"Not that I've heard of. Why do you ask?"

He followed my gaze across the street to the other man. "I figured there might be a network of sorts, to share any news, and maybe someone had a lead on the guy."

"Spoken like a true TV detective."

A laugh escaped my mouth. "You ass."

"Hey, you might've missed your calling." He hitched a shoulder, a smirk pulling at his mouth. "But yeah, I generally hear about such things. Maybe the rainy weather has kept the bad guys away."

"Yeah, maybe." I handed him his coffee and muffin.

"Thank you. You don't have to keep doing this."

"But you watch my dog for me."

"It's hardly that," he muttered.

"It's a fair exchange."

He shook his head. "If you say so."

"Which reminds me." My tone was too eager, and I needed to tamp it down. "I have an idea for how you can pay me back for the damaged book."

His eyebrows drew together. "How?"

"Cut my hair."

“Cut your hair,” he parroted, glancing at my brown waves, which were getting a bit unruly. Of course, I could just as well make an appointment at my usual salon, but the idea had occurred to me last night. After I’d racked my brain.

I pushed my bangs from my forehead. “I need a good trim.”

He stared at the sidewalk, his mouth turned downward.

“Hey, did I say something wrong? I didn’t mean for the suggestion to upset you.”

My stomach churned as he lifted his hand, motioning with his crooked fingers. “I don’t know if that’s possible anymore.”

“How did that happen?”

“Do you really want to know?”

I nodded. “But only if you want to tell me.”

“A fight,” he admitted, then teased, “You should’ve seen the other guy.”

My stomach throbbed because I had a feeling it had to do with his ex.

I clenched my jaw. “Did he get what was coming to him?”

He bit his lip and looked away. “Definitely.”

“So it was payback for what he’d done to you?” I was treading carefully, but he got my meaning.

“Not exactly payback, but…” He squared his shoulders. “I finally stood my ground.”

“Good for you.” Our gazes met and held. “Was he held accountable for any, um, damage he’d done?”

He shook his head. “His word against mine, so I’m hoping karma takes care of it.”

“I hope so too.”

He lifted his hand again. “So I’m not sure your plan would work.”

“How about we test it out?” I swallowed down my eagerness, wanting so bad to convince him. “I trust you.”

“You might need to have the cut fixed after. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Noted.” I laughed, relief flooding me. “Do I need to pick up any supplies? I think I have some sharp shears lying around somewhere.”

He sniffed almost self-importantly. “I still have my set.”

“Nice.” The way he’d said it gave me another snapshot of his former life.

Confident, charismatic, and sophisticated.

“So how about tonight after work?” I held my breath as he considered it.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Great. See you around six?” When he nodded, I said, “I’ll meet you at the front entrance.”

LACHLAN

I ROLLED my cart toward Foster's building. Fuck, I was nervous. Not so much about seeing Foster again, though he was so incredibly handsome, it was hard not to want to look at him unabashedly. And now I'd be very close to him, and my hands would probably shake even more. I'd offered him a disclaimer, but...what if I screwed it up?

I used to be confident, jam-packed with appointments from customers who appreciated my skills, and look at me now. Afraid to give a guy I met on the street a haircut.

But I'd also admit I was itching to get back to my roots—no pun intended. Though practicing on a mannequin might've been better. Like we used to do in cosmetology school. Was I that out of practice?

Foster was standing under the awning, waiting for me, and seeing his smile made my stomach settle a little.

"Hi," he said shyly. Maybe he was nervous too.

"Hi," I replied, returning my own awkward grin.

"You ready to head up?"

I smirked. "No. But a deal's a deal."

He held open the door. "It'll be fine, you'll see."

“You might disagree when you show up at work tomorrow looking like Frankenstein.”

He laughed loudly as we moved toward the elevator. When the doors opened, a woman stepped into the lobby and eyed us suspiciously. As did the man who stepped on the elevator last minute to ride with us. He glanced from my rolling cart to me and then to Foster several times, likely trying to put the pieces together. Hopefully, he didn't tell the superintendent that Foster had let vagrants inside the building.

“Don't worry about him,” Foster said after the man exited to his floor. “Nosy neighbors.”

“Easier said than done,” I admitted.

“You're my guest.” The doors opened on his floor. “Fuck 'em.”

I'd admit it was a thrill to hear that from a guy who was normally even-keeled and gentle with his words.

Oscar greeted me excitedly at the door, and I crouched down to pet him.

“I know, two times in one day.” I kissed his snout. “Good boy.” When I looked up, Foster was watching us intently. “What?”

“Nothing. Sorry, I just...” He shook his head and took a step back. “I should probably take him out for a potty break.”

“I can tag along,” I said, feeling strange being alone in his place, again.

“Nah, we'll be quick. Just...make yourself comfortable.”

After they left, I made use of the bathroom by washing my face and hands, reapplying deodorant, and quickly brushing my teeth for a second time today. I mostly avoided looking at

myself in the mirror. There was nothing I could do about my appearance anyway. But I was nervous knowing we'd be in proximity while I was cutting his hair, and freshening up helped ease my fears.

I was waiting in the hall when they returned about ten minutes later.

“So how should we do this?” Foster asked as he hung up the leash.

I looked around the apartment. “Um, how about a chair in the middle of the room? And we'll need a broom or vacuum for afterward.”

“Sounds good.”

He got to work retrieving towels while I dragged a chair over and removed my shears from their case. Holding them for the purpose of using them felt foreign—mostly because my hand was different, my fingers crooked, and I didn't know how I'd adjust. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

When the door buzzer blared, I stiffened. Was he expecting company?

He headed toward the intercom. “Sorry, maybe I should've waited to order delivery.”

“No, it's okay. You have to eat.”

He frowned, then pushed a button and said, “Come on up.”

I watched as he paced in front of the door as if second-guessing himself.

“It's Chinese food, and I ordered a variety. I'm not expecting you to eat with me.” He toed the area rug absently. “I just thought...you might want to save it for your one meal.

It'll keep in the fridge, and I can bring it to you in the morning.”

I was floored he'd really thought this through and was respecting my boundaries.

When the delivery guy knocked, Foster opened the door, grabbed the bags from him, then took them to the kitchen.

I followed him to the counter, where he began unloading the cartons. “I didn't know what you like, so I got a mix of chicken and beef. But some veggies too in case you're vegetarian.”

I chuckled. “I couldn't afford to be vegetarian right now.”

His cheeks burned red. “Sorry, I'm just trying to—”

“It's okay. Thanks for being so thoughtful.” I reached out and squeezed his shoulder, and that seemed to calm him. “Please, relax. I'm the one who should be anxious tonight.”

“I told you, you'll do just fine.” He glanced over my shoulder. “We can get started, and I can save this for later.”

“No, you don't have to...” I'll admit the smell was killing me. “I think I will have some. But only a little, in case it messes with my stomach.”

His expression brightened. “Okay. Let me grab plates.”

I sat down on a stool as he set a plate in front of me and then nudged the containers my way. He got busy filling his own plate as he explained what was what.

I put a scoop of sticky rice on my plate, along with sweet-and-sour chicken. I didn't give myself time to think about it, just shoveled it in my mouth. As soon as the tangy sauce hit my palate, I moaned. “Oh God, so good.” I scooped more in my mouth and felt his gaze pressing in on me. “What?”

“Nothing, I just...enjoy making you happy.”

My pulse throbbed against my neck. How could he possibly think that about me? Or maybe this was more about feeling gratified by his charity.

“That’s surprising. You hardly know me.” What a stupid response. The man had obviously flustered me.

“I know you well enough by now,” he muttered, looking away.

“I suppose that’s true. In any other circumstance, I’d call you a friend.”

“I’m glad,” he replied as our eyes met. “I feel the same.”

Oscar made himself comfortable at our feet, likely hoping to catch crumbs.

“That’s all I’m gonna have.” I pushed my plate away reluctantly, but I knew it was the right decision. “I wouldn’t mind having leftovers tomorrow.”

“I’ll definitely get them to you.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you love Asian cuisine...before?”

“Definitely. Mostly some fried-rice concoction.” I recalled sharing takeout with coworkers and previous boyfriends, and then thought back to my old apartment with Clint. “I actually liked to cook. I made a mean stir-fry. But Clint always wanted to eat out. He was always arranging dinners with clients for work and loved being social. Not that I didn’t. But not every night.”

Clint had a lot of charisma and liked being the center of attention. It was likely what drew me to him at the beginning.

About three years into our relationship, I'd hoped for more quiet evenings at home, but I wasn't vocal enough. I let him call the shots because I wanted to keep him happy. And I'd lost myself in the process.

"I enjoy eating out, but I'm a homebody too," Foster said, and I wasn't surprised by that confession. "I wish I liked cooking more."

"My mom taught me. We cooked together a lot. She made homemade pizza every Friday night."

"That sounds amazing."

"Her pizza crust was just the right amount of chewy. I tried to recreate it, but there was always something missing."

"Maybe a mother's magic touch. Tell me more."

"She was the best." I felt that familiar ache in my gut every time a memory resurfaced. "We were very close."

"Is that why you wear those bracelets?" he asked, and I stopped mid-twist of one of them.

"Yeah, they were a gift." I smiled at the memory of that birthday, a year before she passed. "I slipped them onto my wrist and never took them off." Clint never understood why I refused to set them aside even when I needed to wear a suit or tux for one of his company's events.

Foster's eyes softened. "I like that."

"When she died, it was hard to live in that house with my dad, so these made me feel like she was still with me," I said, hoping my voice didn't sound too wobbly. It'd been years since I thought about the bracelets; they had become a part of me. "But I knew I needed to stay and make it through high school, or I'd have an even harder time making it on my own."

“Was your dad a bastard to your mom too?” Foster asked hesitantly.

“He was. Mostly after he drank. He went on weekend benders.”

He frowned. “That sucks.”

“He’d call me names and criticize everything I did, and Mom would defend me. He’d stop for a while, then go off on me again. Anyway, I knew it was a bad idea to show up at his place after I left Clint, but I didn’t know where else to go.”

“What happened?”

“He was drunk most of the time and picked fights with me. It was the reason why I moved out as soon as I graduated, yet somehow I ended up choosing some awful men through the years, though never as awful as Clint.”

“How long were you together?”

“Five years. I gave up everything for him. Even my friends. God, what was I thinking?”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself.” He gripped my shoulder, and I’d admit I liked how his hand felt there. Comfort and support. “You were a victim.”

“Yeah, it took me a bit to convince myself of that. He gaslighted me so much, I thought I was losing my mind.”

“That’s usually how it works.” He frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m free now, in the purest sense.” I reached down to pet Oscar. “Want to hear something interesting?”

He nodded as he chewed his food.

“There are no domestic-violence shelters for men in the city, or in the state.”

“Shit, I never thought about that. Why do you think that is?”

“Because men are afraid to come forward?”

“I bet you’re right.” He motioned to my hand. “You’d think with your injury...”

“The truth is, I punched *him*—as his hand was tightening around my neck.” It was the first time Clint had tried choking me after a fight. And I saw it in his eyes, the raw anger. I was afraid he wouldn’t stop. “I broke that fucker’s nose, and he used it to gain sympathy, to turn people against me.” Even my closest friend, Marcie, from work. She was Clint’s friend first, they knew each other from childhood, and he’d called in a favor when I was applying to the salon because they still kept in touch. Marcie and I had grown close over the years—at least I thought we had. “I don’t regret it. That’s how I got away that night.”

“Damn.” His eyes widened. “I know you probably don’t believe it, but you’re strong and brave.”

“Eh, anyone would be to survive.” I was such a wreck that night that I even left the emergency room, unwilling to wait hours for an X-ray on my fingers. So I made do by taping them together as they healed. It was a dumb decision, and here I was.

His fingers squeezed my shoulder. “Not just anybody.”

“Thanks.” My face heated. “So, uh...tell me more about your family.”

“Not much to tell. Middle class, grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. I have an older brother who lives and works in the city. His name is Chase.”

“Are you close?”

“Yeah, we have weekly video calls to check in with each other.”

“Sounds nice.” His childhood sounded way more idyllic than mine.

He told me about pranks his brother would play on him as kids, and as we laughed, it felt like a normal night out with a friend.

Well, not totally normal. Clint would get jealous if I hung out with friends alone. His temper was unpredictable, just like my father’s. During arguments, he’d pushed me around sometimes, bruised my arm from squeezing too hard, and used the silent treatment for days to punish me. Before I knew it, I was miserable, but I also loved him fiercely. At least I thought I did. Our make-up sex was tender and remorseful, something I craved from him, and it was how he’d hook me in again.

Shaking off the memories, I realized I’d nearly forgotten why I’d shown up at his place. Foster was so easy to talk to... but I was there to pay back a debt. That was what my life had become: a series of transactions.

Foster began packing away the food while I took our dishes to the sink. I ran the water, lifted the sponge, and swiped it across the plate.

“Hey, you don’t have to—”

“I want to. Feels like ages since I’ve done this.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Cleaned dishes?”

“Done something domestic.”

“Understood.” He stood beside me and reached for a dish towel. “I’ll dry.”

So that was what we did, something so simple, but it made me feel normal and maybe a bit hopeful too.

After the chore was finished, Foster used a comb to dampen his hair at the sink. We had to make do with what we had. I followed him to the living room, where he sat down while I picked up my shears. Oscar had lost interest after the food was put away, and was now lying on his pillow near the couch.

“So how does it feel to use those tools again?”

My hands started shaking. “I don’t know. I—”

“Hey.” His fingers gripped my wrist to steady my hand. “You don’t have to do this. It’s not like I can’t just—”

“No, I want to.” I blew out a breath. “It’s a good idea to see if I can manage it, especially if I ever...”

“Get back on your feet?”

I nodded. “The shelter sent me on a job interview with a salon near the Flats. It was an entry-level position, to sweep the floors and shampoo customers.”

“And how did that go?”

I looked away. “I chickened out.”

Sympathy shined in his eyes. “Tell me why.”

“I...” I swallowed roughly. “I used to be comfortable in those kinds of posh environments. But as soon as the receptionist saw me walk in, my rolling cart left right inside the door, I noticed how uncomfortable she looked. Like I might rob her or who the hell knows what.”

He frowned. “That sucks.”

“The manager knew the shelter might send me—they’d done a fundraiser with this salon in the past—and Tessa, our social worker, put in a good word for me, but the thing is, if you don’t have a phone or address, it makes getting a job tricky.”

“I didn’t realize how many stumbling blocks there were.”

“I figure most people don’t.” Strangers made assumptions about all sorts of things. The humanity between people felt lost for the most part. It was one of the reasons it was risky to trust anyone.

Foster arched a brow. “It’s also hard for you to rely on the kindness of strangers, isn’t it?”

I winced. “It’s complicated.”

FOSTER

TO SAY my conversation with Lachlan tonight had been eye-opening was an understatement.

He paced cagily in front of me, but it was just as unnerving for me. Even if it was my idea in the first place. Given the tension in the air, it was stupid to blurt, “Nice hoodie, by the way.”

He froze. “Do you want it back? I probably shouldn’t have —”

“It looks good on you,” I admitted. “I thought I made it clear you were free to keep the clothes from that night.”

God, I’d only made it more awkward.

“You did. Thanks for that.” He peeled the hoodie from his shoulders. “Speaking of which, I’m feeling a little heated.” He draped it over a chair, then turned back to me with wariness in his gaze.

I took a deep breath and shut my eyes, hoping it would help him relax.

“What are you doing?” He sounded closer, but I stayed still.

“I thought it might help, plus I like zoning out with my eyes closed. I’ve been trying some deep-breathing exercises for my depression, so this is good practice.”

“Are the exercises helping?” He began combing my hair.

“Somewhat. But when I’m at my worst, it’s like falling into an abyss.” As I talked, I could feel the tension leave him, so I continued. “Like there’s only gray all around me and no footholds to help me get out. Just a void of nothingness. As if I’m looking at the world through a drab, dirty lens, if that makes sense.”

I heard his intake of air, and his hands stilled.

Damn, that sounded bleak even to my ears. Had I admitted too much? But somehow, it was easy to talk to him, and especially with my eyes closed.

“It does makes sense,” he replied softly, and I wanted to open my eyes to see his expression, but I kept them shut. It was better this way. “It’s sort of what the last year of my life has felt like. As if I’m viewing the world from behind a sheer veil. It’s dreamlike that I’m even surviving on the streets. But I am. I’m doing it.”

“I can hear something like pride in your voice.”

“It might sound bizarre, but after what I...what *he*...guess I needed to prove to myself I could survive on my own, even if the circumstances aren’t ideal.”

“I get it. It’s one of the reasons I decided to move here from Chicago. I love my family, and we’re very close, but...”

“But?” he murmured.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful.”

“Don’t hold back on my account. Everything is relative.”

“True, I suppose.” I huffed out a laugh. “My parents can be overbearing and overinvolved in my life. But I know they mean well and only want the best for me.”

“I know what you mean. My mom would be the same. Bet they would’ve gotten along great.”

This time I cracked open an eye, and it was definitely worth it to see the smile on his face.

“Do you ever miss...your former life?”

“Some parts, maybe.” When he lifted the scissors, I shut my eyes. “But I’m not the same person anymore. I haven’t been for a long time. I let someone else rule my life all in the name of love. But at least now I’m in charge of my own damned self. It’s up to me to take agency of my life again.”

“That makes a ton of sense. It’s not the same, but when I’m fighting through the worst of a depressive episode, I know no one is going to save me. I need to do it all on my own. It’s up to me to find a good enough reason to get my ass up and tackle my day.”

I could feel his breathing intensify, small puffs of air against my cheek.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, it was everything right. Different circumstances, but yeah, totally right on.”

It grew quiet in the room as he continued cutting my hair.

“How’s it coming along?” I asked after another minute.

“I think I’ve got the hang of it again.”

“Like riding a bike?”

He snickered. “Yeah, maybe. My hand aches a little, but I’m steadier than I thought I’d be.”

I squinted an eye open. “I knew you could do it.”

There was that smile again.

He grew serious as the comb brushed through my bangs. “Okay, now I need you to stay still.”

I shut my lids so I didn’t overwhelm him. “Will do.”

He leaned closer, and I could feel his breath against my lips, and fuck, that did things to me. He smelled minty and earthy and I liked that combination. Or maybe I just liked him.

He moved around to the back of the chair as my stomach trembled. His fingertips against my nape made me shiver, and when he came around front again, I shifted uncomfortably, knowing I was sporting a semi. It had been a while since I’d been intimate, and I was obviously attracted to him, but damn, it was embarrassing. I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to will the fucker down.

His voice was rough when he said, “That should do it. Wanna see how it looks?”

“I do.” I stood before he could take a step back, and we ended up so close, our chests brushed. “Uh, sorry.”

His cheeks were flushed, so maybe he was having the same problem? Or maybe I was making him uncomfortable, and I didn’t want that.

He motioned to the hallway. “You first.”

He followed me to the bathroom, where I clicked on the light and glanced in the mirror. “Nice. I like it.”

“Yeah?” he asked over my shoulder.

“Better than some cuts I’ve gotten over the years.”

He averted his gaze. “Okay, you’re just being nice.”

I waited until his eyes met mine in the mirror again. “I’m not.”

“Thanks,” he murmured as his fingers trailed over my nape. “I probably need to touch up your neck.”

“Clippers or a razor? I have both.”

“Either works.” Our eyes held for far too long. “Uh, you grab whatever, and I’ll see to the mess we left out there.”

“Sounds good.”

I watched him through the mirror as he backed out the door. And lo and behold, he was thick behind his zipper too. That was gratifying, at least. To know it wasn’t only me. And what was the harm? We were both single.

Okay, it was more complicated than that.

I fiddled with my hair in the mirror as I asked myself what the hell I was doing.

By the time I came out with a razor, shaving cream, and a bowl of water, he had most of the hair on the floor cleaned up. “Want me in the chair again?”

When he nodded, I sat down. He lathered my neck and began shaving with smooth, careful passes.

“Want me to shave anything else?” he asked, and my eyes sprang to his. “Like, your face?”

Christ, I needed to get my overactive imagination under control. Of course he meant my face. “I’d like that.”

He lathered my jaw, tilted my head back, and began shaving. “I haven’t done this in ages, not since I worked in a

barbershop.”

This time I kept my eyes open and on him, watching him as he worked.

He held my gaze after every pass of the razor, his breath catching one of the times. I was stiff as a fence post and couldn't do anything about it. Not in this precarious position, at least.

“I'd tell you that you're free to shave too, but you said your beard keeps you warm.”

“Yeah, maybe in the summer, when it gets too hot.”

Damn, did he think he'd still be out there? I opened my mouth, then promptly closed it. He didn't want to be saved. This haircut was a trade deal.

“All done,” he said, and when he stepped back, I tried to curb my disappointment that it was over.

He began cleaning up while I stored the supplies. After I tossed the towels in the wash, I found him waiting by the door. But what did I expect? For him to stay the night again?

“You sure I can't get you anyth—”

He spun the bracelets on his wrist. “It's probably best I take off.”

“Okay.” There was wariness in his gaze, so I wouldn't push it. “Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*.” His mouth tilted in a smile. “That felt good.”

Without thinking, I reached out to touch his fingers. “I bet you could have these reset someday. Once you...well, you know...”

My hand still on his knuckles, he trembled, and that was when I saw it: the hunger and desire in his expression.

“Lachlan...” I murmured, my heart rising to my throat.

“Fuck...” He took a shaky breath. “I wanna kiss you so bad, but I...”

“Then do it,” I replied, tugging on his hand.

When our eyes connected, he didn’t waste another moment. He stepped forward and caged me against the wall, then buried his head against my neck, and I could feel his heavy breaths and all the indecision that came with them.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’re both adults and obviously attracted to each other.”

He drew back to study me. “Is that why you asked me—”

“No! I would never assume, but tonight I could tell...well, I *hoped* I was right.”

“You were right.” His fingers trembled against my jaw as he slowly...so painstakingly slowly...angled his face closer. I could feel his breath on my lips as he finally...finally brushed his mouth against mine. It was so tentative, so shuddery sweet, that pinpricks lined my lips. My hand hesitantly touched the back of his neck as I leaned my forehead against his.

After another shared breath, I pressed our lips together, and when I felt the tip of his tongue flick against my lower lip, I couldn’t hold back a groan. I kissed each corner of his mouth, then his lips, before our tongues tangled in a sensual dance. And damn, it was heaven.

This time Lachlan groaned as I deepened the kiss, our tongues and mouths becoming increasingly fervent and needy, our hands buried in each other’s hair, his tugging motion

stinging my scalp in a good way. When he sank his weight against me and our chests, hips, and groins aligned, I could feel his arousal as my own shot through the roof.

He caught his breath as he panted against my lips, our mouths and tongues joining in a slower, steadier kiss. It was so soft and hot, my chest crammed with a rush of emotions I couldn't easily unpack right then.

I felt like I might crawl right out of my skin. I needed more. More of his mouth, hands, the needy noises seemingly stuck in the back of his throat. Gripping his biceps, I flipped us so he was now flush against the wall, and seeing the pure want and need in his eyes, I felt the urge to completely devour him.

“Please,” he begged, and somehow, I knew exactly what he needed as I took his mouth in a deep, frantic kiss. He rocked toward me, and when my hand cupped the front of his jeans, he shuddered.

My fingers fumbled on his button and zipper as his hands rivaled mine, and soon enough we were exposed to each other. I latched my lips to his as we reached for each other's cocks at the same time, stroking in near unison, moaning into each other's mouths.

Lachlan was uncut, which surprised me. Not that I hadn't been with uncut men before, but there was something extra sexy finding that he wasn't.

“Won't last,” he grunted as I fisted his cock more firmly. When the foreskin lowered, revealing the glans, I caught a glimpse of that pretty pink head and suddenly wished I could take my time with him.

“Same,” I replied, thrusting into his hand.

He slid his thumb over my slit, collecting precome and using it as lube. Everything felt sensitive to his touch as the familiar prickling sensation traveled down to my balls and I skated on the edge. When he pumped and circled my glans, I couldn't hold back any longer. I shot into his hand, shivering through my orgasm as I pumped him recklessly. He spurted soon after, and I felt his come dripping over my wrist and forearm.

As I got my bearings, I watched hazily as he drew his hand away from my softened cock, then lifted a finger to suck it clean.

“So hot,” I grunted, raising a finger to my own lips and licking away his come.

When he groaned in response, I tugged him closer and tangled our tongues so we could taste each other.

Chasing our breaths, I drew away, feeling sweaty, my brain foggy, but regret couldn't find its way inside me.

“Let me get something.” I dampened a towel in the bathroom, then handed him one end, and we cleaned up and tucked ourselves in.

That was apparently the moment reality sank in. Lachlan had trouble looking me in the eye, glancing instead from his rolling cart to the door.

“I... I probably shouldn't have...”

“Why not? It felt damned good.”

Lachlan nodded. “Still...I...I'm gonna go.”

I watched as the door closed behind him, and wondered if I should go after him, but then thought better of it. I turned

toward the window, and that was when I noticed he'd left the hoodie on the chair.

LACHLAN

I RUBBED my thumb over my lips, remembering how my mouth had felt against Foster's. His lips were soft and pillowy, his kisses addictive and better than I'd even imagined. Had that really happened?

I sat up in my tent and tuned in to my surroundings. Unzipping the flap, I noted it was another sunny day, so the walk to the shelter would be pleasant.

What was I doing kissing a guy and acting like my life wasn't on the line?

I needed to keep focused on surviving, not getting off with Foster.

As if my thoughts summoned them, they rounded the corner, and damn, seeing Foster again after I had my hands all over him nearly did me in. He was so gorgeous and sexy. And upon closer inspection, he was wearing the hoodie I'd abandoned last night before running out the door like a coward.

My face felt warm as they approached, and thankfully, Oscar distracted me by practically jumping into my lap.

"Sorry I didn't say bye to you last night." I kissed his snout, then met Foster's eyes. "Sorry to you too."

“Why? I was a very willing participant.” When his gaze scanned down to my lips, my cheeks felt even hotter.

“I shouldn’t have... I don’t want to give you the wrong impression.”

“About what?”

“I’m obviously not in an ideal situation right now.” I motioned to the tent. “And even if I were, I’m not ready to trust someone again so easily.”

“Don’t even give it a second thought. It’s been a while for me...” He looked away as if embarrassed. “So thanks for that.”

My lips parted in surprise.

“I still hope we can be friends.” He grimaced. “If it’s too uncomfortable, we can start taking a different route.”

“No!” I blurted, pathetically. “No need to do that.” I looked forward to their visits, but I wasn’t willing to admit that out loud.

He hesitated, studying me. “Okay, cool.”

“You’re wearing the hoodie,” I pointed out, searching for something to say. “I didn’t realize I left it until I got outside.” And would’ve looked like a fool going back in for it.

“That’s why I wore it—to return it.” Setting his bag down, he tugged the hoodie off his shoulders and handed it to me. “Also, how could I not? It smells like you.”

I froze halfway to slipping it back on, the butterflies in my stomach furiously beating their wings. But I was also doubting the words and hoping he intended them in a positive way.

“Was that wrong of me to say?”

“I just... I don’t know how you meant that.” I motioned to the sidewalk. “I live on the street.”

“Oh shit.” Foster’s eyes widened. “What I meant was, everyone has a unique scent, and I like yours. Earthy, like grass after a spring rain. And that probably sounds ridicu—”

“No,” I cut in. My heart clanged against my rib cage. “It sounds nice.”

“Good.” He dipped his head. “I can’t help admitting that last night was fucking hot.”

“It was.” I chewed my lip. “And to be fair, the hoodie smelled like you first.”

He inhaled sharply. “Guess we’re even, then.”

“Guess we are.”

We stared some more, and fuck, what were we doing?

Flirting. It’s called flirting.

I had no business flirting with him, but it was sort of fun.

“So anyway...coffee?”

“Sure thing.”

Foster walking away gave me a moment to catch my breath. I gave Oscar attention until Foster returned with our usual fare.

“Thank you,” I said as he handed me my coffee.

“Oh, before I forget.” He dug through his bag. “I was going to donate these to charity, but maybe you or others might be interested.”

“What are they?” I asked as he pulled out a stack of five books.

He hitched a shoulder. “Some classics.”

Looking through them, I found some interesting selections, including *Ulysses* by James Joyce, who was also Irish. I couldn't help thinking that Foster was doing me a favor and wasn't really going to donate them. But the idea of reading in the park again really appealed to me, so I stacked them inside the tent.

“Thank you.” I thought of the woman who'd noticed my book at the shelter a few days back. “I'll be sure to pass them around.”

His gratified grin was blinding, and I couldn't help smiling back.

“Okay, gotta run,” he said, and I waved goodbye.

I crawled back into my tent to look over the books, then chose the one that appealed to me most—not *Ulysses* because it was a slog to get through despite it being considered a literary masterpiece. Even Mom had trouble getting through it. I loaded the rest in my cart because I didn't want to be greedy, then began my trek to the shelter.

After breakfast, I asked around and found takers for the books, including the lady who'd originally pointed out mine. I'd have to tell Foster his idea was a hit.

I stopped at the donation room, mostly to refill my empty bottles from the water dispenser they provided. I grabbed a sample-size toothpaste and bodywash to tuck into my cart, and noticed the vouchers for a local laundromat, which I'd save for this afternoon.

Afterward, I found a sunny place to sit and read Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. I'd watched the movie, so I was more than curious how it measured up to the book. It was

a Friday afternoon, and instead of the city clearing out, it was gearing up for the weekend shows, concerts, and game. It felt good to ignore it for a while, but soon enough I needed to make the trek to the address listed on the voucher.

It seemed to take forever to get there, and as I waited for my clothes to wash and dry, I had an interesting chat with the woman using the washer beside me, whose kids were running around. She was a single mom, looked world-weary and exhausted, and it felt like the universe's reminder that everyone had their struggles. I nearly told her that I'd either watch her clothes or the kids so she could take a break, but she seemed even less trusting than me. And damn, I got it.

By the time I set up my tent, it was dusk, and Darius, the man with the cardboard box, was in my usual spot. But I wasn't greedy, just a creature of habit, so I chose a place closer to the coffee shop. I hid myself away from the crowd, hoping to get some shut-eye.

I dozed on and off, wondering what Foster was up to this weekend. He claimed to be a homebody, so did that mean he mostly stayed in reading, or did he ever go out with friends?

I'll be sure to ask him, I thought around a yawn.

Next thing I knew, loud voices made me stir, and I realized I'd fallen asleep. I peeked outside, and based on the position of the moon, I figured it was well after midnight and the bars would be closing for the night.

A boisterous group of men and women walked by my tent, and I stayed very still, not wanting any trouble. I breathed a sigh of relief when the voices grew softer in the distance.

I felt a crick in my neck, so I must've slept wrong, or was feeling too tense. When moving my head side to side didn't

help, I stepped out of the tent, stood on the sidewalk, and stretched with my arms raised, hearing a satisfying crack.

That was when I felt someone brush against me from behind. The man grunted as he gripped a handful of my hair painfully, and then I was blinded by something he sprayed in my eyes. He pushed me hard as he ran away, and I stumbled forward, landing on my knees.

“Fuck!” I anchored my hands on the pavement as I leaned over coughing and gagging from the aerosol filtering into my throat. My eyes were burning, and I could feel the tears streaming down my cheeks.

I wouldn’t have been able to see my assailant even if I tried, but likely, he was already long gone. This time Darius hadn’t even roused—at least I didn’t think he was anywhere near me—so either he was sleeping or trying not to get involved.

Another minute more and I heard a car pulling up to the curb. I wondered if it was the police.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” It was Foster’s voice. “I was driving home from a charity event when I saw you. Do you need help?”

“I...can’t see.” I rubbed at my eyes, but all I could make out was the blurry outline of him. “I was sprayed in the eyes with something. They’re on fire.”

“Goddamn it! Come on.” He put an arm around me and shuffled me to his car.

My chest seized. “I can’t leave my things!”

“Let me get you situated in the passenger seat, and then I’ll round up your tent and cart.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I sank into his car. I panted openly, my eyes screwed shut as I waited for him to collect my stuff. How in the hell had Foster been driving by at that exact moment? Was he destined to help me a second time or what?

He placed my things in the trunk, and then he was in the driver’s seat and moving into traffic, taking me who knew where.

“No hospital.”

“I figured you’d say that. Driving you to my place to flush your eyes.”

He helped me from the underground garage to the elevator and up to his place, the warmth of his arm and skin soaking into mine. It was the only comforting thing amid the stinging in my eyes and throat and the buzzing in my ears.

“Stay back, Oscar,” he warned as he walked me into his apartment and toward the bathroom. When he ran the water, I got my hands under the stream and began fervently dousing my eyes with water.

“Be right back.” He left the room and came back a couple of minutes later with towels, one he draped over my shoulders. “How is it now?”

“Not much better. But at least I can see a bit more.” My face in the mirror was blurry, but it was hard to miss my bloodshot eyes.

“Come on, let’s get you comfortable.” He led me down the hall to the couch, where I lay down. I started feeling queasy and turned to my side, dry heaving. He was there immediately with a wet cloth to wipe my mouth and then the back of my neck. When I settled against the cushions, I heard him on the phone with the Poison Control Center.

“Yes, some substance was sprayed in his eyes—pepper spray or tear gas, who knows. But it burns like hell.” He listened some more, then said, “Yes, we’ve flushed them.” More listening. “Okay, will do.”

“They said not to rub your eyes.” His voice was closer now. “Here.”

He handed me something. “What is it?”

“They said to soak a towel in milk and apply it to your eyes. It’ll help take away the burning sensation. But that you need to follow up with your primary care doctor.”

My laugh was hollow. “Okay, sure thing.”

As soon as the cloth covered my face, it soothed the sting. It felt so good that my whole body relaxed, and I felt like maybe I had dozed off because I roused to consciousness from the sound of Foster talking on the phone again.

“Yes, Officer. It’s happened before.”

I stiffened.

“Okay, I’ll let him know that he could file a report.”

I sat up, my pulse thumping at my throat, waiting for him to end the call. My eyes felt better, and the room came into focus when I removed the cloth. As soon as Foster walked back in, I blurted, “You called the police?”

“Don’t be mad. I just wanted to know what our options were.”

“Our options? I don’t want to be on the police department’s radar.”

“I didn’t tell him any names, only asked questions. I promise. Some of the businesses around where the assault

happened have video cameras. The officer said it would be helpful to file a report.”

“None of those store owners will want to help.”

“You don’t know that.” Foster squeezed my shoulder, then plopped down next to me. “Please, just consider it.”

I sighed, knowing he meant well. He did help me, after all. Again. “I will.”

I felt Oscar carefully jump on the couch as if he knew he needed to be gentle. My fingers burrowed into his soft fur, and before I knew it, I was asleep again.

FOSTER

IT'D BEEN a long night of keeping an eye on Lachlan to make sure he was okay. Somehow, we'd both fallen asleep on the couch, with Lachlan resting soundly against my chest and Oscar curled beside his legs.

I'd been awake for a while now, scared to wake him if I moved a muscle, and not going to lie, I enjoyed feeling his warmth against me a little too much.

I wanted to protect him, to understand him better, but he might freak if he knew my thoughts. So I just kept still and breathed him in, hoping to prolong this peaceful moment after his harrowing night.

Lachlan had been brave enough to leave an abusive situation, and now slept in a tent on the street, trying to survive. He was understandably cautious about whom he trusted, and I would never dream of hurting him. But my suggestions seemed to overwhelm him, so I needed to tread carefully. He needed to bounce back and feel productive all on his own.

I shifted a little to relieve the cramp in my arm. When Lachlan sighed and snuggled in closer, I wondered if he was dreaming. Hopefully it was something good. He deserved that.

He suddenly jerked awake, and I held my breath. “Fuck, sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I didn’t mind it.” I smiled. “Plus, you’re warm.”

“So are you.” He glanced beside him. “Or maybe it was Oscar.”

“Maybe it was all of us together.” When his gaze flashed to mine, I noticed his pupils were less red. “Your eyes look better. But I still think—”

The buzzer rang, and my pulse jumped. I’d forgotten about my many phone calls last night and that I’d asked for a favor.

“Are you expecting company?” Lachlan sat up straight, his muscles tense. “I should go.”

“Wait.” I winced, wondering if my visitor was still a good idea. “I hope you don’t mind, but since you wouldn’t go to the ER, I asked my friend, Doug, who’s a nurse, to come over before his shift.”

“No, I... You shouldn’t have...”

“It’s okay, I can send him away.” I stood, feeling guilty about the plan. “I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. We still don’t know what was sprayed in your eyes.”

Lachlan sighed, then frowned. “All right. If he came all the way over here.”

He looked wary as I buzzed Doug inside. I had no idea what Doug would even think of this setup, but he’d undoubtedly heard the concern in my tone when I’d called him while Lachlan was resting.

I opened the door to let him in. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem.” When he came through the door, Oscar scrambled toward him, and he crouched down to give him attention. Then his gaze settled on Lachlan. I could see him trying to put all the pieces together between us. Did he think he was a hookup? I wouldn’t mind that. But it wouldn’t be honest. Still, I didn’t think Lachlan would appreciate Doug knowing his business.

“Doug, this is my friend, Lachlan.”

He put out his hand, and they shook. “So, what exactly happened?”

“A man who may or may not have been intoxicated came up behind me and sprayed me in the eyes with something before running off.”

“Holy shit, what a lunatic! What do you think it was?”

“Not sure, but it happened before to...another man on another night, and he...well, he’s better now. It might’ve been tear gas or pepper spray.”

He pulled out a pen light. “Mind if I take a look at your pupils?”

“Sure.”

Doug stepped closer and shined the light into his eyes.

When Oscar whined, Lachlan muttered, “It’s okay, boy.”

Doug raised an eyebrow toward me before looking again. “Were you able to see?”

“Not at first. Everything was blurry.”

“Any other symptoms?”

“Choking, burning, watery eyes, and nausea.”

“Not fun.” Doug frowned. “Pepper spray dilates the pupils, causing temporary blindness.”

“Sounds like that was the culprit,” I said, and Lachlan nodded.

Doug stepped back and slipped the pen back in his pocket. “I think the worse of it has passed. The redness and irritation might last a couple more days, but if you get any other symptoms, like blurry vision or discharge, go see an eye doctor.”

“Will do.” Lachlan winced. “Thanks.”

“Okay, gotta head to the hospital,” Doug said. “Nice meeting you.”

“You too.”

“Thanks, buddy,” I said from behind him. “I’ll walk you out.”

I followed him into the hallway, and as soon as we were alone, he turned on me. “What’s going on?”

“I told you. He didn’t want to go to the ER, so I called you ___”

“That’s not what I mean. Is that some guy you’re hooking up with?”

“No, I...we became friendly a few weeks ago.” I looked away, unsure how to explain. But I also wouldn’t want Lachlan to think I was ashamed of him.

“Wait a minute, the way Oscar was whining...is this the homeless guy you were telling me about?”

“Lower your voice.” I looked over my shoulder, even though the door was shut. “And if it is?”

“Just...be careful,” Doug warned.

“Would you be saying that if Lachlan was a friend from work?”

“You’d know more about a friend from work,” he countered.

“I’ve gotten to know Lachlan pretty well. He doesn’t take handouts very easily. Getting him to my place was a feat, believe me. He’s fallen on hard times, but he’s also proud and doesn’t want... You know what, I don’t need to make excuses for either of us.” I huffed out a frustrated breath. “Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to—”

“No, I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I was out of line.”

“No worries.” The elevator dinged open and Doug held the door. “And by the way, I’d rather you refer to him and others who live on the streets as houseless or unhoused. Lachlan is experiencing homelessness, he’s not the cause of it.”

“I see you’ve done your homework.”

“I’ve...learned a lot in the last few weeks.”

“I get it. Those terms are not as dehumanizing and make it sound like more of a societal failing. Like there’s not enough resources available, which is true,” he said, and I nodded, thankful he got it. “I’ll be sure to use that language at the hospital too.”

“Cool.” I blew out a breath. “I’ll call you later.”

“Hey,” he said before the doors closed, “you still looking for a dog sitter?”

I blinked in confusion until I remembered the work conference I was going to in St. Louis next month. “Um, no, I found someone. No worries.”

Doug had looked after Oscar once before, when I jetted off to Chicago for the weekend, but I didn't want to rely on his help too often. Or maybe I just wasn't seeing straight because his reaction to Lachlan had left a bad taste in my mouth. I'd have to call him later and make sure we were back on solid ground.

I was distracted on the way back to my apartment, and when I stepped inside and saw Lachlan cuddled up with Oscar on the couch, an idea began solidifying in my head.

"Everything all right?" he asked in a tentative voice.

"Yeah, I'm sorry if that made you feel uncomfortable. I just got worried and—"

"It's okay. It was very thoughtful."

I smiled, then headed to the kitchen. "You want some coffee? I actually have a machine."

His gaze swung to the counter. "Then why don't you use it?"

I smirked. "Laziness?"

He laughed. "Would love some."

I got going on the coffee, then pulled out two mugs. He joined me at the kitchen counter while we waited for it to brew.

"Um, so I'm going out of town next month."

His mouth pulled downward. "Oh, you're leaving?"

Why did he look so glum?

"Only for a long weekend." I stood to grab the coffeepot and poured us both a cup. "So I was thinking..."

“Uh-oh.” He lifted his mug and blew on it before taking a sip.

I snickered because I already knew my idea would be a hard sell. “I wondered if you wouldn’t mind dog-sitting for me? I’d pay you and—”

“*Foster...*”

“Just hear me out.” My hand on his wrist stilled him. “Please?”

He stared at me hard, then nodded. “Go on.”

“So, Oscar obviously adores you, and I do need a dog sitter for when I’m away. It’s hard to find someone I trust, and I’d hate to put him in a kennel.”

“You want me to take care of Oscar?” His eyebrows hitched upward. “I suppose I could do that, but how would I manage—”

“You’d stay here, and I’d pay the normal hourly rate that someone who does it for a living charges,” I rushed out.

He looked around my apartment. “I...can’t do that.”

“Why not?” When I realized my hand was still on his arm, I squeezed his wrist gently. “In fact, I’d also like to hire you to walk Oscar daily. I used to pay someone to do that before—in Chicago.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

I took a deep breath and got it all out. “My idea is that you stay here with me—in my guest room—for at least a month. Get to know our routine, Oscar’s routine, and that will lead up to me leaving for my trip. In return, it’ll help you get back on your feet. At the very least you’d have an address to use to apply for jobs.”

His eyes were wide as he studied me and considered the offer. “So, walk your dog in exchange for room and board?”

“Yeah, something like that. Plus meals? We could grocery-shop together.”

“This is hard for me to wrap my brain around. You hardly know me.”

“Hey, I know you well enough. You love to cook, your mom did too. You escaped a horrible situation with your ex, and you used to cut hair at a posh salon.”

He briefly shut his eyes and shook his head.

My gut churned. “Maybe it’s you who doesn’t feel comfortable with me?”

“The thing is, I actually do, and it’s...surprising. In a good way.” He bit his lip in this shy way. “Mr. Librarian who reads Oscar Wilde and saw a dog at a shelter with the same name, so he thought it was fate.”

I smiled, warmth flooding my stomach. “And has harebrained ideas.”

“Definitely that.”

I clinked my cup against his. “It’ll be like a temporary roommate situation.”

“And that’s it?” He looked away, as if not wanting to meet my eyes. “That’s all you’d want?”

“Of course.” Wait a minute, was he implying... “Hey, I don’t expect us to fool around again if that’s what you mean.”

His cheeks turned scarlet. “Technically, I’m the one who kissed you first.”

“True,” I mused, then met his eyes. “But unless you want to hook up, I won’t come begging, no matter how much I enjoyed that. I’ll respect your boundaries, unless...”

“Unless I want roommates with benefits?” He cocked a brow.

Blood rushed to my groin. Christ, when he put it like that. But I needed to stay levelheaded. “Would you like that negotiated into the contract?”

“Contract?”

“It’s verbal, obviously.” I leaned closer. “I’m just trying to be more formal because I think that’s what you want or maybe even need. You’re afraid to trust someone again, and I hate that. But I also get it. Just think of our arrangement as you helping me out.”

“And you’re helping me out at the same time?”

“Exactly.” I blew out a breath because he sounded more amenable to the idea. I hoped. “So, what do you think?”

“I...” He lifted his hands and studied his damaged fingers. “Do you really think I could find a job in my industry again?”

“Definitely. My coworkers complimented my new cut.” I fingered my hair. “I have faith in you.”

For the first time, I saw a gleam of hope in his eyes.

“Sometimes it doesn’t seem possible. And I’m not that same person anymore.” He sighed. “I don’t have anything to my name, and I certainly don’t look as presentable as I did before... Likely I’d just be turned down.”

“With those sparkling-white sneakers?” I teased because despite him being in a storm and then assaulted, they were still

cleaner than mine. “That’s where I come in. You can borrow whatever you want for interviews.”

“That wouldn’t feel right—”

“How else do you expect to get a leg up?”

I watched as he deliberated with himself.

“All right, then.” He put out a hand. “It’s a deal.”

“Awesome.” When our fingers latched, my arm lined with gooseflesh.

“Where would you like me to start?” He stood, looking tired and wary.

“How about we make some breakfast—together?” I motioned to the fridge. “I’ve got eggs and bacon.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I knew he liked to cook, but he’d still need a few good days to heal.

I got to work making omelets while Lachlan handled the toast. We solidified our plans over breakfast. I noticed that he didn’t eat much, either out of habit or maybe fear that the bottom would fall out from under him.

My stomach tightened. Fuck, I wished there was a way to make him feel more comfortable.

Likely it would take time. And not worrying about him out on the streets was a good start.

LACHLAN

I STARED at the ceiling that had become familiar the past three days. Even though I was off the streets, I was still utterly lost. Not only was being somewhere warm and safe with food at my fingertips surreal, but the idea that Foster could really want this arrangement was messing with my head. I couldn't help thinking that he'd change his mind any minute now, so I remained vigilant and kept my rolling cart at the ready just in case. But he'd been nothing but gracious.

I sat up and stretched, ready to start the day even though I'd slept like shit. Again. It was too damned quiet. Too damned everything.

Foster was already at work, and I could hear Oscar sniffing under the door for me. Foster had thought it was a good idea to give me some peace and quiet without an exuberant dog bothering me. But somehow, keeping the door closed felt lonelier.

That certainly didn't make any sense. I slept alone in my tent all the time. But just knowing Foster and Oscar were in the next room made me want to reach out to them or talk to them or I didn't know what. The irony of enjoying being confined inside my tent but not behind a guest-room door

wasn't lost on me. Maybe it would start feeling more familiar with time.

But it was more than that. I couldn't help thinking about how I'd woken up in Foster's arms the other day and how wonderful that felt. So maybe that was it. That itch beneath my skin to be touched and held again—by him.

Foster had made it clear he'd hook up with me if that was what I wanted. Was that all this was? My stomach bottomed out. No, he'd been respectful of my body and choices, and I hadn't had that in a long time.

Once I rolled out of bed and poured myself some coffee—a habit Foster was trying to establish since I'd moved in—I clicked on Oscar's leash for our morning routine.

I felt guilty walking Oscar near any of my usual haunts. But I also didn't want anyone to think something had happened to me. The gossip would no doubt be unbridled. So I decided to head over the bridge, this time taking the Detroit-Superior thruway to the shelter. I introduced Oscar to the people in line, and he definitely seemed to brighten their day.

"I heard you were assaulted last week," a lady said, and others murmured. "And that some man came by in a car to help you."

"Yeah, that definitely happened." My eyes were better but still felt grainy.

"That why you have this dog? Or is he a stray?" she asked.

"Oscar was a stray until that same man took him in."

She raised an eyebrow. "You sure he ain't taking advantage of you?"

She meant prostitution. It was rampant on certain corners downtown, so she must've thought he was some sort of john or pimp.

“Nah, it's not like that,” I said as more came over to pet Oscar. “He's a good man.”

I wished I could do more than bring a smile to their faces, but I had to get on my own two feet first. At least try to.

“You hear of any other attacks?”

A couple of men shook their heads.

After another minute, I flagged down Tessa as she was heading inside with her cousin, Officer Holt. He must've been volunteering in the kitchen again. Some people looked uncomfortable upon seeing him, and averted their eyes, but his smile was so friendly that many greeted him like an old friend.

“Who's this?” Tessa asked as Oscar licked her hand. Her cousin continued into the building, so I felt more comfortable sharing with her.

“My friend's dog, Oscar.”

“Does this explain why we haven't seen you around?” She grimaced. “I heard what happened to you. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, much better.” My face felt hot. I wondered what she really thought. “My friend is letting me stay with him in exchange for looking after his dog. And that way I can use his address and conduct my own job searches.”

She smiled. “I'm happy for you.”

I toed a rock on the sidewalk. “Yeah, well...thanks.”

“You're nervous, aren't you?” She squeezed my arm. “I can see it in your eyes.”

I bit my lip. “I learned a long time ago that nothing is guaranteed.”

“I understand.” She patted my shoulder. “I’m rooting for you.”

“Appreciate that.”

“My cousin—Officer Holt—would also be more than willing to get more details about the assault.”

My pulse pounded at my throat. “I’ll, uh, think about it.”

She frowned. “Yeah, that’s been the going theme around here.”

I grimaced. “Can you blame us?”

She shook her head. “Hopefully, with time, he can build some trust.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I should get going.”

“No offense, but I hope I don’t see you at the shelter anytime soon.” When she winked, I laughed, understanding her meaning. “But if you need our services again, we’ll be here.”

“Thanks.”

My chest felt heavy as we trudged back across the Hope Memorial, the guardian statues looming over us. The fact that Foster had left me his spare key so I could come and go as I pleased wasn’t lost on me. I felt the first raindrop as we rounded the corner, and by the time we got up the elevator to his place, it was coming down hard.

I walked to the window to watch it from that vantage point, imagining what I’d be doing right then. Either seeking shelter in a doorway, or under an awning or the Main Avenue

Bridge. Later in the evening, I'd be setting up my tent while getting pelted with any number of weather conditions. Snow, hail, sleet, I'd been through it all.

I looked down at myself, at Foster's thermal shirt and the jeans he'd lent me that were loose at the waist. The steadier my diet the more I'd be able to fill out his clothes, but I still wasn't going to bank on it.

After giving Oscar a treat, I perused a bookshelf for something to read until I remembered that I still had one of the classics he'd donated. I snuggled on the couch with Oscar while the rain pelted the windows, and I got lost in the chapters.

I found I could relate to the women in the book, especially the Dashwood sisters. They felt trapped in their system of wealth and social status. What was that saying? *The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.*

And though I wasn't technically trapped when I was with Clint, he made me feel like I was. In fact, being with him made me feel more vulnerable than living on the street.

When I heard Foster's key in the door, I sat up, feeling guilty that I'd spent the afternoon reading instead of scouring the employment ads.

Foster and I had an arrangement, but he wasn't putting any pressure on me. In fact, he seemed to be giving me time to adjust and breathe. And while I appreciated that, I also felt antsy to get moving, especially when yesterday's newspaper proved fruitless.

"How was your day?" I asked in a strained voice.

"Busy," he replied, bending down to greet Oscar. This was already beginning to feel like a routine, and I didn't know how

I should feel about that.

“Okay if I start dinner?” I hadn’t accompanied him to the grocery store the other day because I was afraid it would be too overwhelming. Foster seemed to understand that, so we created a list and made a meal plan.

“Go for it. I’m starving.” He stepped out of his shoes and hung up his raincoat.

I walked to the refrigerator and pulled out the ingredients for a stir-fry. Being useful felt good, and I could tell he liked when I cooked for him.

He placed today’s newspaper on the counter. He got them free at the library. “How about we work on your résumé tonight?”

“I’d like that.”

He sat at the island and helped chop veggies. “Anything new on your end?”

“I walked Oscar to the shelter,” I mumbled. “Hope you don’t mind.”

He chomped on the end of a carrot. “Why would I mind?”

“I...I don’t know.” Foster was way more compassionate and understanding than I ever thought possible, so why did that continue to surprise me? “I wanted to make sure people knew I was okay. That nothing happened to me the other night.”

“God, I hadn’t thought of that. Good idea.”

I nodded. “Plus, a lot of them appreciated having a friendly dog around.”

“I bet.” He looked at Oscar as if to say, *good boy*. “Feel free to take him for visits anytime.”

I was relieved he didn’t ask me again about filing the police report, and I certainly wasn’t going to bring up Officer Holt. In fact, once my eyes cleared up, Foster seemed to drop the idea, and I was glad for it. Besides, I hadn’t heard any more horror stories from the shelter today, so maybe the guy had had enough fun for a while.

Yeah, right. There would likely be others.

Once we ate, we headed to the couch, where he pulled his laptop out of his bag and fired it up. I sat down beside him and started flipping through the newspaper.

“Hang on a minute.” He left the room, then came back with a second, smaller laptop. “This is my old one. I figured you could use something to work on.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off. “And before you complain, I think it’s important. Most people look for jobs online nowadays. Plus, you’ll want to tailor your résumé to each person you email.”

Good point. “Okay, true.”

His smile was smug, but I couldn’t fault him for it. He sat down beside me again, opened the laptop, and gave me a quick tutorial before we got to work on my résumé.

I’d been so out of the loop that placing my fingers on the keyboard to type didn’t seem real to me. I wasn’t much better with a pen and paper, not with these fingers, but at least no one had to read my handwriting.

“You sure I should use this address?”

“That’s the idea, right?” He gave it to me, and I typed it in. I wasn’t very fast, never had been, but he was patient with me.

“I also have a landline.” He pointed across the room to the phone sitting on the end table. “I know, I’m a dinosaur, but in this case it helps. You should use it to take calls from prospective employers.”

“Okay, T-Rex. Thanks.”

He smirked and nudged my shoulder.

Next, I listed my work history at the different salons, my education, and the information on my state licensure.

“Impressive,” he said, leaning toward the screen, and I could feel his breath on my cheek. When I turned my head, our eyes met, and I shivered a little.

I wanted to kiss him so bad, but I needed to keep my focus on important things.

“What should I say when they ask why I’d been out of work so long?”

He looked off into the distance, considering it. “How about...you had an accident involving your fingers?”

“But won’t that just draw too much attention to them?”

They might end up being my downfall, but I was going to remain positive. Still, I’d only cut one head of hair, so how would I fare at the end of a long day? Maybe I needed to only search for entry-level jobs. Start over again, from the beginning. For now.

“True.” He sighed. “I don’t know, I hate that question. During the worst of my depression, I’d taken time away because it was emotionally and physically taxing. But some

employers don't really understand mental health. I don't try to hide my depression, but I've also learned to adjust."

"You're right. That's why I was fired. Well, technically, I kept calling in sick without explaining myself, but still."

"I bet that asshat didn't miss one day of work."

"I'm not sure, actually. He might've been embarrassed that his face was black and blue. But it did give him a good sob story and plenty of sympathy, I'm sure."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but...you'd think your friends would've read the signs between you."

"He was quite the charmer in public." He even had Marcie fooled. Maybe I should've confided in her how toxic we were becoming. I shrugged, then glanced at him. "Are you still friends with your ex?"

"Nah. Still see some of Robert's posts on social media, but that's about it. I'm glad we were both able to move on while remaining civil."

"Have you dated again?" Probably too personal, but I was more than curious.

"A little, but no one special. And that's okay with me."

"It's okay with me too—I mean, in regard to myself," I said, and Foster laughed.

"Well, I can understand why. But I hope one day you're with someone who appreciates you. Someone who's kind and trustworthy. You deserve that."

I cleared my throat and looked away. "Thanks."

We put the computer away with the idea of tweaking my résumé again tomorrow, then watched some TV, which also

felt strange after being out of the loop on shows and movies. As our hands rested together on the cushion, the tension grew thick, and I longed to close the distance between us. To ask Foster to kiss me or hold me.

When I looked down at his lap, he was stiff behind his zipper. I tried to act casual when I asked, “You having the same problem I am?”

“Maybe? I mean, yeah, if we’re being honest.” He shifted uncomfortably. “But that doesn’t mean I need...”

“What if I want to?”

He met my eyes. “Want to what?”

“Make you feel good.”

When I slid to my knees in front of him, he swore under his breath, but didn’t stop me from unbuttoning and unzipping his pants.

“Wait.” He stilled me with a hand to my shoulder. “I don’t want you to think—”

“I don’t.” And before he could say more, I slid my knuckles over the front panel of his boxer briefs.

He shuddered, then squirmed when I buried my face in the material and breathed him in. “Well, fuck.”

I helped him tug his pants and underwear off to allow me more room, then settled between his thighs. His legs shook as I kissed his belly and hip bones, ignoring his flushed cock for now. God, he was gorgeous. All man, and all mine to drive to the brink. The exact thing I needed right then.

My fingers curled around his shaft, jerking him off as I licked lower at his sac. I pulled one of his balls into my mouth and tongued his nuts, wanting to drive him wild. And from the

way he was groaning and tugging my hair, I was doing just that.

I watched him as his eyes screwed shut and he rocked forward, and if that didn't feel powerful, to have this man practically begging for it, I didn't know what did.

"Please," Foster said, and my balls ached hearing that throaty voice. "Don't stop."

I licked his slit, and the burst of salty precome across my tongue only made me harder. When I finally wound my lips around his cock and breathed in his spicy scent, my vision swam, almost like I couldn't get over that this was real.

A potent, heady feeling ballooned inside me. I was off the street, and currently sucking a beautiful man who trusted me enough to give him pleasure. And the wildest part was that I trusted him. I never imagined myself in this position again, even if this was only friends with benefits.

I palmed his balls as my lips savored the salty head and thick shaft. I took him deep, down to the root, inhaling his scent as Foster swore and twisted his fingers in my hair. His balls grew tighter, and I could tell he was close, ready to unload. "Gonna let loose."

I lifted my eyes to his and redoubled my efforts.

"Oh fuck!" he cried out as he filled my mouth with his come. And I swallowed it down, sucking him dry and reveling in every second of it. "Goddamn, so good."

When he was soft, I pulled off his cock, Foster's heavy panting filling the room. My knees aching, I stood up, feeling dizzy with longing.

"C'mere." Foster reached for my waistband, pulled me out, and I was so far gone, I was practically useless in helping him.

He tightened his fist and stroked me good, pulling down the foreskin to tongue my head on every pass. It was too damned good to hold off. My knees shook as I spurted. His mouth enclosed my cock, and he drank me down.

Holy fuck, I wished I'd lasted longer so I could relive every second.

"So fucking hot," I said, breathing heavily.

"Yes, you are," he replied with a wink as he pulled his shirt over his shoulders and wiped his sweaty brow with the fabric.

"Speaking of hot," I said, admiring the view, then followed suit so I could cool down.

He pulled me to him and kissed me breathless before tucking me into his arms, bare skin against bare skin, and damn, it was nice.

When I yawned one too many times, he pushed me up. "Time to hit the hay."

I reluctantly stood as he cut the lights, and we headed to bed.

I chuckled as I stepped into my room and found Oscar asleep on the mattress.

"That rascal," Foster said, then made the motion to wake him.

"No, don't. Maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight."

His eyebrows drew together. "Are you having trouble?"

"Sort of?" I bit my lip. "I know it sounds strange, but it's too quiet."

"Damn, you should've told me."

“Why would I? That’s nothing to complain about.” Hand to my chest, I said, “I’m lucky.”

Our gazes locked for a long moment, and then Foster lifted a finger. “Hold on. I’ve got an idea.” He left the room, rummaged around in the hall closet, then returned with a large box fan. “How about some white noise?”

“Good idea. Thanks.”

He plugged it into the far wall and adjusted the setting to high. I instantly felt relief. It would help mask the silence that seemed to leave me restless and unsettled.

Foster sat down on the mattress to pet Oscar while I slid beneath my covers. I tried not to drink in his bare form, his softened cock hanging below the nest of dark hair. If he felt my gaze pressing in on him, he didn’t call me on it. I liked that he felt comfortable enough in front of me.

“Want me to stay until you fall asleep?” he asked softly.

Why did I like the sound of that so much? I didn’t want to rely on him, but I found myself nodding anyway. Just for tonight.

After he cut the light, I shut my eyes with a sigh. Just knowing he and Oscar were near, I fell into dreamland.

FOSTER

LACHLAN ANSWERED my landline on the second ring. He recognized my number through the caller ID feature on the phone, which helped him weed through the telemarketers.

“How about some takeout tonight?” I suggested.

I didn’t want him to think he always needed to make dinner, though I could tell he enjoyed it. We stayed inside most of the week, except for walking Oscar. I hadn’t suggested eating out because I had a feeling that would overwhelm him—at least right now, when he was just getting used to the idea of being safe and sound.

“Sounds good,” he replied.

It was as if he was reintegrating into society and needed to go slowly.

Fine by me.

“You can decide. The menus are in the drawer next to the stove.”

It’d been over a week since I’d helped Lachlan get off the streets, and I’d thought it might get awkward and that maybe at first we’d fumble around each other. But it felt natural, comfortable. I enjoyed having him around, and not only because he loved hanging with my dog and cooking dinner. Or

that other thing, where we sought pleasure in each other a few more times, which felt bone-meltingly good.

“You shaved,” I said as I came through the door that evening, his handsome face more on display than it had been that morning. Now his beard was just a neatly trimmed goatee, and I didn’t want to call too much attention to it, but it must’ve meant he was feeling more comfortable. More settled. At least I hoped so.

His cheeks stained red. “Yeah, I figured it was time. The days are getting warmer.”

I hung my bag on the hook near the door. “It looks good.”

“Thanks.” He set the laptop aside. He’d continued to tweak his résumé and began his search online, but he didn’t share much more with me about where he might apply and what he was interested in. I didn’t want him to think I was prying or rushing him. It was important he thought it through and got his bearings. “Pizza was delivered five minutes ago.”

“Awesome, I’m famished.”

He stood and met me in the kitchen, where I was greeting Oscar. “I just fed him dinner.”

“Cool.” I headed to the sink to wash my hands. “I’ll grab some plates.”

We sat at the kitchen island, sharing a large pepperoni pizza and talking about our day. He admitted to looking up his old salon online.

“How did that make you feel?”

“Sick to my stomach, which doesn’t make sense.”

“It sort of does, though.” I reached for a third slice—Lachlan had barely finished one. “That place is tied to your

old life with your ex.”

“True.” He picked at his crust. “But it’s not only that. I’m not sure what I want anymore, and being a hairstylist is all I know.”

“Did you use to enjoy it?”

“I did. But now I feel like there’s got to be more. More to my life.” He screwed his eyes shut. “My thoughts are all over the place.”

“It’s okay.” I pressed my shoulder against his. “You’re allowed to take your time and figure stuff out. There’s no rush.”

“But I can’t impose—”

“It’s only been a week.” Something caught my eye on the television screen, which was muted in the living room. “Holy shit.”

I stood and went to turn up the volume. It was a news story about an incident near the waterfront on 9th, where a houseless man had been stabbed. “Do you know him?”

Lachlan was right behind me, watching with widened eyes. “He seems familiar.”

“What if the assailant is the same guy that sprayed you?” When they moved on to the next story, I muted the television again. Feeling too on edge, I began clearing the leftovers in the kitchen. The way Lachlan pushed away his plate, he’d lost his appetite as well. “Have you given any more thought to filing a police report? Starting a paper trail of crimes?”

He shook his head, fear evident in his eyes. “I told you, I don’t want to bring attention to us.”

Us. He used the word as if he were still houseless, still part of that demographic, and how could he not? It'd only been a week. He'd only just gotten used to sleeping on a mattress in a stranger's apartment. He'd shared how vulnerable he'd felt at night, and I'd made sure to check on him and sit with him sometimes. He left the door cracked so Oscar could come and go as he pleased. More times than not, Oscar ended up in the guest room with Lachlan.

"I know it sounds risky, but if nothing is ever reported..." I moved toward the sink with the plates. "Damn it, I just hate the idea of that guy getting away with assaulting people."

Riled up about the topic, I didn't look where I was going, and when I tripped on the corner of the throw rug, the plates slipped from my hands and crashed to the floor. "*Goddamn it!*" I looked at the mess I'd made.

Face hot, I went for the broom and dustpan, and happened to glance in Lachlan's direction. His hands were raised in what looked like protective mode, and he'd backed away from the counter.

"It's okay," I said, his reaction not really landing in my brain. "Let me get this cleaned up."

I started sweeping up the mess, wondering why Lachlan was frozen in place instead of offering to help. Not that he needed to. But if I didn't get these shards off the floor, Oscar might cut his paws.

"Can you do me a favor and keep Oscar away until I'm finished?"

When I didn't get a response, I realized Lachlan was no longer in the room, and a moment later I heard his bedroom door close. I had no idea what he was thinking.

I made quick work of sweeping, then got out the vacuum for all the little bits I might've missed. Thankfully, Oscar stayed back, afraid of the suction noise.

When everything was cleaned up and the trash thrown away, I washed my hands before heading down the hall, my adrenaline finally leveling out.

Lachlan's door was closed, so I knocked gently. "Can I come in?" When there was no answer, my stomach quaked. Had something happened worse than me making a fool of myself in front of him? "Lachlan? Are you okay?"

I cracked the door open a hair, and that was when I saw it—his yellow tent set up in the corner of the room. My heart clenched. I must've overwhelmed him, first bringing up the police report and then raising my voice when the dishes crashed to the floor.

Oscar came bounding in and made a beeline for the tent, sniffing all around it like he'd done so many times before.

"Hey, Lach?" I asked, tentative. "If you tell me to go away, I will. Oscar too."

I waited a beat before he said, "I...I don't know what just happened."

"I think maybe...I scared you." My heart was thumping in my ears.

"Yeah, maybe." His voice sounded so small and timid. Damn it.

He unzipped the flap and poked his head out, letting Oscar lick his chin. But he kept his gaze downcast, as if he couldn't look at me right then.

I crouched down to eye level but kept my distance. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Sometimes people raise their voices and it doesn’t mean anything except a strong emotion or being passionate about something.”

“I know that, logically, but...” He shook his head.

“What did a loud voice mean...before?”

“It was a warning sign.” His gaze latched on to mine. “It normally meant I did something to upset Clint.”

“Did a lot of things upset him?” My pulse throbbed as I tried to keep my voice level. But damn, I wanted to throttle his ex.

He scoffed. “Even small things.”

“Fuck,” I said under my breath.

“Like, messing up meals or not serving him the exact way he liked.” He made a frustrated sound. “He had this thing about his maple syrup being warm, and if I forgot to do that...”

“What an absolute prick.” I curled my fist before thinking better of it, then quickly loosened my grip. “So, he’d get loud and you’d argue?”

“Sometimes, yes. But I mostly tried to appease him because he had this way of making me feel like I was a loser, like I’d fucked up, you know?”

“Gaslighting 101.”

“My father used to pull some of the same shit.”

“With you and your mom?”

“Uh-huh. Sometimes Clint wouldn’t talk to me for days, which would drive me stark raving mad. I’d try everything to

get him to interact with me, and when he finally did, it was as if I could breathe again.” As if to demonstrate, he blew out a long breath. “We’d be on good terms for days after, and that really messed with my head.”

“I’ll bet,” I murmured. “That sort of behavior probably messed with your mom’s head too.”

“Yeah, I almost wish... I wish she and I could have had this discussion as adults. There’s so much that makes sense now. Like how happy she was when my dad was in good spirits. As if he controlled the mood of the house.”

“And that’s how you felt with Clint?”

“Yeah. And when he started getting more and more physical, I knew it would only escalate the longer I stayed. And...you know the rest after that.”

I knee-walked closer, needing to be near him. “Can I hug you? It’s okay if you’re not ready.”

“I’d like that.” As soon as I got close enough, I pulled him into my arms. “I’m sorry I was harping on about the police report. I won’t push for that anymore. I was so fired up, I tripped over the rug and smashed our plates. Ugh, what a mess.”

His arms wound around me tighter, and we stayed that way for another minute, just hugging and breathing each other in. “Thanks, for explaining and apologizing. It means a lot.”

I pulled back to look at him. “Friends talk things through. So you tell me if there’s anything I do that makes you uncomfortable, and I’ll do the same.”

He smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

Damn. I’d sure as hell try not to make that mistake again.

LACHLAN

WAS I really sitting in my tent in Foster's guest room? I'd panicked, and it was the only thing I could think of to do besides leaving, which I'd considered briefly before heading down the hallway and digging for the tent in my rolling cart. It was so second nature that it took me no time to set the darn thing up.

Honestly, Foster was right. I should file the police report, just like I should've stood up for myself in a more public way against Clint. Even if nothing ever came of either, it was a step in the right direction. But I just wasn't confident enough. I preferred to walk away or hide.

The guilt made my stomach ache. What if another unhoused person got hurt, or another of Clint's boyfriends? I likely wasn't the first.

"I can help make up your bed again," Foster said, his gaze trailing over to the mattress I'd stripped of sheets and blankets.

My gut churned. "I don't think so."

I didn't feel ready to sleep in that bed again and act like my life was normal. But there was a deep groove between Foster's eyebrows, and I wished I could make him understand.

I patted the comforter I'd arranged on the tent floor. "But you're welcome to hang out with me in here."

My pulse thumped, not only because I was inviting him into my private space, but because I wasn't sure what he'd think. How pathetic did I sound?

His eyes softened. "You'd want that?"

I nodded, not really understanding where all this trust was coming from right then. I had fled the kitchen because I was afraid. But it wasn't really of him. It was of being fooled by someone again, and yet he'd quickly batted down that idea by explaining and apologizing. Clint used to offer non-apologies where he'd pin the responsibility of his anger on me. And I took the brunt of it willingly to make things better.

Foster crawled inside and made himself comfortable on the bedding. It was essentially a one-man tent, so our knees were touching, our breaths mingling.

Thankfully, Oscar was busy chewing a bone he'd rediscovered in my room, otherwise it would've been way too crowded.

"It's cozy in here," Foster said, and I smiled.

"It is." I twisted the corner of the comforter. "Do you understand now?"

"I think I do." He reached out, touched a strand of hair near my jaw, then pushed it behind my ear. I sighed because it felt so good to be touched by him.

When he ran his hand along my scruff, I kept my eyes closed, wishing it would never end. "You're gorgeous, Lachlan."

“I could say the same to you.” My stomach felt funny as I opened my eyes and our gazes clashed. I reached out to touch his five-o’clock shadow, enjoying the roughness against my fingers. “I want you. Is that wrong to say after the way I acted?”

“No. It’s human.” His lips were only a fraction away, and I could easily close the distance. “I want you too. Even if all I do is hold you.”

Despite our conversation, I still felt on edge. “I want...I need...*more*.”

“I think I get it.” He gathered my face in his hands, his kiss so devastatingly tender, I practically melted. He encouraged me to lie back, and as he hovered over me, he asked, “Is this okay?”

I nodded, pinpricks lining the hairs on my arms and legs, the anticipation killing me.

“Can I take these off?” He indicated my jeans, and when I nodded again, he slid them down. I took off my shirt, saving him the trouble of dealing with it. Before I knew it, I was completely bare, but the affection blazing in his warm, brown irises made me feel safe and cared for.

He removed his shirt as well, and my gaze roamed all over his firm chest and downy dark hair before he bent down to feather kisses along my throat and collarbones. When he lashed his tongue against one nipple and then the other, I groaned, reveling in being tended to for the first time in forever.

Sex before was always on someone else’s terms, and I was normally doing the heavy lifting, sometimes falling short of getting my needs met. Foster taking his time and wanting to

make me feel good was unfamiliar, so maybe that explained the tears suddenly stinging my eyes.

I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and pulled myself together. I relaxed into his touch and allowed myself to enjoy this. Enjoy the feel of Foster's stubble rasping over my thigh as he buried his nose in my groin. Relish his warm mouth as he engulfed my cock, making me shiver. He pulled down the foreskin and licked the head, and I opened my lids to watch him. Swiping the precome from my slit, he seemed to savor it on his tongue. Ugh, he was so fucking hot, and his desire made me feel powerful and confident enough to ask for what I wanted.

"Please, suck my balls." My hand burrowed in the crown of his hair. "I'm so fucking turned on."

"Damn, keep talking to me." He pulled off my shaft and angled downward, swirling his tongue around my sac before sucking one ball, then the other. My cock was stiff as a fence post, prominent against my stomach. I ignored the urge to jerk myself off as I watched him lick my sac like it was a delicacy.

"I love how your tongue feels," I told him. "Your mouth is a dream."

Why did it take me so long to leave an awful situation when this was what I was missing? Lying to myself only made me waste years. If Foster would've heard me say that out loud, he'd no doubt have suggested something deep, maybe pointed out that leaving was extremely hard. That it took a ton of energy and courage. He'd also probably say something enchanting, like we were meant to connect at that exact right time in the middle of a bustling city street.

And he'd be right, but this...this was blowing my mind.

And I still wanted more.

Deserting my balls, Foster fit my cock inside the heat of his mouth again, and the slow, deliberate suction was making me desperate for release. But not like this.

“Wait.” I gripped his shoulder, and he instantly pulled his mouth away. “I...I want your dick inside me. I want you to fuck me.”

“Well, damn. You’ve left me a bit speechless.” Foster reached down to adjust himself. He was stiff behind his zipper and likely uncomfortable. “Are you sure? I could just—”

I grasped for his waistband. “Please.”

I helped him drag his jeans and underwear down his thighs and kick out of them. He was hard, a rosy flush at the tip, and I was desperate to feel all of him. “How do you want me? Should I—”

“How about you ride me?”

And fuck, I loved that about him. He knew that gave me the control I desperately needed. Plus, I loved that position and hadn’t done it that way in years.

I puffed out a heavy breath as if it had been jammed in my lungs for months, maybe years. “I’m game.”

FOSTER

“BE RIGHT BACK.” I kissed Lachlan’s cheek before disappearing to my room for a condom and lube. When I crawled back into the tent to lie down, it was a surreal moment of two worlds colliding, and I felt momentarily wobbly.

Pushing the thought aside, I suited up while Lachlan took control of the lube by liberally rubbing it on his hole, and I couldn’t look away even if I tried. When he fingered himself, I was sure he could see the hunger in my gaze, and I certainly wasn’t going to hide it. “Gorgeous.”

When he rubbed more lube down my length, I shivered at his touch. Lachlan stroked me at a leisurely pace, as if he wasn’t rocking my world. I swore under my breath as he lifted his knee to straddle my hips. This was really happening.

Groaning, he rocked back and forth, no doubt enjoying as much as I did the feel of my cock sliding along his crease. I clutched on to his waist, trying to slow my breathing and hold myself back from thrusting into his warm heat.

Lachlan bent forward to peck my lips. “Ready for this?”

“Whenever you are,” I replied as our eyes met and held. My hands were trembling at this point, I was so turned on. I could’ve gotten off from just this visual alone, though I

would've lamented the opportunity for our bodies to connect in this way.

Watching me closely, Lachlan rose up on his knees to align my cock with his hole. Holding open his ass cheeks was a sensual sight all its own, but when he slowly bore down and my cock breached his hole, my vision doubled as I took in the incredible sensation.

He closed his eyes and arched his back as my cock filled him. "So damned good." He used his knees for leverage as we fucked in long, deliberate strokes. With each thrust, I gripped his thighs tighter, my moans low and throaty.

He stared at me with an open expression, as if amazed he could elicit that response from me. How could he not know how sexy and gorgeous he was? Well, now I was bound and determined to show him. "You feel incredible."

Lachlan's eyes softened briefly as he lifted into a crouch, and then he swiveled his hips for added effect. His eyes rolled back as my cock rubbed his prostate on each pass inside him.

The tent filled with the sounds of our heavy panting, of our skin slapping together as he bounced faster. His dick was stiff and flushed at the tip, leaking against his stomach. I curled my fist around his shaft and stroked upward, eliciting a whole-body shudder from him.

"Wait," he said, stilling my hand. "I don't want to come yet. I like being filled with your cock."

I groaned. "Fucking hell."

I wanted to make it last longer too, but Lachlan was winded from the effort, and I definitely was not in the best shape of my life.

“Let me help,” I said, and he practically sagged in relief as I stilled his hips. Readjusting my grip, I fucked upward into him. And damn, it was so good, maybe for both of us because he didn’t even contest the angle or try to match my thrusts. He just let go, surrendering to the moment, and it was gratifying to see him like that.

“You’re gorgeous like this,” I murmured as we fucked earnestly, the sound of our bodies connecting and our moans filling the space between us. “So tight around my cock. Not sure how much more I can take.”

He hummed as he shut his eyelids and wrapped a hand around his shaft, jerking himself sloppily as I drilled my cock into his hole.

“I’m gonna come.” Not a moment later, Lachlan spurted all over my chest and stomach and the sheets. He sank against me, our mouths and tongues meeting in a greedy, frantic kiss.

I moaned into his mouth and fucked him through my orgasm as my balls tightened for an elongated, luxurious moment, then let loose, waves of pleasure rolling through me. Lachlan held on for the ride, lying panting on my chest.

I slowly came back to my senses as my softened cock slid from his ass. My fingernails trailed up and down his spine as he lazily kissed my shoulder. I loved that closeness with him, even if it would end in another minute.

“Thank you for giving me that,” he said against my ear. “It’s been a long time.”

I didn’t ask—I didn’t want to ruin the moment—but I could guess what he meant, whom he was referring to. I gathered his face in my hands, my lips found his mouth, and I

kissed him slow and deep. It'd been a while for me too, but nothing this intense, this dizzying, this good.

When he rolled off me, I nearly protested, but I wasn't sure that would go over well.

He let out a yelp. "Wet spot. Your sheets might be a bit ruined."

I chuckled as I unfolded my achy limbs from the tent to stand and dispose of the condom, and a minute later I handed him one of two damp hand towels to help clean us up. The cool cloth felt good on my hot skin, but not as good as having him beside me.

As he dabbed uselessly at the damp areas on the sheets, an idea formed on my lips, but I was hesitant to say it out loud.

"Hey." I reached out to still his hand. "How about you sleep in my bed tonight, and we'll wash this stuff in the morning?"

When he looked away, I was certain he was formulating the right way to gently let me down, and I cursed myself for even suggesting it. I'd been hoping the idea would appeal to him after our talk, combined with the connection we felt from being intimate—or maybe that was just me. Maybe he still didn't feel safe with me, and I couldn't fault him for that.

"I'd like that," he said, tossing the towel aside and lifting onto his knees. "Besides, I'll probably fall into a coma as soon as my head hits the pillow."

I grinned. "Ditto." I stretched out my hand, and he latched on to my fingers as I pulled him up. He didn't let go, and we walked hand in hand to my room, my heart thumping unsteadily in my chest at the sweetness of the gesture.

He seemed soothed by my warm, dry covers, and when I cut the lights, he sighed dreamily. He turned away from me, but at the same time his body seemed to shift closer, as if unconsciously needing to be nearer. When my arm hesitantly circled his waist from behind, I held my breath, hoping I'd read him right.

"Night," he said, and I murmured a response, taking in the mind-boggling gravity of it all: Lachlan showing me that vulnerability tonight. Him wanting intimacy from me.

It made me want to keep him safe and cocooned in my arms for as long as he'd let me. It wasn't rational, of course. Lachlan needed desperately to stand on his own, but I couldn't help feeling protective all the same.

Soon enough Oscar joined us, getting cozy at the end of the bed, and it added a layer of insulation to this arrangement that felt strangely right.

LACHLAN

“LACHLAN WILL BE WATCHING Oscar at my place next month,” Foster said to his parents and his brother, Chase. They were on a three-way video call, and I was trying my best not to fidget as I sat beside him on the couch.

I didn’t want to be part of the call, but Foster said it would be weird if he didn’t at least introduce me, since I was living with him and all, even if only temporarily.

“Perfect timing to get a roommate,” Chase replied. You could see the resemblance between the siblings, but Foster was way more handsome, in my opinion.

“How do you feel about taking care of Oscar?” Mr. Middleton asked. It almost felt like I was being interviewed for the job, but I knew he was only being careful and curious, given that I’d just moved in and they were meeting me for the first time.

“Oh, um, well...I love Oscar, so it’s a no-brainer for me.”

“And Oscar loves him. In fact, Oscar is how we met one morning on our usual walk and coffee run.”

I winced and looked away. Was he going to tell his family that he’d befriended a man experiencing homelessness, then asked him to live with him?

“Oscar was pulling on his leash to get closer to Lachlan and then loved on him. Oscar gave him no choice.”

I laughed because it was sort of true. That dog wasn't going to give up until I greeted him properly. And the rest, as they say, was history.

Mrs. Middleton clapped her hands excitedly. “If that isn't a meet-cute, I don't know what is.”

“*Mom*,” Foster warned. “It isn't like that.”

I wasn't sure whose cheeks were redder, mine or his.

“I'm just being silly,” she replied. “I'm glad you have a new friend. Were you looking for a place to live, Lachlan?”

“Maybe temporarily? I, uh, sort of fell on hard times,” I said, but before I could explain further, Foster jumped in.

“He needed a place to stay after a bad breakup, and the timing worked out for both of us.”

Was he embarrassed of me, or just trying to prevent them from prying further?

As they caught up on work and family life, I felt myself wishing I had what they did. Foster had complained about how overinvolved his parents were, and it'd definitely been that way with my mom, but I'd trade places with him in a heartbeat.

Listening more closely, it dawned on me that Foster was only giving them the highlights of his life, and I was sure he had his reasons. But I also felt the tension radiating off him. He'd slept a lot that weekend, and when I asked if he was okay, he'd confessed he was battling a depressive episode.

He'd had a psych appointment after work last week and took a telehealth call with a therapist in his room, but I

certainly didn't pry. Still, it was hard not to want to help him in some way. He'd done plenty for me. So I just kept things clean and cooked us meals, and it felt like I was doing my part.

Foster admitted that his episodes normally lasted two to three months, with more down days than up, and I felt guilty that I was so wrapped up in my own shit, I might not have noticed him being extra tired and quiet. It'd been an effort for him to make himself presentable for the family call—his hair was still a wreck—so maybe that was the reason he didn't offer them many details. Or maybe it was because I was there and he wasn't exactly comfortable. Another reason I didn't need to be present.

As soon as the call ended, Foster breathed out in relief. "That wasn't too bad, was it?"

"No." I nudged my thigh against his. "Why did you only give them the highlights?"

"What do you mean?"

"About me...about you..."

"I..." He bit his lip. "They would only worry."

"But you said they know about your depression."

"They do. I was first diagnosed when I was a teen."

I drew a pattern on his knee, trying to tread carefully. "Then they'd understand, right?"

"You don't know my mom. She'd worry, and text even more, which in turn would only make me feel guilty and more depressed." He frowned. "I just need to work through it on my own. I'm sorry you have to see me this way."

"Hey, don't do that. It's part of you." I kissed his cheek. The affection between us had grown since the tent incident,

and I'd admit I enjoyed it a little too much. "Just like experiencing homelessness is part of me."

"*Was* part of you."

"Huh?"

"You used present tense." He clenched his jaw. "You're not houseless anymore, not if I can help it."

"I can't think like that, or...not yet," I huffed out. "That's like you saying you're over your depression because you had one happy morning."

"That's not the same. I didn't choose to have—" He stopped abruptly and stared at me, the wheels spinning in his head. "That was dumb of me. You obviously didn't choose to experience homelessness, and...I think I understand what you mean now. It's your mindset, your survival mode. Same for me, but in a different way."

When our eyes met, I nodded.

Foster reached for my hand, then kissed me gently on the lips. "Thank you for understanding."

"I want to be here for you." Another kiss. "I'm no expert, but do you think your meds need to be boosted or changed?"

"They were increased last week, but results take time. That's the frustrating part."

I sighed. "Never an easy fix."

"Nope. And the other part is all about me and using techniques I learned in therapy. About how I choose to push through my days." He shook his head, the weariness evident in his eyes. "I can't miss work, so I generally use up all my spoons there."

Unfamiliar with that phrasing, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Oh, sorry. The spoons metaphor refers to how much emotional, physical, or mental energy a person can exert for a certain task or over a period of time. My therapist introduced me to the concept.”

How interesting. “So when you use up all your spoons, that means you’re spent for the day?”

“Uh-huh. And afterward, I only have the strength to do stuff that feels comforting.”

I’d never heard someone put it that way before. “Like what?”

“Like being cocooned in my covers,” he said, which explained all the napping. “A warm shower works sometimes too, or getting lost in an old movie or a book I’ve read a hundred times.”

“That makes sense.” I smiled. “I totally understand the getting-lost-in-a-book part.”

Foster winked. “But today I’d like to go on a walk with you and Oscar and get the endorphins flowing in my brain. That cool with you?”

I squeezed his hand. “Sounds perfect.”

FOSTER

I GOT DRESSED for our walk, embarrassed to have worn the same holey sweats too many days in a row. Not that Lachlan cared how I looked or dressed. But he did care how I felt. I was becoming more and more grateful to have him in my life. He was so understanding, kind, helpful, and pleasant to be around. It was nice having someone in the apartment to share chores and meals with. And then the nights when he wanted me the past couple of weeks—sometimes just to lie with him for a bit, other times to grind or suck or push into him—were addicting. Though I knew our time together would come to an end eventually, I still felt like we were building something. A lasting friendship, at least.

The sun was shining as we walked around the city, and that lifted my spirits. It was amazing how much the weather played into moods. Cleveland was unfortunately a pretty gray city, so it was an adjustment.

Lachlan seemed relieved when we stopped for coffee and muffins at a different shop this time—maybe because the other corner was too much of a reminder of his days on the street. Just like I had certain triggers, he did too.

When we passed a man holding up a bowl with loose change, Lachlan felt conflicted, I could see it in his eyes. I dug

in my pocket while he averted his gaze, and when the change jingled in the bowl, the man looked up and thanked me.

Then he glanced at Lachlan. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Lachlan smoothed a thumb beneath his chin. “Yeah, gave myself a cut.”

The man tugged at a lock of his unruly hair. “What I wouldn’t do for one of those.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” he mumbled, then kept walking.

Oscar and I jogged to catch up. “Hey, you all right?”

“Yeah, just...I feel guilty. What makes me more special—to get help from someone like you? Nothing. It’s all a crapshoot.”

We were quiet for the next block as I attempted to swallow the lump in my throat.

As we waited at the crosswalk, I blurted, ““You don’t love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or their fancy car, but because they sing a song only you can hear.””

The light changed, but he just stood stock-still and stared at me. “Is that another Oscar Wilde quote?”

I smiled. “It’s been attributed to him, probably falsely because I’ve never seen it in any of his works. Who knows, but it’s stuck with me.”

“I can see why. So what are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that your circumstances or mine don’t matter. We connected because something inside you spoke to something inside me, and we shouldn’t feel guilty for that.”

“Kismet,” he replied. When Oscar started whining because we weren’t moving, Lachlan chuckled. “I think he feels left out of this conversation. Technically, it was Oscar who saw something in me first.”

I patted Oscar’s head. “True. If it wasn’t for him...”

“You would’ve never noticed me?”

“Oh, I would’ve noticed you,” I insisted, and a stripe of pink lined his cheeks. “I don’t know if I would’ve been brave enough to strike up a conversation.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

When the traffic light cycled to red again, we crossed the street and headed toward my apartment. The walk had been a little pick-me-up, but I could feel the walls closing in on me again. My energy was draining with every footstep, but I pushed through.

Fucking depression.

“By the way,” I said, thinking about the unhoused man who’d greeted him. “Have you ever done that? Given the others a haircut?”

His eyes flashed to mine. “No. You were the first since...”

“Just curious.” I held open the door.

He was distracted the entire way up the elevator, so maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up.

By the time we got inside, I was wiped out, but I wanted to stay present after such an enjoyable morning, so instead of escaping to my room, I sank down on the couch. Soon enough, though, I fought to keep my eyes open.

“Did you use up all your spoons?”

I offered a tired smile. “Yeah.”

“I like that concept.”

I nodded. “Me too. It’s useful.”

He sank down beside me while Oscar went to his bowl of water and drank heartily.

“I felt that way surviving on the streets. By nightfall, I was tired down to my bones.”

“Exactly.” God, it felt good that he understood me. “So maybe I’ll just veg out or read for a little while.”

Lachlan’s eyes sprang to my bookshelf. “I can’t believe I never asked what happened to the ruined book.”

“It’s still there.” I motioned to the lowest shelf. “We ordered a new copy for the library.”

Lachlan stood and went to retrieve the book. Its pages were still warped, but they weren’t stuck together anymore. I could’ve tossed it, but it felt like a reminder of him. Maybe I’d even convince him to keep it when he decided it was time to go.

That thought sat heavy in my stomach, and as he padded back over with the book, I blurted, “Will you read to me?”

“Are you...serious?” A flush crawled over his face, his voice soft and timid.

“Only if you want to. No pressure.”

I breathed out and shut my eyes, partly so he wouldn’t feel put on the spot.

But then he cleared his throat and began reading, ““Is your ladyship at home this afternoon?”” and a thrill shot through me.

I sank into the rise and fall of his timbre, and after a few minutes had gone by and he'd paused to catch his breath, I said, "Your voice might end up on my comfort list."

"That might be a first for me." I could hear the wonder in his voice.

"Well, it's true." I opened an eye. "What's that quote you like so much from this book?"

"Hold on, I know the exact page."

I watched as he flipped through it with enthusiasm, my stomach performing swooping dive bombs.

"Here it is." He cleared his throat. "'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'"

"That's how I feel right in this moment," I murmured as my eyes shut, exhaustion falling over me. "Like I'm still in the gray, but I'm looking at the stars."

"*Foster.*" His voice was shy again, and I pictured the blush on the apples of his cheeks as I drifted off.

LACHLAN

I SET the book down when it was obvious Foster had fallen asleep.

“Like I’m still in the gray, but I’m looking at the stars.”

The man had nearly rendered me speechless, but I would’ve read to him for hours if he’d asked me to.

After placing the throw over him, I padded to the kitchen to pour a glass of water for my parched throat, and saw the grocery list he’d left on the counter. It would help him out if I shopped for those things while he napped.

I deliberated about it some more as I washed the glass and set it to dry on the rack. Decision made, I wrote him a note and then pocketed the list and the cash he kept in the drawer in case I needed anything. It felt strange using it, but that was part of our deal. The idea that he trusted me that much was not lost on me.

I headed to my room, where I lifted my backpack and absently stuffed it with supplies, an idea forming in my head. It might not come to fruition, but I entertained it anyway.

“Good boy,” I said to Oscar at the door. “Keep Foster company until I get back.”

I headed toward the grocery store on Euclid Avenue, actively looking for the man we'd seen earlier with the change bowl. I was so distracted that I walked past the entrance. Instead of doubling back, I continued on to the Main Avenue Bridge. The man in question was seated on a large rock, eating a bagel out of a paper wrapper, the empty bowl at his feet.

"Were you serious about what you said earlier?" I asked him. "About a haircut?"

His eyebrows rose as he studied me. "Definitely. Why?"

"I used to be a hairstylist." My grip tightened on my bag. "I've got my shears with me, and I'm more than happy to give you a cut. I brought water bottles, a towel, and shampoo as well."

His eyes brightened before he narrowed them. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. It would be good practice for me in case a job opportunity arises."

"Is that man with the dog helping you out?"

"Uh-huh...he's a friend. So I thought I'd pay it forward." I fidgeted a little, that guilt returning. "What do you say?"

"I'm game if you are." He stood and threw his wrapper in the nearby trash can. "Where do you want me?"

I looked around, my eye catching on an overturned construction barrel. "How about sitting on that thing?"

He got himself situated while I pulled the supplies out of my bag.

He washed his hair using the shampoo and water bottle, and then I got to work cutting off his coarse, tangled tufts. I

also trimmed his beard, then pulled out a hand mirror and disposable razor so he could shave himself.

“How do you feel?” I asked as he stared at his reflection.

“Like a new person.”

My heart felt full, like I’d done something decent and good.

“Can I be next?” a lady asked from behind me, and when I looked over my shoulder, a line had formed. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

“I’ll try my best, but my hands are messed up, so I don’t know how far I’ll get,” I said to the others. “They don’t hurt that bad yet, so I’ll keep going for now.”

“If you run out of steam, can I at least wash my hair?” asked a familiar young man. Unfortunately, he was addicted to drugs, though I didn’t know what kind. But I recognized the tremor in his hands.

“Absolutely.”

A lady with bushy red hair rolled up with a grocery cart and stood talking to someone in line. She collected scraps and traded them in for cash, which was a smart idea. But the cart was sometimes hard to push when it was overloaded, and one time I’d helped her get over a curb in the snow.

“Did you hear there was another attack?” she told the others in line, and my hand clenched around the comb. “Sprayed in the eyes outside the casino on Public Square.”

I felt sick to my stomach as they discussed the harrowing event, and when my eyes met Darius’s, who was listening avidly from beside her, he frowned and shook his head.

Soon enough, they moved on to the weather report, but it was hard to shake the news that there had been another victim.

I was able to cut four more heads of hair before my hand felt swollen and stiff. The others in line were just grateful to use my shampoo, and one even borrowed my shears to hack away at their own hair under my supervision. I helped the lady straighten her bangs when she got a little too scissor-happy.

“Well, I’m on borrowed time here, so I have to get back,” I said, beginning to clean my supplies.

“Will you come again?” one of them asked.

My stomach felt all wobbly, but I didn’t want to make any promises. “I’ll try.”

On my way to the grocery store, the world around me seemed richer, more resonant than it had in a long while, simply because I helped some people down on their luck feel more human again.

My head was swirling with so many thoughts between the haircuts and the assault, that being inside the crowded store didn’t register much. I made quick work of getting the items from Foster’s list, then trekked back to his apartment.

When I came through the door, Foster was sitting up, looking a bit less worse for wear. Oscar greeted me as I set the bags on the counter.

“I got your note. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.” I opened the fridge and started putting stuff away. “How about I make dinner soon?”

“Sure,” he replied around a yawn. “But we could also order in.”

“Nah, I feel like cooking.”

When our eyes met across the room, the corners of his lips tilted upward.

I opened the cupboard near the sink. “Need water. Want some?”

He rubbed at his eyes. “Please.”

I filled two glasses with ice water and padded over to hand him one. “I also went on another errand while I was out.”

“Yeah?” he asked after downing half the glass.

I nodded. “I visited the houseless under the bridge, and I... cut their hair.”

“Did you really?” He set his glass down and reached for my hand, pulling me toward him. “That’s amazing!”

Setting my glass aside, I easily fell into his arms, my face at his neck as I inhaled his spicy scent. “It felt pretty darn good. I know I wasn’t paid, and I need to keep applying for jobs, but...”

“No, don’t do that.” He rubbed circles on my back. “That was more important. We only placed parameters on our living arrangement because that’s what I thought you needed.”

“I did need it.” I drew away to look at him. “I don’t want to impose or get in the habit of—”

“I don’t give a fuck. It doesn’t feel that way at all.” He kissed my cheek. “How do your hands feel?”

“Pretty sore.” He reached for one and started massaging my knuckles. “Damn, that feels awesome. At least it was good practice and gives me an idea of what I’m up against.”

“Then it was worth it. It was a win-win for them and you.”

“Yeah. Did that nap help?”

“Maybe?” He made a frustrated sound. “I hate feeling like this, but I also know there’s no way around it. The new dosage might start helping, but I still have to push through.”

I trailed my fingernails over his collarbone. “Well, I’m here for you if you need anything.”

We snuggled on the couch for a while longer before I reluctantly untangled our limbs to start dinner. He pulled out his laptop to respond to emails and casually chatted with me while I prepped our food.

During dinner, he picked at his pasta, and I knew it was more about his mental health than about my cooking. “You’re not eating much. Want me to pack it up for later?”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t feel very hungry.”

“I get it.” I was much the same when I first moved in, albeit for different reasons. “You don’t need to apologize.”

I began clearing the dishes while he dug out storage containers for the leftovers.

“How about we do one of those comfort things on your list?” I said, pressing our shoulders together at the sink.

“You don’t have to cater to me.”

“What if I want to?”

When our eyes met, his lopsided smile made the butterflies flap in my stomach. “Can we watch a mindless movie and then go to bed?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Foster averted his eyes. “*My* bed?”

I grew still. “You want me to sleep with you?”

“I liked it last time, but if you’re not comfortable...”

“I liked it too.”

That settled, we watched a comedy, and hearing Foster chuckle despite his mood was heartening. Then I tucked us into bed, and this time, I curled Foster in my arms. His dreamy sigh as he got settled was everything I needed to hear and more.

FOSTER

I WOKE up with his warm body beside me again, and it was becoming addicting.

Lachlan had slept in my bed every night since I'd asked him last weekend. And though my depression was still hanging on like a storm cloud overhead, his presence had become a comfort. It helped tremendously that he seemed to understand my struggle and allowed me to work through it myself—without trying to solve it like my ex, though he'd been well-intentioned. With Lachlan, his mere presence made me more determined to push through and live in the brighter moments, however brief they were.

And speaking of brighter moments, we had done plenty of jerking off and grinding because being naked in bed beside him made me hard as fuck some nights. And now I was on my back, Lachlan on his side, facing me, his erection poking my thigh.

He hummed against my shoulder, and when I groaned in reply, he rolled on top of me. “Ah, fuck. Morning.” We were both so hard, it was like steel against steel.

“Morning.” And when he blessed me with that dazzling smile as he looked down at me, I wanted to crawl inside him

and live there for a while. See the world through his eyes, convince him he was worthy.

My hands wound around to his ass cheeks and squeezed. His skin was smooth, and I liked teasing his crease with my fingertips as I rocked against him. We rutted and kissed, and I could've gotten off after another minute, but then his hand reached down to circle both our cocks, making it that much better.

“Need to be closer to you,” he murmured, and I felt the beating of wings in my stomach. Sometimes when he was in the moment and let his guard down a little more, it was hard not to feel completely swept away by him.

“Same,” I huffed out, affection coursing through me. “Can’t get enough of you.”

I sighed as he drew back to align our tips together, and just as I was about to make a joke about him comparing sizes, he performed some magical trick where the head of my cock slid inside his foreskin and slotted against his shaft.

My eyes rolled in the back of my head. “Holy fuck, that feels so good.” I’d never had a guy dock me before, but if this was what it felt like, I was all in.

Lachlan shivered, then buried his head in my neck, mumbling something nonsensical. All the blood in my dick seemed to rush to the crown, making my glans ultrasensitive. How was this so erotic? So intimate?

“Wait, don’t move yet,” I said as he gently rocked his hips. “Just want to feel you like this for another minute.”

He sagged against me, his fingertips brushing my jaw as our mouths rested together, not really kissing, just breathing the same air. I felt like I was floating on a cloud, a fluffy white

cloud above all the gray. A perfect moment suspended in time, that I'd undoubtedly remember forever.

When Lachlan started moving, I joined in, meeting him thrust for thrust, both of our hands helping keep our shafts connected. My breath stuttered every time we made contact, no matter how light or soft the impact, and soon enough, he was pulling his foreskin back and our come was mixing against my stomach as we panted shakily against each other's lips.

After we caught our breath, I reached for a shirt to wipe us down, and then he tumbled against the sheets beside me.

"Well, damn," I said. "Did I mention how much I like having you in my bed?"

"I do too. I wasn't sure if it was a good idea. I mean, we shouldn't get too used to this, right?"

When Lachlan wouldn't meet my eyes, I rolled on top of him and planted one on his lips. "Why? You plan on never seeing me again?" I tried to keep my tone light. "Leaving me high and dry after you find a job?"

"It would suck, but...we said roommates with benefits, and I wouldn't be living here anymore."

"Oh, I see... Our verbal agreement is set in stone."

"You know what I mean." He smiled and rolled his eyes. "I don't want to assume anything or make you feel like..."

"You're not. I'm just trying to live in the moment and spend time with you because I happen to enjoy it. If that's okay with you?"

I was starting to feel more for Lachlan than I was letting on, but I didn't want to scare him off. Plus, he came with a lot

of baggage—we both did—and I didn't know what would happen a month from now.

“It's more than okay.” He pecked my lips. “But I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'm scared to lose your support.”

“I'm scared of that too.”

“Good, because right now you're my only friend.”

Fuck. “I'm sorry, Lachlan. I know it's been rough.”

“It's okay. I just wanted you to know that if anything, I hope we can still stay in touch, hang out or whatever.”

“I would definitely want that.”

We took showers, got dressed, and took Oscar for a walk, stopping for coffee and muffins, as usual. *Christ, listen to me. He's right. I shouldn't become too used to it.*

Back in the apartment, I hit the button on the landline when I saw a message flashing. Lachlan froze as he listened to the woman's voice.

“Sounds like someone is trying to schedule a job interview with you.”

He pushed the button and listened again. I handed him a notepad and pen so he could write down the number and address.

“It's in Rocky River,” he said absently, as if thinking through how far the west-side location was from downtown Cleveland. “I'll look up the bus route.”

“You can always...” I trailed off when he gave me that look. He didn't want me to take him, and he couldn't drive himself because his license was expired.

One step at a time. He knew perfectly well how to fend for himself.

“I’ll feed Oscar if you want to call her back.”

Without waiting for a response, I headed to the kitchen, where I refilled the water and put food in Oscar’s bowl, trying not to eavesdrop. It was his second offer. The first was for a rental space in a co-op for hairstylists. But he didn’t have the resources for that. Not yet. The request had come by email a couple of days ago, and though he turned them down immediately, he seemed glum about it that night. Maybe because he thought that was the best he was going to get after being away from the industry for a while.

“More jobs will come through. You should only take one you feel good about.”

“I’m not sure that’s good advice.”

“What do you mean?” I smirked. “It’s excellent advice.”

“I should take anything that’ll get me a steady paycheck, don’t you think?”

“Not if it makes you feel awful.”

I’d frowned thinking about how he’d walked out of the salon the shelter referred him to and that he was probably regretting it. I didn’t think he should.

He’d bounced back after that conversation, sending more résumés and cutting hair at the bridge again.

Lachlan was just hanging up with the Rocky River salon when I finished with the dog.

“I scheduled an interview for next weekend.”

“Awesome.” I thumped his shoulder. “Congrats.”

“What’s on your agenda for today?” Lachlan asked, but I was distracted by an idea forming in my head.

“Since you have a job interview when I’m out of town next weekend, that means you need a cell phone and something to wear.” His wardrobe consisted of a steady rotation of the clothes he came with and stuff I’d lent him.

“What? No way I can aff—”

“It’s part of room and board,” I said, and when he threw me a skeptical look, I squeezed his shoulder. “What if something happens and I need to get a hold of you? The phone will be added to my plan until it can be transferred to you. That way, you won’t miss any more calls.”

He paced the room as he considered it. “Fine, but I’m going to keep a tally of what I owe you.”

I smiled. “I wouldn’t expect any less.”

An hour later, we were walking in the pleasant weather toward Tower City, an indoor shopping mall near Public Square. We shopped for a cheap phone and clearance sale clothes because he insisted.

“Thank you,” he said, briefly knotting our fingers together on our way out. But I hung on to his hand until the crosswalk, where we were separated by a large group of people wearing similar shirts. Some sort of fundraiser at the casino, if I had to guess.

“Have you been to the Rock Hall?” I asked as we neared East 9th Street. If we headed east, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame would soon appear in the distance.

“Not inside. The harbor next to it is nice, though.”

“Wanna get lost in a museum for a couple of hours?” I asked before adding, “I get a discount from the university.”

It only took him a second before he replied, “Let’s do it.”

We strolled down 9th Street to the North Coast Harbor, taking in the pretty view of Lake Erie, before turning our attention to the museum, whose architecture resembled the Louvre in Paris.

Tickets in hand, we walked through the displays, reading about the different musicians and studying their costumes and instruments.

At the Beatles exhibition, I smiled. “My parents would love this. They’d play *Abbey Road*, and we’d dance around the house like a bunch of goofballs.”

Lachlan got this distant look in his eyes. “Same, in the kitchen with my mom. But *Sgt. Pepper’s*.”

We grinned at each other before heading to an alcove where a documentary on the band was playing. We whispered favorite songs to each other and laughed at their antics in the recording studio.

The Rock Hall was hard to do all in one go, so by the fourth level, I suggested a break and some lunch. We ate our sandwiches at a table facing the water. Again, I got that feeling that he had drifted off somewhere in the space of his own thoughts. I just hoped he wasn’t regretting the purchases we’d made earlier.

“How about we finish setting up your phone?”

The store had already helped with most of it, so when he pulled it out of the bag, I helped him punch in my cell and work numbers.

“Anyone else you want to add?”

He shook his head and glanced out the window with a sad expression, and I was sorry I’d asked. He had lost contact with most people in his life, even his father.

I placed a hand on his wrist. “You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry.” He looked out at the view again. “It’s just... see those benches down there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I used to sit there and read, and it was one of the only times I was able to let go for a little while and not worry so much about my next meal or surviving.”

“Sounds like a nice memory,” I said, picturing him paging through the book I’d lent him.

Lachlan nodded. “Before reality set in again.”

I waited because I had the feeling he had more to say.

“There was another incident on an unhoused person. Last weekend.”

My eyes sprang to his. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I felt guilty.”

I knew he meant because of not filing a police report, or maybe because he was safe now and they were not, but I didn’t say anything, letting him work through it.

He stood suddenly. “There’s something I need to do.”

“Want me to—”

“I need to do it by myself.”

“Okay, sure.”

We cleaned up our litter, then headed for the exit. I walked with him until we got to Superior Avenue.

“I’ll see you at home in a couple of hours.”

I liked that he called my apartment *home*. It helped settle my nerves a little.

“If you need anything, text me.”

“I will.” He patted his front pocket, where he’d slipped his cell. “And, Foster? Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

As I walked back to my apartment, I felt a bit rattled about whatever Lachlan thought he needed to do. But given that he’d turned in the direction of the bridge, I could only assume he was headed to the shelter.

I just needed to trust that he was doing what was right for him.

LACHLAN

I KNEW I'd confused Foster, but what I'd told him was true. This was something I needed to do by myself—for myself.

Tessa didn't always work on Saturdays, so I was taking a chance by showing up at the shelter, but I hoped I'd gambled right and it would be worth the effort.

My stomach clenched when I saw her office door open. “Hey there! Sorry to spring in on you like this. Do you have a minute?”

She smiled. “Of course. Wasn't certain if I'd ever see you again. Have a seat.”

“Okay, sure...”

I was beginning to second-guess myself, and Tessa must've noticed my discomfort, because her eyebrows drew together. “Everything all right?”

Time to be brave.

“Yeah, I, um...I'm sure you've heard that there was another incident last weekend.”

She winced. “I've definitely heard the gossip around here.”

I shifted in the plastic chair. “You told me once that Officer Holt wants to build trust with those of us experiencing

homelessness.”

There was a hopeful gleam in her eyes. “Is that why you’re here?”

“Yeah. I’d like to file a police report about my attack, but I’m also nervous, so I thought maybe...maybe you could help me figure out how to...”

She stood suddenly. “Stay right there.”

When she strode out of the office, I had the sudden urge to run. I knew it was only my survival instinct kicking in, but I couldn’t help myself. My fingers gripped the sides of my seat as I counted to ten. When that didn’t work, I stood and began pacing, twisting my bracelets and wondering what was taking her so long.

“Sorry,” she said as soon as she returned. “I thought maybe he was still here.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah. He volunteers sometimes, as you know.”

“That’s okay. I did wonder how to best reach out...if I decide to talk to someone about the assault.”

“I’m so glad to hear you’re willing to talk about it.” She patted my arm. “If one of you files a report, maybe it would prompt the others to be less afraid.”

“Maybe. That was my thought too. Or at least give them some leads.”

She lifted her phone off the desk. “How can Officer Holt get a hold of you?”

I considered my options—Foster’s address, his landline... until I remembered my new cell.

“Oh! I have a phone now.” My cheeks heated as I tugged it out of my pocket, then awkwardly thumbed the screen. “Let me give you my number.”

She punched it into a text exchange she’d started with her cousin. “Thank you again, for being willing. I know it’s hard.”

I gave a curt nod. “Fear is a powerful thing.” It felt good admitting that out loud. There was a freedom to it.

Tessa walked me to the door. “I’ve seen some new haircuts on folks around here.”

I dipped my head. “It’s good practice; plus, I like doing something worthwhile.”

“No need to convince me.” She winked. “I’m glad you’re getting back on your feet.”

“Thanks.” With one final wave, I was on my way.

My phone trilled as I was headed over the bridge, startling me.

I punched the Answer button. “H-hello?”

“Lachlan, this is Officer Holt. How can I help you?”

“I wanted to talk to you about the assaults on the unhoused population, myself included.” I wished my voice wasn’t so damned shaky.

“Where are you now?”

“I just left the shelter.”

“I’m right around the corner. Can you meet me?”

My heart was going crazy. “Uh, sure.”

Fuck, what was I doing meeting with an officer of the law? I couldn’t help thinking I was in trouble for something, even

though I hadn't done anything wrong. But that mindset was hard to shake. Not that I'd ever done anything illegal when I was houseless, more like I'd always felt like a public nuisance. I'd heard the phrase *move along* one too many times to count.

I saw his cruiser waiting at the corner as I crossed over the bridge. When he motioned to me, I looked all around before sliding into the passenger seat.

"Try to relax. I only want to talk."

"O...okay." Still, my hands curled on my lap in protective mode.

"Tessa said you might be interested in filing a report?"

"Yes." My voice was so unsteady.

"That would really help the case. The more eyewitnesses the better."

"I'm nervous it'll keep happening and the guy gets even bolder."

"Bolder than the pepper spray?"

"Yeah. Or maybe he has, and we just don't know it."

"I agree." When his eyes met mine, I only saw compassion in them. "Can I give you a ride to the station now?"

I briefly screwed my eyes shut. "Sure."

Officer Holt pulled into traffic, and the closer we got to the Ontario station, the more determined I felt. But also petrified. *I can do this.*

He made small talk as he drove, likely keeping the crucial details he wanted to ask about for the actual paperwork. It made me curious about how many crimes went unreported.

“Can I ask you a question—for a friend? It involves a different sort of situation.”

He briefly glanced in my direction. “Go for it.”

“If my friend was abused by a significant other...”

“Like domestic violence?”

“Yeah...” My pulse thumped at my temple. “How unrealistic would it be to file against that person say, a year later?”

“It depends. Did this *friend* ever involve the police in disputes, take photos of injuries, or leave a paper trail of any kind?”

My shoulders slumped. “No.”

But Clint might’ve taken photos of the injuries he’d sustained from me that night. I wouldn’t put it past him.

“That makes it harder, but not impossible.” Officer Holt pulled into a space in front of the police station, then stared at me for a long moment, likely figuring out I was talking about myself. “I’m sorry that happened to him.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, averting my eyes.

The building was a flurry of activity, with multiple floors of courtrooms, offices, and even a jail. It did not feel comfortable being inside, so I just kept my head down until we got to Officer Holt’s desk in a crowded room with other cops all around us.

Fuck, I almost couldn’t breathe.

“Wait right here,” he said, and I watched as he walked over to another officer to discuss something.

I felt fidgety, so I pulled out my cell, suddenly wishing Foster were here with me. I scrolled to his number and opened up a text box. **I'm at the police station, filing a report about the assault.**

He responded immediately. **Is that where you went?**

Not exactly. The social worker at the shelter has a cousin who's a cop. I've seen him around a couple of times. I felt more comfortable asking him for help.

Good idea. I'm proud of you.

Yeah, I was proud of me too. Or I would be once I got this part over with.

Foster

“HOW’S YOUR FRIEND?” Doug asked me over lunch the following week. This time we met at a sandwich shop closer to the hospital.

“Lachlan is much better, thanks for asking.”

I’d kept him updated for a couple of days after the aerosol assault, but we hadn’t had time to really catch up this past month.

“Good to hear. He still staying with you?” he asked, his tone even.

I nodded around a bite. “I’m giving him the opportunity to get back on his feet.”

And between job applications, haircuts under the bridge, and filing a report at the police station, he was well on his way. He was keeping himself busy, that was for sure.

Doug set down his soup spoon. “It’s more than that for you, isn’t it?”

Fuck, how could I even explain? But Doug and I always played it straight with each other. “It just sort of evolved into... We... *I*...”

He arched a brow. “You’re hooking up?”

I cringed because it felt like he’d reduced whatever this was between Lachlan and me to just sex, and it was more than that.

“We’ve been intimate, yes.” My face felt hot. “But mostly just spending time together. I care about what happens to him.”

“Can you see a future with this guy?”

Could I? I hadn’t allowed myself to really go there because so much of what happened felt so temporary, which was unsettling.

“I dunno. The timing’s not ideal. He got out of a bad situation and ended up living on the street, and I’m...well, I’ve been going through a rough patch too.”

His eyes filled with concern. “Your depression?”

I’d shared some with him over the years, and even recently when I had to cancel plans because it was difficult to get out of bed, let alone out of the apartment.

“Uh-huh. I mean, it’s part of me, but I feel bad he has to see me like that.”

My depression had been more manageable the last few days, but I knew I wasn’t out of the woods yet. My head wasn’t entirely clear, and I still wanted to cocoon myself under my blankets, though to a lesser extent, so the med change seemed to be helping.

“Has he said anything?”

I recognized that protective tone all too well—I’d heard it from Doug before, when I finally called it quits with my ex.

“No, no, not at all. Lachlan’s been really supportive. It feels so authentic and real with him.” I turned away from his scrutiny. “We’ve been vulnerable in front of each other plenty of times.”

“I can tell you care about him.”

“Yeah, I do.”

If I admitted that to Lachlan, would it scare him off? I knew he felt indebted to me because of the living arrangement, the cell and clothes, so did that muddy the waters for him?

“When he does get back on his feet, will he be looking for his own place?”

I crumpled up my sandwich wrapper. “I think he’d want that. To feel some agency over his life.”

“That makes sense.” He stood to dispose of our trash. “I wouldn’t want you to move too fast.”

“No worries there,” I replied, though I believed that people could feel in their gut early on when something was right—or wrong.

Out on the sidewalk, we said our goodbyes. “Catch you later, Doug.”

I went back to work in a daze, mulling over our conversation and realizing just how much Lachlan figured into my daily thoughts and plans. I was falling for him, and I didn’t know what I meant for him outside of friendship, but no way I’d want him to feel any pressure from me.

“You’re my only friend.”

I organized a bookshelf, helped a few students find resources, and before I knew it, the afternoon had flown by and it was nearly time to trek home.

“All set for the conference this weekend?” my supervisor asked on my way out.

“Yep, should be productive.” It was an annual conference that allowed attendees to network, share resources, and learn new concepts, and for sure there would be some familiar faces, librarians I’d met at other events or even from college. CSU employees took turns attending, and this year it was mine, but the timing felt off. Or maybe that was only my insecurities talking. However, given that it was the entire reason I first asked Lachlan to move in, I certainly couldn’t bow out now.

When I got home, I found Lachlan on the couch in front of his laptop—with Oscar beside him, of course. His grin upon seeing me made my stomach flutter. Damn, he was incredibly handsome.

“Dinner is simmering on the stove,” he said. “And guess what? I have another job interview.”

“Awesome news!” I petted Oscar. “Where?”

“A barbershop on Carnegie Avenue called Urban Cuts.”

“Urban Cuts?” I tried to picture where it might be located. “Sounds familiar.”

“It’s nothing fancy, which suits me just fine. I got my start working in one. It’s a whole different vibe, and this guy sounded cool on the phone.”

I leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Anyone would be lucky to have you.”

He flushed. “Thanks.”

As we ate and talked about our day, I felt this strange foreboding, like he was bound to get one of these jobs and be gone soon. I should’ve been happy for him—and I absolutely

was—but I also wanted to keep him all to myself for a little while longer.

After we cleared our plates, I retired to the couch and scrolled through my phone to put on some music.

“I recognize this Beatles song,” Lachlan said. “‘With A Little Help from My Friends,’ from the—”

“*Sgt. Pepper’s* album,” I cut in with a wink. “Figured some nostalgia was in order.”

He held out his hand, urging me to stand, and when I did, he said, “Let’s dance.”

I chuckled. “What’s gotten into you?”

He grinned as he moved his feet. “You’re the one who started it.”

He pulled me into his arms and swung me around the room. It was clumsy, our feet not always lining up, but it was fucking perfect. I could almost picture him and his mom hamming it up together. She must’ve loved him so much, and I could see why.

That night, freshly showered and naked in bed, I wrapped him tightly in my arms. “Just wanna hold and kiss you.”

“Are you okay?” he murmured.

“Yeah, just...” I cleared the frog in my throat. “I’m leaving in a couple of days.”

His gaze flashed to mine. “Are you having second thoughts about me staying here while you’re gone?”

“What? No! That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what do you mean?” He worried his lip between his teeth.

“That I’ll miss you, okay?” I kissed his lips. “Miss this.”

His eyes widened. “Foster, I—”

In a move that surprised even me, I rolled on top of Lachlan and stared down at him. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve grown pretty fond of you. I like hanging out with you. I hope that doesn’t scare you off. I’m only trying to be honest.”

His eyes searched mine, and I could’ve kicked myself for confessing too much. I adjusted my arm to roll away, but his legs encircled my thighs, pinning me to him.

“I’m pretty fond of you too,” he said against my ear, making me shiver.

“Good. Now let me make you feel good.” I started from the top of his head and kissed his nose, lips, and jaw. Then his shoulders, collarbones, and the soft hair under his arms. “Mmmm.” The way he smelled...fuck, like an aphrodisiac.

“Feels so good, but also...” He squirmed against my mouth.

Lachlan was ticklish there, so before he dissolved into hysterics—though I would’ve enjoyed seeing that too—I changed direction, feathering my lips across his chest, enjoying the smattering of coarse fur against my chin from his pecs down to his groin. His stomach trembled as I brushed my nose across his belly, over to his rib cage. “I can’t feel your hip bones anymore.”

“That’s what happens when you eat more than one meal a day. Oh *fuck*,” he bit out as I licked the tip of his cock, then a stripe down his length.

So responsive. He panted, his moans becoming even more animated as I sucked his cock and licked his balls thoroughly. When I moved lower to kiss his taint, I didn’t know how he’d

respond to my mouth being there. But he simply lifted his knees to his shoulders in invitation. Fuck yes.

I dived straight in, circling his rim, getting it soft enough for me to poke my tongue inside.

“Oh my fucking God,” he said, shuddering. “I could come just from this.”

“Oh yeah? Show me,” I said, then went to town eating his ass with my lips and teeth and tongue, probing and nibbling and kissing his hole like it was my favorite thing in the world. And maybe it was quickly becoming that, especially with the way he was responding with grunts and sobs as his hands tugged at my hair.

My fist curled around his cock, stroking him at the same time, and though it was sloppy, I didn't think he was complaining. When Lachlan cried out and spurting all over his stomach with my tongue deep in his ass, it was so goddamned sexy.

And I was stiff as an iron rod as I sat up and started jerking my cock.

“Come on my face,” he said in a ragged voice.

I knee-walked closer as I pumped my shaft, near enough for him to stick out his tongue every other stroke and lick my glans. A litany of stars sparked behind my eyes as I exploded partway in his mouth, partway on his cheek and chin.

He pulled me to him, and we lay there warm and clammy, with our come sticking to our skin, completely sated.

LACHLAN

AS SOON AS Foster left for his flight this morning, it felt lonely without him. Which was wild, since I'd been sleeping outside in a tent barely over a month ago. But I had quickly gotten sucked into this domestic routine with him, enjoyed his company, and would never be able to repay him. And fuck, the way he kissed me and made my body sing...talk about being shot to the stars.

I'd watched him slip into his suitcase the hoodie we sometimes shared between laundry days, and the gesture warmed me to my core, but I didn't call him on it.

"I've grown pretty fond of you."

I tried to shake off the melancholy feeling. I had interviews the next couple of days, which I needed to focus on, and I was nervous as hell. I felt out of my element despite this being the only career I'd ever known.

Foster had encouraged me to use a car service, but a bus was much cheaper. I looked up routes and would use his pass to ride the west-side line to Rocky River.

I gave Oscar one last scratch beneath the chin for good luck, then went out the door. I was dressed in black jeans with a simple blue button-down Foster said brought out my eyes.

I'd trimmed my hair to chin length last night and had made sure my beard was neat and presentable.

I looked tame compared to the old me. I'd worn all sorts of posh designs—not anything too pricey, but on trend. Looking back now, it felt superficial. None of it mattered anymore. Not like it did to live life on my own terms.

The bus ride took thirty minutes but was pretty efficient given where I needed to go. I exited on Detroit Road near the locally famous pink building, then walked the rest of the distance to Le Chic salon. The area was a mix of quaint and trendy, and though it was a struggle, I held my head high as I stepped into the lobby.

Tiffany, the manager, greeted me near the front door, and I followed her to a back room, where she conducted the interview.

“What have you been doing the past year?” She looked up from behind her computer, where she'd pulled up my résumé.

Living on the street, lady.

“I took a break because I was going through something personal.” It was the response Foster and I had come up with, and hopefully it worked. “But now I'm ready to get back to doing what I love.”

She scrutinized me as if searching for what I could possibly mean, but I was not obligated to tell potential employers anything personal.

“I see you were employed at A Cut Above in Akron for several years. I know a Marcie Smith who works there.”

I felt a stitch in my chest. “She's great. It was a nice place to work.”

I could already see the wheels spinning in Tiffany's head. She would definitely contact Marcie to ask about me, and Marcie would tell her I was a mess and was fired because of it.

She asked me more questions about my work experience and skills, then showed me around the salon, but it felt insincere on both parts. No way I'd get the job after that interview. I had left her with too many questions.

On the way back to the city, I went over my responses, wondering what I could've said differently, but it only made me angrier. People went through shit in their lives. It didn't mean they were bad news. Maybe it would've been better to admit everything. Would I feel any worse than I did now?

I was in a funk the rest of the day, and it only felt worse without Foster there. Oscar made up for it, though, and if I didn't have him, it would've been even lonelier.

How did it go? Foster texted me that night. Oscar and I slept in his bed without him, and I reveled in Foster's scent infused in the sheets and pillows. I found it potent and comforting, which was another sign I was in too deep, that I was feeling things for Foster I shouldn't have, and it would be hard to break away when it was time to leave.

But I didn't want to get sucked into another scenario where I didn't have anything of my own besides my job. It was too easy to get swept up in this life with him. Of course, he was nothing like Clint, so it was more about me falling too easily. Though...I never felt like this before. Foster wasn't perfect, he had his own struggles, but him sharing so openly, his compassion shining through, only made him more endearing.

Not sure it was the right place for me...or if I was right for them.

That's okay, it takes time to find something that fits.

He always had the right thing to say.

I still feel I shouldn't be picky. Not that they'll offer me the job. It's the kind of place I might've liked before. Trendy and high-end, but I'm not sure that's me anymore.

Why shouldn't you be picky? Why be miserable unless you absolutely have to? Take your time and figure it out. I like having you around.

That warmed my stomach.

Your sheets smell like you, I typed, then held my breath.

Fuck, I love hearing that. Your hoodie smells like you.

So you admit you took it! I grinned at my phone.

I needed something that reminded me of you.

Guess we're both pathetic.

I think you spelled smitten wrong, he replied, and my cheeks hurt from smiling.

LOL! Suppose I did. Had I really admitted that? **How's your conference?**

Boring. But aren't they all?

The next day, I wore the black jeans with a different shirt to my interview, and maybe because I had gotten the other one out of the way, I felt pretty confident going into this one. I decided to just be myself even if I fell flat on my face.

This shop was within walking distance—well, at least on decent-weather days. About fifteen minutes by foot up

Carnegie Avenue, I spotted the striped awning from the other side of the street, so I paused to check it out. The blond-brick veneer was in decent shape, along with a welcome mat and planted flower boxes near the front door.

I crossed at the light and stepped inside Urban Cuts.

I immediately heard laughter between two men in barber chairs, and then the other clients waiting their turn joined in. The front desk had no receptionist, so more than likely, they didn't take appointments. The men waiting probably just chose a day to show up and tested their luck. But given the comfortable atmosphere and easy banter, these men didn't mind socializing in the meantime.

"Can I help you?" asked a man with dark, wavy hair.

"I'm here to see Carlos about a job."

"I'm Carlos." He motioned toward where everyone else was waiting. "Have a seat. I'll finish up and be right with you."

"Sounds good." I sat down beside an older gentleman with balding gray hair and listened to his conversation with the man next to him. The men seemed familiar with each other's lives, talking about family members and weekend plans. That was the case in many salons between customers and stylists, but this felt different, more like a neighborhood vibe, and when the gentleman beside me included me in the conversation, I relaxed even more.

I watched how Carlos and the other barber at the station beside him expertly used their clippers, and I momentarily panicked. Not that I never used them, but I hadn't practiced lately. Clippers and razors tended to be used for closer, more refined shaves and mostly in barbershops. Scissors were

preferred at salons, so I didn't know if my style would mesh. Or maybe I'd just have to adapt.

"Follow me," Carlos said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

The other barber smiled as I passed by, and two of the customers wished me luck.

"Thanks," I said with a grin.

The third chair at the far corner was empty, so more than likely, they hoped to fill the vacancy with a new employee. Could that be me?

Deep breaths. You got this.

Carlos sat down at a desk in the back office, and I took the chair in front of him. There were papers everywhere in what I'd call an organized mess.

"I printed out your résumé without running out of ink, so that was a win," Carlos said.

I chuckled. "I swear the printer business is a conspiracy."

"Right?" He had a nice smile, but I could tell he was a no-nonsense type of guy. "So tell me a little about yourself."

"I...well, I've been cutting hair at different places since I graduated from high school."

"I see that." He looked down at the paper. "Why this barbershop?"

"It felt right? Okay, that sounds stupid." I huffed out a breath. "I've had a rough year and haven't worked in a while."

Well, shit, was I really admitting this? But somehow it seemed the obvious thing to do.

"I see." He tossed the résumé aside. "That explains the gap."

“I...was in a toxic relationship with a man who didn’t treat me well, and when I left, I ran out of resources and ended up on the street for a while.” There, I said it. It was hard to look at him, though, so I stared at a poster just over his shoulder. “But I’m getting myself together and looking for a job. The place where I’m staying is within walking distance. I’m a hard worker and just need someone to give me a chance again.”

When I finally looked at him, Carlos’s gaze was fixed on my hands, which were resting on my knees. “Looks like you were banged up pretty good. Sorry that you fell on hard times. I’ve had my share too, even thought I’d lose this place once.”

I swallowed roughly as relief flooded my stomach. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No need to be sorry. The point is, I can understand adversity.” He motioned to the open door. “Probably all those men out there can too.”

That was likely why I’d felt comfortable. There didn’t seem to be any judgment, just genuine conversation and cordiality.

“I have a couple more candidates to interview, but I definitely like what I see so far. Sometimes chemistry is more important than an impressive résumé.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Agreed.”

He tipped his chin. “How are your hands holding up?”

“I’ve been cutting hair again, helping those experiencing homelessness. Isn’t too bad at all.” Sure, they’d ached at first, but the more I did it, the better it got.

“Yeah? I’ve always wanted to do something like that. To give back. Good for you!”

“Thanks.”

Carlos seemed like a good guy, and as he walked me to the door, I felt more confident than I had in a long time. Even if I didn't get the job, I wanted to thank him for making me feel valued. That was worth its weight in gold.

FOSTER

I SMILED at the photo that came through by text. It was of Lachlan and Oscar at the waterfront by the Rock Hall. It filled me with such a sense of contentment, something I couldn't easily explain.

It was the last full day of my conference—I was flying home in the morning—and if I wasn't expected to participate in a panel discussion that afternoon, I might've changed my flight to get to them earlier.

I missed Lachlan, but I also liked having him in my space when I was gone. I had texted him as many times as he'd sent photos of Oscar, so I thought maybe it was mutual. Plus, he was sleeping in my bed even with me gone.

The workshops were boring, but it was nice catching up over lunch and dinner with people I hadn't seen in a while. Still, it was almost too much socializing, and though I was coming out of the woods mental health-wise, I needed to head back to my room often enough to recharge my batteries. The hotel sheets weren't nearly as soft or comforting as my own, but I made do.

The panel topic was focused on getting university students to read more fiction. It was difficult when their studies were filled with deadlines and research papers to write. Another

librarian had some success instituting a monthly book club, and for some reason my thoughts drifted to the classics I'd donated to Lachlan's shelter. It'd felt good to do so, to know the books would bring them joy.

When it was my turn to talk, I emphasized making areas available for students who loved fiction to gather in the library, by holding events and making popular novels easy to find with enticing displays like they had in bookstores. It was an idea I'd floated to my supervisor, and it was going to be written in the budget next year. Again, my mind drifted to the houseless, wondering if the shelter provided such a space for them.

My flight the next morning was on time, and after landing, I couldn't get in my car fast enough to drive home. I parked in the underground garage, and as I made my way to the elevator, a moment of doubt overwhelmed me. One day Lachlan wouldn't be there to greet me. He would move on with his life. He wasn't beholden to me in the least, but sometimes I wished we'd met under different circumstances.

"Hey there," I said when I came through the door. Oscar bounded toward me, followed by Lachlan, who pulled me into a hug. And there it was, the smell I'd missed that was more potent than the hoodie I'd slept in. Earthy, like fresh rain on the sidewalk.

Oscar shoved his nose in the middle of our embrace and whined.

I laughed as I drew back and crouched down to properly greet him. "I missed you. Both of you."

"We missed you too," Lachlan replied, and heat filled my stomach.

I stood and reached for my luggage. “Let me put my things away.”

“You hungry? Didn’t know if you ate before your flight.”

“I’m starving. Should we go get something?”

“You want to go out? You haven’t used up your spoons this weekend?”

I felt a stitch in my chest that he remembered the correct phrasing. “I have, definitely. But I also want some fresh air and to stretch my legs after being cramped in that plane.”

I rolled my suitcase to my room, and noting he’d made up the bed, I had the sudden urge to cocoon myself in those sheets. But I pushed on, freshening up in the bathroom. When I came out, he was standing by the door with his sneakers on. I smiled at how bright white they looked. All those little things that made Lachlan him.

Unable to resist, I pulled him into a hug and buried my face in his neck.

“Hey, you all right?” His arms encircled me. “We don’t have to go out. I can make something here.”

“No, I want to. Just needed to be close to you and breathe in your scent.” I drew back, pecked his lips, and noticed the wonder in his eyes. Likely, he was feeling the same way—*was this real?* “I also want to hear all about your second interview.”

We talked on the way to get food, and it felt good to inhale fresh air. I told him about my boring conference, and he recounted his job interview at the barbershop.

“Carlos made me feel comfortable,” he said, flushing, and I could tell he was more interested in this job than he was in

the other. I hoped he got what he wanted, even if it meant him moving on.

The idea still sank like a lead balloon in my stomach. I pushed through the feeling. “Did he ask about the time gap in your résumé?”

“He did, and I...told him the truth.” He worried his lip between his teeth as if second-guessing that decision. “But it seemed like he totally got it—got me.”

“I’m glad.” I thumped his shoulder. “I can tell you really want it.”

“Well, yeah. But if not, I’m grateful he gave me the space to be myself. I think I might be honest in interviews from now on.”

I kissed his cheek. “Sounds like a good plan no matter what.”

I pulled open the door to the sandwich shop, and we found a window seat, ordered food, and continued listing the pros and cons of each interview and how he felt about the manager of the Rocky River salon knowing his ex-friend.

“Just shows what a small world it can be sometimes...” I mused. “Do you think she’ll contact her?”

“Definitely. No way I’ll be offered that job.”

“I don’t get it.” I picked at my straw. “How could Marcie really know you and doubt what’s truly in your heart?”

He hitched a shoulder. “She was Clint’s friend first, and like I said, he could be pretty charming and convincing. I mean, I certainly was hoodwinked.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“Is what it is.” He cleared his throat as if to force the raw emotion away. “Now tell me more about your weekend.”

So I did while we finished our meals. It always amazed me how natural it felt with him. How we could be doing literally anything or nothing at all and still talk and laugh and be comfortable.

When he saw a man rooting through the garbage can outside, he grew quiet. He didn't mention it and neither did I, but it was as if he had reminders all around him of how hard life could be.

By the time we got back home, I was beat, but I didn't regret my decision to go out. I retreated to the couch with Oscar, and we did our own thing in comfortable silence, Lachlan reading in the chair and me watching mindless television because reading words on a page seemed like a feat right then.

Eventually he joined us, encouraging me to rest my head on his lap while he brushed his fingers through my hair. God, I could've stayed like that forever.

When I looked up at him, his eyes softened, and I remembered that quote again about looking up at the stars, which made me feel strangely emotional.

“Hey, what is it?” I said when I spotted wariness in his gaze.

“It's nothing. I just... I hope me being here hasn't upended your life.”

Was that what he'd been thinking about since leaving the sandwich shop?

“Hell no.” I knotted our fingers together. “You being here has enriched it.”

I watched his Adam's apple bob. "You've enriched mine too."

LACHLAN

FOSTER HAD to work the next morning, but he looked tired and spent from his weekend. The Monday after a trip always sucked, I certainly remembered that.

He'd said his mood was improving, but maybe his body was telling him otherwise. I'd done some research while he was gone and learned a lot about depression. It apparently wasn't a straight line out of the gray—as Foster liked to call it—it was a lot of ups and downs, and that made plenty of sense. It mimicked life in that way.

Still, he insisted on walking with me and Oscar that morning, as if he needed to spend as much time with us as possible. And I got it. I felt the same.

Instead of making coffee, we walked the familiar route to the coffee shop he used to frequent when I lived in my yellow tent.

We passed people I recognized from when I was without a home, and it felt strange. No one gave me a second glance now, nor tightened their hand on their bag. It felt like a luxury not to have that unsettling scrutiny, but I pushed the guilt aside.

As Foster tied Oscar's leash to a tree, I promised him a treat after for being a good boy, and we both stepped inside.

While we ordered coffees and muffins, I could feel someone watching us from a nearby table. When I turned to look, I immediately zoomed in on the manager pin on her lapel as she continued to scrutinize me. What the hell? Was it because she recognized me from the street?

Now I was itching to leave as soon as possible. Coffees finally in hand, we turned toward the exit. The woman stood and approached us, and I braced myself for whatever she had to say.

I have every right to be here. Old habits sure died hard.

But she addressed Foster. "Are you the gentleman who approached me once about the assaults happening on the homeless?"

Foster side-eyed me as he replied, "Yep, that's me."

What in the world? He never told me that.

"Like I told you, I'd only get involved if the police contacted me. And now they have. Our security department is working on pulling the surveillance video from the street."

"That's good news. Thank you."

I followed him outside in a daze. "Why didn't you ever tell me you asked the manager questions?"

He winced. "I don't know. Nothing came of it, so I didn't want to get your hopes up. Or maybe I didn't want you to be mad that I interfered."

"Truth is, I might've been," I replied, remembering how tightly wound and suspicious I was—had to be—while living on the streets. "But that was then, and this is now."

Foster snickered. “Still a stubborn man.”

“Are you referring to you or me?” I kissed his cheek. “Thank you for always having my back.”

I untied Oscar and gave him a treat, and then we walked partway with Foster toward the university.

“Try to have a good day.” I squeezed his shoulder, wanting to get in one last touch. “I can tell you feel groggy.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I’ll get my second wind.”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Maybe he should’ve called off work.

But I kept my mouth shut and continued on my walk with Oscar.

In the afternoon, I took a bus to the nearest superstore to buy toiletries, then wandered down the shaving aisle. When I saw the cordless clippers on sale, I only hesitated a moment before setting the box in my basket. On the way to the register, I loaded some waters as well as batteries for the device, an idea forming in my head as I checked out.

After getting back to the apartment, I prepped some things and stuffed them in my backpack. I fetched Oscar’s leash, but then thought better of it. I’d taken him with me to the bridge before, and he seemed to enjoy the attention he got, but today I needed to remain focused on what I was trying to accomplish. I’d only be distracted if I brought him with me. “I’ll be back. Be a good boy.”

When I got to the bridge, not many people were around, likely because it was a beautiful day. Bummer.

But Joe and Darius were there, along with a couple of others, so I pushed on.

“Anyone need a cut? I brought clippers today.”

Darius’s eyes lit up. “Can you do a fade? Haven’t had me one in a long time.”

“Sure!” I replied confidently, though I felt nerves creeping up.

He got situated on the overturned barrel as I pulled out my supplies. After his hair was shampooed and rinsed, I got comfortable with the clippers in my hand. “I’ll start with a higher grade up top. Sound good?”

“Uh-huh.”

I remained quiet and focused as I worked, keeping the top longer and cutting the sides into a fade. Relieved I’d actually done it, when I looked up, I saw others had gathered around, watching us. My fingers ached, but likely because my grip was too tight.

As I wiped the residual hair off his neck, I said, “Did you hear that I filed a police report about the night I was attacked?”

“We all heard that,” Joe said.

“Do you think you and Darius might want to talk to the police as well?”

“Oh, I don’t know about all that,” Darius said, hopping off the barrel and backing away as if I’d burned him. Fuck.

I held up my hands. “I get it. I was scared too. It took some convincing to get me to do it.”

“What convinced you?” Joe asked.

“Hearing that the attacks were continuing. I want them to catch the guy so he can’t hurt more of us.”

“Getting one creep off the street doesn’t mean there won’t be more,” Darius argued. “Why would we want the police in our business?”

I frowned. Could I blame them? I’d used the same logic.

“I understand. But that guy probably thinks he’ll never get caught.” I huffed out a frustrated breath. “If you change your mind, the policeman I spoke to was Officer Holt from the shelter. Tessa’s cousin. Now, anyone else need a cut?”

When they all volunteered at once, I chuckled, then got to work. By the end of the afternoon, I was beat but felt way more comfortable with the clippers.

FOSTER

THE SMELL of dinner wafted through the hallway as I exited the elevator.

“Damn, I’ve got it good,” I said as I stepped inside. “A home-cooked meal from a sexy man?”

Lachlan laughed, wiping his hands on a towel and joining Oscar in greeting me at the door.

“Hope you’re hungry, hot stuff,” he said with a kiss to the lips that left me wanting more. But we had all evening to ourselves.

I’d felt off-kilter all day, likely because I was on sensory overload after my weekend trip, and I felt fatigued down to my bones. Sometimes when I got like this, I took Oscar for a long walk or lifted weights. It usually helped clear my foggy brain.

Or jerked off to porn.

Maybe I just needed the sustenance of a good home-cooked meal.

I put away my bag, then settled on a stool at the island. “What did you make?”

“Chicken and roasted veggies,” he said tentatively, as if I wouldn’t enjoy what he’d made.

“Something lighter and healthier sounds perfect,” I said when he slid my plate in front of me. But I still picked at my food because I just wasn’t feeling very hungry.

“You okay?” His eyebrows drew together as he watched me. “I mean, I know you’re not, exactly, but you seem extra... I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry.” I swiped the napkin across my mouth. “The truth is I’m not very hungry, and I feel bad because you went through so much trouble—”

“Hey, it’s all right.” His fingers trailed over my wrist. “We’ll just have plenty of leftovers for tomorrow.”

I helped him pack up the food and clear the dishes, but I was distracted and edgy, like I was crawling out of my skin. I splashed cold water on my face in the bathroom, then padded to my room to change out of my work clothes into something more comfortable.

Standing in my boxers, I looked at my reflection, wondering if I had lost much weight during this latest episode. That was when I felt Lachlan step up behind me and enclose me in a tight embrace. His eyes met mine in the mirror, and I loved the way I looked and felt tangled up in his arms. I sighed, reveling in the weight of him, feeling like it was relieving the burden a little. But not enough.

“What do you need?” he whispered against my ear.

“I... Will you fuck me?” I asked, and his eyes widened. “I want to feel something other than numb and drained. I want to feel you inside me.”

“Are you serious? I haven’t topped in years.”

“Oh, damn.” I hadn’t even thought of that, maybe because I was vers. “I don’t want to put you on the spot. Forget I—”

“No, I didn’t realize how much I wanted that until this very moment.” He kissed my shoulder. “I want to be inside you too and make you feel good.”

His lips trailed along my nape as his fingers brushed over my nipples, making them stand at attention. I groaned as I leaned my head back and shut my eyes, giving in to the sensation.

I needed this. From him. Needed it more than I needed anything else right then.

As he circled to stand in front of me, I pulled him into a desperate kiss, my hands winding tightly in his hair as Lachlan drew away to lash his tongue against a nipple.

“Please,” I begged, reaching for his waistband. He made quick work of disrobing as I pushed out of my underwear so that we were standing bare before each other, both of our cocks full and flushed between us.

I wasn’t sure who stepped forward first, but our lips crashed together, our hands groping and searching, for what I didn’t know, but it was like our lives depended on it. We were clumsy as we devoured each other, eventually landing on the edge of the bed.

He reluctantly pulled away and padded to the nightstand for lube and a condom. “Lie down for me.”

I scooted back toward the pillow without hesitation. I liked this side of him. Confident and self-assured. It was everything I needed. I wanted to blot out all my thoughts and just feel.

The mattress dipped as Lachlan kneeled near me, then nudged my legs apart. He opened the bottle of lube, and I watched as he coated his finger, then reached behind my balls

to rub it over my hole. I flinched at the cold sensation, and gritted my teeth as he worked the tip of his finger inside.

“It’s okay if you change your mind,” Lachlan said, and I shook my head hard, looking him straight in the eye.

To emphasize the point, I lifted my knees to my shoulders to give him better access. He swore under his breath as he took me in, his fingertips brushing along the vein in my cock, then down farther, where his thumb circled my rim.

I moaned when he leaned forward and fluttered his tongue over my sac, my bones practically liquefying as he sucked one of my balls while simultaneously pushing his digit deeper and fucking me with it.

“Give me two fingers.” I was impatient, wanting to feel him inside me right that instant, even knowing the prep time was important too.

“Bossy,” he mused as he pushed a second finger inside. And there it was, that burn that was threaded with pleasure as he moved his fingers just enough to rub against my prostate.

“Ah, fuck.” I trembled, my eyes rolling back, because it felt like too much and not enough at the same time. I propped one foot on his shoulder as if to push him away while simultaneously tugging at his hair to keep him closer.

And then electricity zapped through my veins when I felt my cock slide inside the heat of his mouth. My mind became a wasteland of pure sensation. Lachlan sucked me expertly, pushed his fingers deeper, and I fisted the sheets and squirmed beneath him. I felt completely flayed open but couldn’t find it in me to protest.

“Fuck, I can’t stop watching you,” Lachlan murmured against my hip bone. “You’re so beautiful.”

I heard him, and opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out except a long moan. All I could manage was to feel every last thing he was doing to me with his hands and mouth.

Lachlan kept his fingers inside me as he towered over me, then leaned forward to kiss me. It was sloppy as our mouths collided and our teeth clanked. But I was greedy for it as I sucked his tongue, making him moan. I cupped his face and kept him right where I wanted him until he was breathless.

I watched as he drew back a bit dazed and reached for the condom. He opened it and rolled it down his stiff shaft. The lube was next, and he slicked it down his cock and then used his fingers to add some to my hole. I clenched on instinct, needing to feel that fullness again. I wanted it so fucking bad, I was trembling.

And then he was there, the tip of his shaft breaching my rim. The burn only lasted a few intense moments before it transformed into pure, overwhelming bliss.

“I can’t believe I’m inside you,” Lachlan said as he drove in deeper, his chest a bloom of color.

“So so good,” I chanted, closing my eyes and winding my fingers around my shaft. Another moment, and then Lachlan’s hand was there on top of mine, his thumb rubbing over the head, adding an extra sensation I hadn’t expected.

I rocked against him, trying to fuck his hand as he buried himself to the hilt inside me. He stilled as if to take in the moment, and when our eyes met, his softened, making the stitch in my chest intensify.

I moaned when Lachlan readjusted his hands to the underside of my knees and started moving. And damn, I wanted that. To be fucked hard and thoroughly. To feel full of

Lachlan now and burn from the memory of his cock after. To feel alive with the sensation of this night. To suck air into my lungs and be alive for him. For this. For us.

Lachlan pulled almost all the way out before slamming forward, again and again, rocking the bed so hard, the headboard might've dented the wall. He pushed my legs higher, changing the angle so that the head of his cock rubbed against my prostate with each thrust. I grabbed my shaft and jerked in time to his punishing rhythm.

“Ah, hell.” My whole body twitched, a warm, tingling flush moving through my limbs and pooling in my balls.

Lachlan was panting hard, his voice gruff when he said, “Come for me, baby.”

And God, my balls tightened even further at hearing that. Before I knew what was happening, my orgasm was ripping through me like a tornado. I just went along for the ride as come shot out of me, hitting my chin and cheek.

Lachlan thrust harder and then went rigid as he unloaded inside me. He rode out his orgasm with slower, deeper thrusts, and then he slumped forward, my legs loosely wound around his lower back.

We were quietly panting as we clung to each other until our heart rates evened out. I nearly protested when I felt his weight lift off me. He was back a moment later with a damp towel, wiping me down as I lay comatose, barely able to help or keep my eyes open.

My words sounded slurred when I said, “Thank you. So damned good. Never had better.”

I felt him gently kiss my throat, and then I was out.

LACHLAN

I HAD a phone interview the next morning with the owner of a salon who was out of the country, and that went fairly well. I didn't feel comfortable enough to tell him about my background, not like I did with Carlos, but he hadn't asked anyway. We planned to meet in person at his place of business on the east side when he got back to the States in two weeks.

Two weeks seemed so far away. I'd admit that waiting for employment news was making me stir-crazy, especially since Foster had returned from his trip. It called our agreement into question, and though he said there was no deadline, I felt like it was looming all the same.

I headed out the door with Oscar for a walk before the rain hit late afternoon. When I saw a help wanted sign for a dishwasher outside a restaurant, I stored the number in my phone. I figured if I didn't hear back from these interviews, it might be smart to apply to places outside of the hair industry. It would be minimum wage, but it was better than nothing. And way better than living on the streets.

My mind immediately sprang to Foster and that quote: *"You don't love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or their fancy car, but because they sing a song only you can hear."*

It was true enough, especially after fucking him the other night. It was like the heavens opened up and the angels were singing, that's how incredible it had been. But in order to feel more like me, I needed to bounce back—with the help of the new perspective on life the past year had given me.

I made a visit to the shelter and spoke to Tessa about the manager of the coffee shop and my conversation with Joe and Darius. As before, Oscar was a big hit with the residents. Who could resist petting a sweet dog?

“Well, if you didn't convince them, maybe the latest attack will.”

“There was another? Where this time?”

“On the East Bank of the Flats.”

I frowned. “Sucks.”

“In better news, your haircuts are a big hit. It's all the buzz around here—no pun intended.”

I grinned because if nothing more, I had that. Making people happy in my own little way. Even for free. Like Carlos said, I was giving back to the community.

I had my supplies with me, but even if there were no customers under the bridge today, I still made my way there to see if Joe and Darius were around. I wouldn't bug them about it or even bring it up again, but others were bound to be discussing the latest assault.

Turned out I was right. It was the hot topic of conversation under the bridge, mainly because the woman who'd been sprayed was present. Her eyes were still red, but when Oscar sniffed near her feet, she smiled.

“Is he friendly?” she asked in a tired voice. She’d likely been up all night.

“He is.” I crouched down to eye level and encouraged her to pet Oscar. “I’m sorry about the assault. The same thing happened to me a month or so ago.”

She nodded. “I heard about it.”

“I spoke to Officer Holt and filed a police report. It would help if more people came forward.”

She bristled. “I’d be too nervous to step foot in a police station.”

“What if I went with you?” Joe said, appearing in my side view. I inhaled sharply, surprised by his change of heart.

“You’d do that?” she asked him.

“I sure would.” He clenched his jaw, tension thrumming through him. Maybe he felt like enough was enough. “How about right now? So they can see for themselves the damage that man is causing.”

“I can be an eyewitness,” Darius said from behind them, and I breathed out in relief. I didn’t think Darius would acknowledge he’d witnessed my assault too, but it didn’t matter. We all had our reasons.

“I’ll walk with you and direct you where to go,” I said, hoping none of them changed their minds. We should get going now while we had the momentum.

Just as I stood, I heard, “Lachlan, is that you?” and the familiar voice made my stomach curdle.

No, it couldn’t be.

Clint was in a suit and standing with a group of men dressed similarly, so if I had to guess, he was about to go into a restaurant on 6th Street with his coworkers and a prospective client. I knew his financial-services company had an office in Cleveland, but I'd have never in a million years thought I'd see Clint downtown.

"I'll be right there," Clint told his coworkers, then crossed the street toward me.

"I'll, uh, catch up with you," I said to the trio headed to the police station, then got distracted when Oscar started whining. It was unlike him, so maybe he'd had enough of our so-called walk. "It's okay, boy. We'll go home soon."

Clint looked me over as he approached.

"What do you want?" I asked him instead of questioning why he was in the area. Maybe I didn't want to know the answer, especially if he was transferring offices or anything like that.

"What do I want?" he scoffed, and a brief tingle of fear lifted the hair on the back of my neck. "I haven't seen you since you left a year ago. Marcie told me you were looking for a job in Cleveland, so I guess it's true. You moved down here?"

"Why wouldn't I?" My hand tightened into a fist. "It was far enough away from you."

"Hey, I..." He softened his voice and stepped close.

"Save it." I recognized that manipulative tone he used to sway me, normally after a fight. "We have nothing to say to each other."

He squared his shoulders, seemingly unruffled by my dismissal. So like him. "I think we have plenty of unfinished

business.”

I smirked, surprised at my sudden bravado. “Like what?”

“Like you telling my friends I was abusive. I’ve never—”

“Seriously?” Anger exploded inside my chest. I used to think him so handsome in a tie, but now that I saw him for who he was, he was revolting. “You’ve never used silence to punish me, or told me how worthless I was when I made you angry, or squeezed my arm so hard you left bruises?”

I was trembling now, and Oscar must’ve sensed it because he moved closer, leaning against the back of my knee as if propping me up with his weight.

“If you want to talk about bruises, you’re the one who punched me and walked out!” He left out the part where his hand was wound around my neck and I was terrified he wouldn’t stop squeezing.

My gaze leveled on him. “Yeah, I did. I finally got brave.”

“Lach—” He gripped my arm. “Please, just let me exp—”

Oscar’s growl stopped us both in our tracks. “It’s okay, boy.”

“Since when do you have a dog?” He looked over my shoulder, and when I followed his line of sight, I realized that the trio who’d agreed to file the police reports hadn’t moved. “And what are you doing with homeless people?”

I clenched my jaw, wanting to unload on him, but I kept my cool. “Neither is any of your business. Don’t you have a lunch meeting to attend?” I motioned toward the restaurant. “Go have the life you deserve.”

“What the hell kind of comment is that?” When he sneered in that ugly way, it all came rushing back again. How fearful

he made me. How much I placated him. “That’s not the way you should talk to someone who gave you everything.”

When he squeezed my arm harder, I winced and tried to pull out of his grasp.

“Probably time for you to move along,” Darius said gruffly.

That was when Oscar lunged, latching on to Clint’s pant leg.

“Get your fucking dog off me!” Clint shouted, trying to fling him away.

“Oscar, no!” I warned, afraid he’d get hurt. But he wouldn’t budge, no matter how much Clint yelled and shook his leg.

I grabbed Oscar’s collar, attempting to calm him down and convince him to release his hold. It took several tries to get him to let go. I held tight to his leash, winding it around my wrist so he’d remain close to my side.

“I can’t believe your dog attacked me!” Clint backed away, visibly shaken, and when I glanced down at his trousers, I could see the holes from Oscar’s teeth. “I’m going to press charges.”

I couldn’t breathe. That was all Foster needed.

“He’s never done anything like that before.” I gripped the leash tighter. “He was only protecting me!”

His gaze zeroed in on the bracelets as I rubbed them against my thigh, unable to use my hands right then. He knew I was rattled, but at this point, what did it matter?

“Fuck that.” Suddenly Clint had his phone out and was snapping a photo of Oscar’s collar, which had his information

on it. “You’ll be hearing from me.”

“Like I told you: time for you to move along,” Darius said, stepping up beside me. “You wouldn’t want those businessmen you came with to know you hang around riffraff. They might wonder what you’re up to.”

Clint opened his mouth to speak, then promptly shut it. He turned and strode away.

I stood there blinking in shock. Had all that really happened?

“What a horrible person,” Joe said. “Glad your dog wasn’t hurt.”

Me too, Joe. Me too. It could’ve ended up way worse.

I sighed, wishing I’d walked away from the get-go before Clint grabbed me and Oscar went into protective mode. “Thanks for your support.”

Darius nodded. “We gotta watch out for each other.”

FOSTER

I COULD TELL something was wrong as soon as Lachlan came through the door with wary eyes and slumped shoulders.

I'd texted him an hour ago to let him know I was on my way home, and he'd told me he was at the police station, helping other victims file assault reports. That'd surprised me but also not. Lachlan had just the right amount of charm to make a convincing argument for others to get involved. Once he'd made the decision for himself, he was all in.

Oscar was waiting for me when I got here, so I fed him while I watched the clock. I had an appointment with my therapist tonight but also wanted to be there for Lachlan when he arrived.

"Did something happen at the station?" I asked as he trudged inside, his eyes downcast, as if he couldn't look at me.

"No...no, it went well." He greeted Oscar with a preoccupied pat on the head. "They have plenty of eyewitnesses now."

"Okay, good." Maybe the whole process was too overwhelming for him, and I could certainly understand that. "Are you all right? Run out of spoons?"

“No, I...” He turned to look at me. “I’m so sorry I got you involved in my life.”

My stomach bottomed out. “What are you talking about?”

His fingers absently went to work on his bracelets. “Me living with you, the police being involved, and now maybe even more trouble.”

“Trouble?” I didn’t know what happened, but it was obviously something he felt guilty about. I reached for his hand and led him to sit beside me on the couch. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. What’s going on?”

“I was under the bridge, about to walk over to the station with the others, when I heard someone call my name. It was Clint.”

My eyes flashed to his. “Holy shit.”

“I should’ve never taken Oscar with me.” At some point he’d brought the dog home, which at first I thought it was so he could join the others inside the police station, but maybe that wasn’t at all what happened.

Panic arose in me as I bent down to look Oscar over. “Did Clint hurt Oscar?”

“No.” He grimaced. “It was the other way around.”

My breath sputtered out of me. “What do you mean?”

“Clint had raised his voice and grabbed my arm.” He demonstrated on me. “Oscar growled in warning, then lunged at his leg.”

My hand slammed against my mouth. “Oh my God, he’s never done anything like that!”

Looking at Oscar's serene position at our feet now, there was no way you could imagine him wanting to hurt someone, no matter how much of a bastard they were.

"He was protecting me. I don't know if he broke skin, but Clint said he would file charges." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm so sorry. I'm afraid what this will mean for you and Oscar."

"It's okay. Take a deep breath." I pushed a stray lock of hair behind his ear. "Maybe he's just full of hot air."

He frowned. "No. He's vindictive."

I swallowed the boulder in my throat. "How would he know how to find you? Us?"

"He took a photo of Oscar's collar. Even if the picture is blurry, he could still find a way." He stared out the window. "Marcie might help him. She could ask the Rocky River salon manager for my contact information."

"Fuck. Come here. It's okay." I pulled him into my arms, and he came willingly, burying his face in my neck. "No matter what happens, we'll figure it out. Together."

Hopefully I'd get off with a fine for a first-time offense if I agreed to muzzle my dog in public. It would suck, but also, it was better than the news stories of certain breeds of dogs being put down for being too much of a threat. Still, I wasn't going to let Lachlan know that. It wasn't his fault, and he felt guilty as it was.

The mood was somber as we ate leftovers and snuggled on the couch, Lachlan recounting the event for me again. Unfortunately, it overshadowed the good that happened afterward—getting three of the unhoused population to file police reports about the assaults. That was huge and something

to be celebrated, but it was like Lachlan was living in the gray now, and I didn't know if I had the strength to pull him into the light. So I just held on to him, trying to be his anchor, when really, he was mine.

When it was time for my therapy appointment, I stood with my laptop. "I'll be done in about an hour. No beating yourself up about any of this. Promise?"

He chewed on his lip. "I'll try."

I walked to my room, shut the door behind me, and settled on my bed. I was distracted during the session, and my therapist called me on it. "Tell me what's eating up your concentration."

"I'm sorry." I looked over my shoulder to be sure the door was indeed shut. "I told you about Lachlan."

"Your roommate and friend."

"Yeah...and the circumstances of how we came to know each other."

She nodded. "He was living on the street after being a victim of domestic abuse. You helped him through a storm and through a random assault."

Hearing it laid out like that was surreal. Made it seem like Lachlan and I had been through a lot together in a short amount of time. I had told my therapist the truth about my relationship with Lachlan before I'd told my family, and I felt guilty about that, but it felt good talking to her, knowing everything would be kept in confidence. It helped me sort through my feelings and put things in perspective.

"So this afternoon, Lachlan and Oscar were on a walk downtown when out of the blue, he ran into his ex." It still sounded like a wild coincidence. If you believed such things.

My mom always told me there was no such thing. That life put tests in your path, and how you decided to respond to them helped you grow as a person. “Oscar went into protective mode when they started arguing.”

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. “Is Lachlan all right?”

“Yeah, but apparently Oscar tore the asshole’s pant leg—maybe even drew blood, he’s not sure—and the guy said he’d press charges.”

“Sounds like a real winner,” she muttered as she wrote something on her notepad. “Do you wish you’d been there to protect him?”

Damn, she always knew how to get right down to my underlying feelings.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “I feel helpless after the fact.”

But I was liable to punch the guy’s lights out, and then he’d bring assault charges against me.

“I’ll bet you being there now is providing him plenty of comfort.”

I blushed and looked away.

“Your feelings for him are growing.”

“They are,” I confessed quietly. “But we’re not anything more than—”

“Why can’t you be?”

I hitched a shoulder. “We both have baggage, so...”

“So that means you can’t find happiness?” She arched a brow. “You obviously understand each other quite well. Or are you nervous the feelings won’t be reciprocated?”

“Yeah, there’s a bit of that too.”

What if admitting anything scared him off? Not only would he have to deal with a dickhead ex, but also with a new guy who caught feelings when he was only trying to lend a hand.

“That makes sense. But you’ll never know unless you’re honest with him and yourself.”

“We’ll see.” I looked away, and she must’ve taken that as a sign that I was finished with this conversation.

“Let’s talk about your depression,” she said, and I nodded. “I know you’ve had a lot going on with traveling and work and this news about your dog, so I want you to try and take it easy. All those events can be triggers because they deplete your energy. And though you think you’re doing better, it could be a setback. You know how that goes.”

Only too well.

After the session was over, I shut my laptop and opened the door, noting how quiet it was in the apartment. Maybe Lachlan and Oscar had fallen asleep on the couch. I padded toward the living room, only to find it empty. As were the kitchen and bathroom.

The only option left was the guest room. The door was shut, but that wasn’t anything new. When I opened it, I finally found them.

Asleep in his yellow tent in the corner of the room.

I clutched my heart as I watched them for a minute. Somehow, that man and my dog were meant for each other. And hopefully I fit somewhere in there too.

LACHLAN

IT WAS THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND, and Foster was still in bed. In fact, since the incident with Clint, he seemed more lethargic, more pensive, and I had to wonder if his anger about what happened was building up as the days went by. We hadn't heard anything from Clint or the authorities, and it was like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I'd just gotten back from walking Oscar, two coffees and muffins in hand, but Foster was still tucked away in bed.

"You asleep?" I whispered as I padded into his room.

"Sorry," he replied groggily and shifted on his pillow. "I know I'm not much company."

"It's okay." I set his coffee down on the nightstand. "I just want to make sure...does this have anything to do with Clint and—"

"No, this is part of my depression." He rubbed his eyes. "Sometimes it's not so much about being sad as about feeling depleted. You still have the feeling that all the color has been sucked out of the world, but it's for different reasons. And this time, I think, I ended up doing too much, so I slid back a bit."

"One foot forward, two steps back," I said to myself. "What can I do?"

“Not your problem. Eventually, I’ll get my butt up and figure out my day.”

I sat down on the mattress and slid my fingers through his hair, trying to provide him the same sort of comfort he always did me. The man had saved me twice, had given me a place to live, and now my ex might press charges. He didn’t deserve any of that.

“You said you try to do things that bring you comfort when you feel like this.”

“Uh-huh.” His eyes were shut, but he was angling his head toward my hand as I continued to stroke his hair.

“Like how the shower feels on your skin?”

“Yeah, that’s a favorite, but I feel too weak to get up.”

I kissed his cheek. “I’ll help you.”

When I drew the covers back, he protested. “You don’t have to—”

“I want to.” Without a second thought, I scooped him up in my arms and carried him to the bathroom.

He must’ve been stunned silent because all he did was look up at me with wide eyes as he circled his arms around my neck.

“My knight in shining armor,” he teased when I propped him on the toilet seat, then fiddled with the handles in the shower.

I quickly disrobed, then pulled down his boxers so he could step out of them. We were both half-hard, but that wasn’t what this was about right now. This was about helping him feel human, something I’d needed help with many times.

“Come on, handsome.”

He held on to me as we stepped inside and under the spray. He sighed as soon as the water rolled over us. It did feel soothing, I’d give him that.

He propped his hands on my shoulders as I reached for the bodywash, squeezing a generous amount in my hand and then rubbing him from his chest down to his groin.

Foster watched me intently, panting shallowly against my cheek. His eyes seemed misty, but it was hard to tell because of the steam rising around us. When he sighed, I knew he was enjoying the extra attention I was giving his torso.

“Don’t let go of me,” I told him, then kneeled down to wash from his thighs to his feet, kissing each leg and ankle as I went. When I looked up at him, his eyes were shut as if in silent prayer, and I was glad I’d followed my instinct.

My face was in front of his groin, so I buried my nose in his wiry pubic hair to smell the essence of him, something that always made me feel alive and calm. His hand shook as he moved his fingers from my shoulder to burrow in my wet hair.

I kissed his cock reverently, my way of telling him how special he was, and when he groaned and shifted, I wondered if he also needed a release.

“Want me to... It’s okay if you don’t.” I squeezed his hip. “But it might feel good.”

He’d asked me to fuck him the other night, and from what I’d gathered, it had made him feel alive and human again. And damn, I got it. It was how I’d felt that first time I’d kissed him against the wall.

“Ah, hell...*please.*”

I palmed his dick as my tongue traced over the glans. He smelled like soap as I licked the length and sucked each ball into my mouth, his moans increasing with each pass of my tongue.

My fingers circled from his hips to his ass, and I gripped his cheeks as he thrust into my mouth. I hummed around his shaft as I felt it nudge the back of my throat.

I pulled off to catch my breath, then engulfed his cock again just as my fingers found his crease. I sucked his cock while my finger prodded at his rim, my dick growing painfully hard from all the sounds he was making. I adjusted my grip to slide a finger inside from behind his balls, and he shuddered. Keeping his cock in my mouth, I finger-fucked him, rubbing his prostate with every thrust.

“Holy hell!” he cried out as he stiffened and shot into my mouth. I looked up to watch him chase his orgasm, and it was so hot, I spurted onto the shower tile.

I caught my breath, then stood to take his mouth. “Gorgeous.”

“Thanks for that,” he murmured against my lips. “Felt amazing.”

“Whoa there, hang on to me.” I reached around his waist when his legs got wobbly.

His laugh was hollow. “I’m afraid that orgasm made me want to nap again.”

“Maybe you need some food in you too,” I said, and he nodded. “Let’s finish up.”

I washed his hair and mine, then stepped out to grab towels. He dried himself off, and I helped him back to his bedroom.

“How about you lie down and take a ten-minute catnap while I make us something more substantial?” More substantial than the muffins I brought home.

“Sounds good,” he murmured, shutting his eyes.

“Will you join me out there?” I asked because I remembered him saying that moving his limbs did him good. “If not, we can eat in bed.”

“I can try.”

“Awesome.” I went to the guest room to get dressed, then padded to the kitchen to look in the fridge.

I was deciding what to make alongside the eggs from our most recent grocery-store trip, when I heard ringing. I followed the sound, which was coming from the direction of the coffee table.

Shit, the noise was from Foster’s iPad, and when I glanced at it, I realized it was the weekly video call with his family. He’d obviously forgotten about it, and I didn’t know if they’d think something was wrong if he didn’t respond. I turned to shout to him, then thought better of it. Instead, I sat down on the couch, pulled the device toward me, and hit Answer before I could rethink the decision.

Fuck, what was I doing? Too late now.

His parents appeared in the first square box on the screen, and then his brother in the second one from his own apartment.

“Hey, Lachlan. Nice to see you,” Mrs. Middleton said, seeming a bit confused.

“Hi, you too. I’m sorry I answered for Foster,” I rushed out, “but he’s feeling under the weather, and I didn’t want you

to worry.”

FOSTER

“...HE’S feeling under the weather, and I didn’t want you to worry.”

I stood frozen at my bedroom door. It took a herculean effort to make it this far, but sitting up and drinking coffee helped. Besides, I wanted to push myself after Lachlan had done so much to help me. The gentle way he took care of me in the shower wasn’t something I’d soon forget.

He said he was making something to eat, and I wanted to sit at the table and try to enjoy it with him because I didn’t know how many more of these kinds of days together we had left.

“That was nice of you.” I could hear the worry in my mother’s voice. “Is he sick?”

Fuck. I felt bad that Lachlan was taking up for me, so why couldn’t I make my feet move to join him? I’d forgotten about the call and wished I’d made an excuse by text. No way I felt in any condition to chat and pretend I was okay.

“He’s, uh, yeah...feeling washed up and stuff from a busy week, so...”

Maybe that would do it, and they’d end the call until next week. I held my breath as I waited for everyone to bow out.

“He’s depressed,” Dad said matter-of-factly. My fingers gripped the wall, trying to find purchase. “It’s okay, you don’t have to sugarcoat it for us.”

I used to think my parents were disappointed in me during depressive episodes, but that was just my mind playing tricks on me. From this perspective, I could hear the worry, but not anything remotely resembling the notion that they were ashamed or dismayed.

“I wasn’t trying to sugarcoat it,” Lachlan responded. “I just didn’t think it was my place to tell you.”

“You’re a good friend,” Chase said, and that propelled me a step forward. I needed to get my butt in gear and not leave Lachlan high and dry. I had no idea why he’d decided to answer the call, but to be honest, I’d ignored my family’s texts all week. He was right. They would’ve worried.

“Thanks, so is Foster,” Lachlan replied. “Right now he’s the only friend I have in the world, or at least it feels that way, and I owe him a lot.”

Ah, hell. I paused in the hallway again. It might be awkward to bust in on their conversation now.

“From the little Foster told us,” Mom said, “it sounds like he owes you a lot too.”

She was right. I hadn’t given them many details, but she was my mom, so she was good at figuring stuff out. Like how fond I’d grown of Lachlan. She’d probably even deduced we were intimate, not that she’d bring that up. Awkward.

Chase probably guessed all that too. We hadn’t talked much outside of our weekly calls, but he’d asked a couple of questions about Lachlan by text that gave me the impression he had his suspicions.

“He, um, gave me a place to stay when I was in dire straits, and I would do anything for him. I, uh...well, I love him,” Lachlan said, and I clenched my chest as my heart throbbed. “I just wanted you to know that he’s in good hands and I’ll take care of him. I won’t let anything bad happen.”

I braced my forearm against the wall. I couldn’t breathe. Had I heard him right? Did he mean...as a friend? Or romantically?

“Well, I think that’s probably one of the best things a parent can hear about their child,” Mom said in a watery voice, clearly moved by Lachlan’s declaration. “He’s precious to us, both our sons are, and you thinking so too means the world to us.”

“Thank you,” Dad said, and Chase made some sort of noise in assent. No doubt he’d tease me about this later.

“You’re welcome,” Lachlan said, and then my thoughts drifted off as they said some other things before ending the call.

When the apartment grew silent, I pushed off the wall and walked the rest of the way to the living room.

Lachlan glanced up in surprise. “Hey, I didn’t think... I haven’t finished making breakfast yet.”

“That’s okay.” I cleared my throat. “I heard voices, so...”

“I...probably did something impulsive and stupid, but it’s done now.” His face darkened. Was he referring to his confession? “I answered the call with your family.”

“I know. I heard.” I made it to the couch and sank down beside him.

He frowned. “Are you mad?”

“Hell no. I’m grateful.” My fingers found his jaw, forcing him to look at me. “So...you love me?”

His mouth opened and closed as his flush grew deeper. “You heard that too?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I, uh, it just came out.” He was so flustered, and it was endearing. “But I don’t want you to be freaked out or think that means you have to feel the same. I don’t want to lose you. You’re my best friend.”

Fuck, my heart was complete mush over this man.

“Shh...” I pecked his lips and snickered. “Please, let me get in a word.”

He squeezed his eyes shut briefly. “Sorry.”

“It’s so wild, right?” I felt an overwhelming rush of emotion but steadied my breath. I drew a pattern on his knee as I got my thoughts in order. “I know we’ve only known each other a short time, but it also feels longer than that.”

His gaze searched mine. “It does.”

“There’s this undeniable connection we have”—I glanced toward Oscar’s pillow, where he lay sleeping—“all three of us. When I was lying in bed after our shower, I took note of the silence, of my heart still beating. I had made it through one more day, one more episode, and I want to make it through a ton more, with you.”

His breath hitched.

I gathered his face in my hands and looked into his sapphire eyes that were bright and glassy. “And I was afraid what you’d think if I admitted I love you too.”

His eyes softened. “You do?”

“I do.” I pulled him into my arms. “And I don’t want you to leave, even if it might be a good idea for you.”

“I don’t want to go either.” He buried his head against my throat. “But I need to stand on my own two feet. Not that I even have a job yet, but I’ve broadened my search and applied to some other places.”

Well, that was news. “Like where?”

“A couple of restaurants and a drugstore.”

“Okay.” I tightened my arms around him and kissed his head. “So maybe when you get a job—it’s only a matter of time, after all—you start paying rent? I like having you as my roommate. But it’s also okay if that doesn’t feel right or seems like pressure.”

“Can I think about it?” he said against my shoulder.

“Of course.” I laced my fingers through his hair. “There’s no need to make any decisions yet. And I’ll be cool with any choices you make.”

He drew back to look at me. “What happens if the police come knocking?”

I shrugged. “Depends. I’ll fight the asshole in court if I need to.”

“Fuck.” He curled his hand into a fist. “If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have to deal with Clint and his—”

“Hey!” I leaned my forehead against his. “If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve never met the man of my dreams.”

His laugh was muffled. “That might be a little far-fetched. You found me living on the street.”

“What does that matter? It’s about how our hearts connect, how I can be vulnerable in front of you, how you don’t make me feel less than.”

“Fuck, it’s like you’re describing how I feel about you.”

When he rubbed at his eyes, I reached for him. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“I’ve never had that. Someone who has my back, who feels like a true partner.”

I swiped at a tear with my thumb. “Neither have I.”

There was wonder in his eyes when he said, “Really?”

“Really.”

He cupped my face and fit our lips together, and it was as if a kaleidoscope of color exploded behind my eyes. And in that moment, nothing mattered except how his mouth and hands and tongue felt against mine.

It didn’t matter if he decided he needed to go, as long as he didn’t go far.

He drew back to catch his breath. “Does this mean...”

“That you’re mine?” I breathed out, my heart beating a tattoo against my chest. “I hope so.”

“Damn, I like the sound of that.” He let go of my hand and stood. “Let me feed you, and then we can decide what the rest of the day looks like. Even if it’s reading in bed together.”

I smiled, feeling on top of the world, even if that world still had edges of gray.

LACHLAN

“SORRY I’VE BEEN shitty at communicating,” Foster told his mom. “I just needed time to sort stuff out.”

It was Sunday night, after a relaxing weekend that helped him recharge his batteries. I tried not to eavesdrop as they discussed his mental health and his relationship with me. I was still a bit in shock that we’d confessed our feelings and were on the same page.

Things felt different between us now. More intimate, special. They always had, really, but now we had a name for it. *Love*.

Not long ago I might’ve said I’d met the right guy at the wrong time, but maybe that wasn’t accurate. Maybe there was never a right time. Or maybe the wrong time forced me to understand myself better, leading me to meet the most amazing man.

I still hadn’t decided if living here with him was a good idea, but he was giving me plenty of space to think, which I appreciated.

Oscar made himself comfortable beside me on the couch, and I rubbed behind his ears. My first introduction to Foster had been through Oscar, as if he were part of some master

plan. But that meant Foster had seen me at my worst, and according to him, I was seeing him at his as well. We had connected in the gray, and that bond created a spark that made everything around us brighter.

Pretty cool, but also surreal.

Still, this decision-making wouldn't move forward without an actual job.

Which was why, the following morning, I met with the restaurant manager for the dishwasher position. I had no experience in the food industry, but I did know customer service and how to work as part of a team. The position seemed like hard, honest work, but I was used to being on my feet all day and could certainly manage the pace once I got the hang of it.

And I could still cut hair under the bridge on days off to keep up my skills.

The manager seemed desperate to hire someone as soon as possible, so I figured my chances were pretty darn good.

I was playing tug-of-war with Oscar and his rope toy, when my cell rang in my pocket. It happened so infrequently that I almost didn't recognize the sound. Not like I did with the familiar buzzing of texts from Foster.

When I saw the call was from the salon in Rocky River, my hands started shaking, but I pushed the Answer button anyway. "H...hello?"

"Lachlan Byrne?"

"Speaking."

"This is Tiffany from Le Chic, getting back to you about the opening at our salon."

“Hey there.” I sat down before my knees gave out. Why I was so nervous about this call, I didn’t know, but rejection was hard to swallow no matter what.

“I’m just letting you know that the job is yours if you want it.”

I blinked. “You’re kidding.”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” she asked with a laugh. “Your résumé speaks for itself.”

“I guess I thought that because this past year has been rough...”

“We all go through tough times. Your personal stuff is none of my business, unless it affects your job performance. Also, I ran into Marcie Smith, and she told me you were an awesome coworker and that the customers loved you.”

Well damn, Marcie hadn’t thrown me under the bus despite how I left things. I didn’t necessarily believe that Tiffany just happened to run into Marcie, but it was normal for a potential employer to contact your former workplace.

“Thank you, that’s nice to hear,” I replied, feeling relieved, baffled, and sort of miffed all at once. I wasn’t sure how I felt about her contacting my old friend, though I understood why she did. “And I appreciate the offer. I’m definitely interested, but I have another one to consider. Can you give me a day or so to get back to you?”

“Of course. Hope to hear from you soon.”

As soon as I ended the call, I was up and pacing. Why didn’t I accept the offer straightaway? What was holding me back? Fuck, I needed to think this through. Was it the connection to Marcie, and by extension, Clint? Probably. It felt too close for comfort.

I lifted my cell and texted Foster the news.

I was offered the job at the salon in Rocky River.

It felt like forever before he responded, though it had only been a couple of minutes.

Congrats! Did you accept?

Not yet. I just... Something doesn't feel right.

The phone rang in my hand. When I saw Foster's name on the screen, I answered immediately.

"You don't have to take the first offer that comes your way."

"I know I don't, though I should at this point. It's just that..." I trailed off, my thoughts spinning.

His voice was soothing in my ear. "Maybe it doesn't feel like the right fit?"

"There's that, but also, apparently Marcie put in a good word for me."

"You're kidding! So maybe things are not really as they seem when it comes to old friends."

"Maybe. I just don't see how anything would've changed."

"It's been a while since you've talked, so you never know."

"True...but also, what if Clint finds out where I work and shows up?" I didn't realize until I said it out loud how much that possibility plagued me.

"Then we get a restraining order." I loved how he said *we*, like we were truly going to be there for each other.

“O...kay.” My voice was unsteady and laced with emotion. “Guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Yep, together.”

I smiled in relief, though he couldn’t see me.

“Why not take the day to think it over?”

“I will.”

After we said goodbye, it still didn’t sit right with me, so I pulled out my laptop and looked up the number for A Cut Above in Akron. I hit Dial before I changed my mind, and when they answered, I asked to speak to Marcie.

She was her bubbly self when she got to the phone.

“Marcie...it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Lachlan? Oh my God, I’m so glad you called. I had no way to reach you, and I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I admitted. And I truly did. It was hard to leave behind a friend. But the way things had gone down...

“Wait, where are you?” she asked.

I bristled, considering Clint again, so I ignored her question and focused on the purpose of my call. “I wanted to thank you for saying kind things about me to Tiffany at Le Chic.”

“Of course. Everything I said was true. It’s been a bummer around here without you.” That felt good to hear, even if she was only being nice.

“Well, I was a mess, so...” I took a deep breath. “You think you know what went down between me and Clint, but —”

“I was wrong, Lachlan. I’m so sorry.”

I inhaled sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I shouldn’t have told him you were interviewing in Cleveland. That was dumb. It’s just, we were both at the same restaurant, and he brought you up, and I just sort of blurted it out.”

I rolled my eyes in exasperation. “Well, he’s your friend.”

“I don’t know about that anymore. The things he told me...I’m not sure I believe him. I always had this niggling feeling in my gut, and I...I should’ve trusted it.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“He’s been seeing someone,” she said, and my stomach squeezed nauseatingly tight. “I can’t put my finger on it, exactly, but the guy seems afraid of upsetting Clint. And it hit me that you walked on eggshells around him too.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I let them roll down my cheeks.

“I always thought you were being respectful of Clint, private about your relationship, but now I wish I’d asked more questions, dug deeper, asked if you were all right.”

“I probably would’ve told you I was fine.” I swiped at my eyes. “He was abusive, Marcie. Emotionally at first, then increasingly more physical.”

She swore under her breath. “But his nose, the bruises and what he said happened. That it was you—”

“I did punch him, but only because I was afraid he was going to choke the life out of me.”

She burst into tears. “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.”

We talked a bit more about what happened at the end, how messed up I was at work, but she also had a client waiting, so we had to cut it short.

“Can we exchange numbers? I promise not to give it out to anyone. I would love to talk more and see you if I can.”

I was nervous, so fucking nervous, but I gave it to her anyway, trusting *my* gut and hoping she'd keep my confidence.

FOSTER

WE WERE out to dinner with Marcie, and I was so happy for Lachlan. He'd been nervous the whole way to the restaurant, which was chosen based on location, at the halfway point between Cleveland and Akron.

But as soon as they laid eyes on each other, it was like all that other stuff melted away. It was hard to get a word in edgewise because they had an entire year to catch up on. So after an introduction and some small talk, I just listened, enjoying hearing the satisfaction in Lachlan's voice at having his friend back.

"Cheers," I said, raising my wineglass. I almost felt guilty for being present at their reunion, but Lachlan had insisted he needed moral support. It was also nice to meet a friendly face, and someone who was important to him from his former life. It helped me piece together a richer view of what he was like.

I was not surprised to learn that Lachlan was fun, even outgoing, and well loved by his coworkers. The two of them recounted nights out, and she told him about customers who'd asked after him.

It was like the parts of his life that were lost had been found, making him come alive again with possibility. I loved seeing it, even if it made me feel a bit unsettled. We were

officially a couple now, but I still didn't know when or if he would decide to go off on his own. I was ready to look for apartments with him if that was what he needed—he just had to say the word, and I'd support him.

He had made other decisions, though. Like not to take the job at Le Chic, instead starting the evening dishwashing position at the restaurant. It was hard work, he came home late and tired, but I could tell he finally felt productive, even if it wasn't the job he'd hoped for. Another downside was that the pay was minimum wage, which didn't give him the opportunity to be independent yet. Still, he insisted on paying for groceries and his phone bill. He wanted so desperately to feel like he was making it on his own, and more than likely, all that was holding him back from making a decision about our living arrangement.

In the meantime, I was giving him space and reveling in any time we could spend together when we weren't like passing ships in the night due to our differing work hours.

As we dug into our food, Marcie said, “I like the hair and beard. You look good, even after being through a horrible year—for which I feel partly responsible.”

“What could you have done?” Lachlan asked, but I knew he was only being polite. He'd spent countless nights mulling over how he'd lost everything, and I didn't blame him.

“For one, I could've pleaded your case so you wouldn't be fired.” She grimaced. “Let you stay at my place for longer.”

Lachlan had shared that he left not only because he overstayed his welcome on Marcie's couch, but because Clint knew exactly where to find him, muddying the waters for all of them.

Lachlan shook his head. “I know how charismatic he can be, so don’t beat yourself up too much. I was also under his spell, or should I say thumb?”

I reached for his hand. “We all have stuff we regret.”

Marcie nodded. “I don’t want to make the same mistake again. So when I ran into Clint and the new boyfriend, Jeremy, at an opening in town, I told Jeremy he can always call me if he needs anything, and gave him my number.”

“Slick,” Lachlan replied, but he also looked a little green. “Do you think he knew what you were getting at?”

She shrugged. “I waited until Clint was out of earshot, so maybe he figured it out.”

I said, “At the very least, maybe you got him thinking.” One could only hope. Unless Jeremy and Clint were still in the honeymoon period of their relationship. But according to Lachlan, there had been warning signs in the beginning too.

“Is it awkward between you and Clint now?” Lachlan asked. Apparently, Marcie hadn’t confronted him, but was actively avoiding him.

“Understatement.” Marcie winced, then looked at me. “I know Clint through my parents. Our families lived on the same street when we were kids, and we all remained friends.”

“Clint had encouraged me to apply to the salon,” Lachlan explained to me. “Marcie and I hit it off right away.”

“We did,” she said with a grin. “I talked to Mom, told her how I was feeling about Clint, asked her to help me make sense of everything. He had always been competitive as a kid, and a spoilsport, but that doesn’t explain the kind of adult he turned into. At least not all of it.”

“Sounds like he turned into the worst kind of bully,” I said.

Marcie had twisted her napkin into a shredded mess, which gave a clue as to how torn up inside she felt about the whole thing. “My mom was shocked, to say the least.”

“How is Dottie doing?” Lachlan asked with affection, the way an old friend would.

“She’s good. I almost told her we were in contact again, but I promised you I would keep it confidential.”

“I appreciate that.” He stole a glance at me. “Especially after running into Clint downtown.”

“I still can’t believe that happened. Or maybe I can.” She frowned. “Oscar must’ve read his energy.”

“That’s my theory too,” I said. “Lachlan is probably more Oscar’s person than I am.”

“Hey, that’s not true.” Lachlan squeezed my knee under the table.

“No, it’s okay. It’s actually really sweet.” I pressed our thighs together. “Besides, had it not been for Oscar, I wouldn’t have met Lachlan.”

Marcie’s eyebrows drew together. “Did Oscar really keep sniffing around you?”

“Yeah.” Lachlan smiled, and it might’ve been the first real one that didn’t also sting when thinking back to living in his tent and being without a home. “He was persistent.”

“Tell me about it. One night there was this horrible storm,” I began, and as I was recounting the story of Oscar escaping to find Lachlan, his cell rang.

He glanced at it with a furrowed brow, then stood to take the call. “Be right back.”

I watched him stride toward the exit, likely so he could hear better. I was distracted, wondering if it was bad news or good. Or hell, maybe it was only a telemarketer.

“I can see how much you care about him,” Marcie said, then looked away guiltily. “I’m glad you were there for him.”

I smiled. “I’m glad you’re back in his life. He needed a friend.”

“I’m glad too. I just...” Her shoulders slumped. “I wonder if there’s anything more I can do.”

I twirled the ice in my drink. “What do you mean?”

“Not sure, exactly.” She drained her wineglass. “I don’t know if Clint will bring charges against you for the dog bite, but if anyone needs a character witness, I’ll be there.”

“That’s very kind,” I said just as Lachlan returned to the table, looking a bit dazed.

“Everything all right?” I asked, trying to temper my worried tone.

“Actually, yes. You’re not going to believe this.” He bounced into his seat as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. “That was Officer Holt. They found video proof of the assault.”

“No way!” We high-fived, unable to hold back our relief. “That’s good news.”

“Assault?” Marcie asked warily.

“That’s a whole other story,” Lachlan replied with a hollow laugh.

“Wait.” She lifted a finger. “This deserves more wine.”

LACHLAN

MY RESTAURANT SHIFT on Friday ended after midnight. I was tired, messy, and ready to crawl into bed beside a warm, sexy man. But it was honest work, and receiving my first paycheck felt amazing, even if it wouldn't help me beyond the necessities. Still, that was way more than I'd had even a month ago.

We hadn't discussed our living arrangements again, mostly because I was torn. What mattered to me the most was having agency over my life, regardless of where I lived, and though I trusted Foster to respect my boundaries, I didn't know if I trusted myself enough to know the difference.

So instead of talking about it with him, I began weighing the pros and cons. The options of where I could live with my current paycheck were dismal, but anything was a step above a tent on the street. If I could get through that, I could get through any conditions. Unless it was complete squalor. In that case, I'd choose my tent.

My best bet was moving out of the city to low-income housing and taking the bus to work. No way I wanted to return to Akron or be that far away from Foster—or Oscar, for that matter. I wanted them in my life. I wanted everything with

them, but it was all right to take our time. Hadn't Foster been saying that to me for weeks?

As it stood now, our schedules were mismatched, and I saw Oscar more than Foster most days. We treasured the nights I had off. I'd make dinner, and we'd spend quality time together, and it was difficult to think of giving that up.

I stifled a yawn at the crosswalk, then fished out my phone. There were a couple of texts from Foster telling me he was headed to bed and that leftovers were in the fridge. There was also a message from an unknown number, so I hit Play and lifted the phone to my ear as I walked across the street.

“Hey, Lachlan, this is Carlos from Urban Cuts. Sorry it took so long to get back to you, but we had a water leak at the shop and some cleaning up to do. There's always something. Anyway, if you still want the job, it's yours.” My heart was beating out of my chest. *“We're pretty informal here, so either call or come by the shop to discuss the pay and hours.”*

I listened to the message two more times, so many emotions crowding my chest. I'd wanted that offer so fucking much but thought that ship had sailed. I didn't want to leave the restaurant in a bind, so we'd work something out after I gave my notice. Suddenly, I had too many job opportunities. Life was so fucking strange sometimes.

I keyed into the apartment and then jumped in the shower to wash off all the grease and grime. The water only energized me, so it was hard to stay quiet by the time I padded to Foster's room.

“Sorry,” I whispered when Oscar lifted his head from his perch at the foot of the bed. I slid under the sheets and sighed at the feel of Foster's warm, bare form beside me.

“You’re home,” he muttered, stirring.

“Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s okay. I tried to wait.” Foster had more energy now that his depression had lifted, and he stayed up later on the nights I worked. “And something felt different when you came through that door.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned toward me. “Different energy or something. Maybe I’m dreaming.”

My chest throbbed at how in tune Foster was with me. “No...no, you’re actually right.”

His fingers pressed against my shoulder. “Did something happen?”

“After my shift, I had a message on my phone. It was Carlos from the barbershop, offering me the job.”

He brushed his fingers beneath my chin. “And you want it, I can feel it.”

“I do.” The fist in my stomach loosened. “I really want it.”

“Congratulations.” He pecked my lips. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” I lay flat on my back and rubbed my eyes. “It’s still hard not to expect the other shoe to drop.”

He pulled me into a tight embrace, his front against my back. “You’ve been through so much, just...try to enjoy it.”

“Damn, I love you.”

He kissed my ear. “I love you too.”

Even though I was tired and it was late, I still felt wired from that voice message. And from his body being pressed against mine like this, my cock had instantly jerked awake. I wiggled my ass a little. “Damn, you feel good.”

Whereas his shaft was half-hard before, it now grew to full mast. “You don’t play fair.”

“I know you’re tired, but...” I reached my arm back to grip his thigh, telling him right where I needed him. When the head of his cock brushed against the crease of my ass, I shivered.

“I need to be inside you too.” He pressed my shoulder down to the mattress, then lifted onto his knees to reach for a condom and lube in the nightstand.

“Maybe once I have a better job with health insurance, I can get a complete physical and we can forgo condoms.”

Foster swore under his breath as he rolled down the condom. “Can’t wait.”

When he licked at my hole, I squirmed. “As much as I love that, I need to feel you. Hurry.”

“Bossy,” he teased. He drew back and lightly bit my ass cheek, and then I felt the cool trickle of lube against my rim as he straddled my legs. He pulled open my cheeks with the heels of his hands and swiped the rim of my ass with his thumb.

“Such a pretty hole,” he said, pushing inside me.

We groaned at the same time. He pulled out a little, then pressed forward inch by inch until he was buried inside me.

“Fuck, you feel too good. I could live right here.”

“I might allow that,” I said, and Foster chuckled.

He ground inside me in a slow, seductive dance that was driving me wild. “Oh God, so good.”

“Yeah? Well, my cock is loving how your tight hole is sucking me in.”

“Ah, fuck.” I reached down to stroke myself as his punishing rhythm increased and he pounded me good. It was the exact burn I’d been hoping for. It made me feel alive with possibility, like maybe for the first time, I had a shot at living instead of just existing.

I fisted the pillow, my panting rough as Foster’s fingers tightened on my hips. He was always careful not to leave marks, but tonight I would’ve reveled in them because I was driving him to the brink, and it was amazingly good.

Foster’s moans pierced the stillness of the night as his thrusts became sloppy and uneven, and then he cried out, letting loose inside the condom.

I buried my face in the pillow as the room slanted and my own orgasm took hold.

He sank down on top of me, and though we were hot and sweaty, I loved feeling the weight of him on me. Somehow it anchored me.

“Don’t move,” I told him. “Not yet.”

Foster hummed, tenderly kissing my shoulder and breathing against my nape.

FOSTER

I TUGGED Lachlan to sit down beside me for the family call Sunday morning. He was getting used to being on video with them. I mean, he'd confessed his feelings for me to them first, so there was that. I would never forget how that all went down and would always treasure it.

"Hi, family," he said with a wave at the screen. "Um, you know what I mean."

I pressed our shoulders together. "I consider you part of my family."

"Which means you're an extension of ours," Mom added, and I heard Lachlan's quiet gasp.

"You haven't even met me in person yet," he teased. "You might change your mind."

"Well, that just means you have to come to Chi-town for the holidays," Chase said with a huge grin, and damn, I liked the sound of that. But that was still six months away, we were just getting used to this relationship thing, and we hadn't even gotten through June yet. Not that it was a hardship. Everything with Lachlan felt comfortable and natural. Him finding his own place still weighed heavily on me, but I needed to trust that he'd do what felt right.

“I...” Lachlan’s face flushed pink. “That would be up to Foster.”

My fingers gripped his knee. “Of course I want you there with me.”

We shared a smile as Dad asked, “Have you ever visited Chicago?”

“I haven’t.” Lachlan likely hadn’t given travel plans a second thought this past year. Why would he? He was just trying to survive. And I didn’t know if he had before. Did he like to travel? There was still so much to discover about each other, something I was looking forward to.

“Good.” Dad winked. “Then we’ll have plenty to show you.”

Lachlan grinned. “Can’t wait.”

“Don’t worry,” Chase said, “we’ll try not to overwhelm you. Mom promises not to bring out the photo albums from when we were kids.”

Mom mock-scoffed. “I never promised any such thing!”

She’d done the same with Chase’s first serious girlfriend, so it was a running joke in our family. I had a feeling Lachlan would eagerly page through anything Mom showed him. And I’d do the same if his mom were alive.

While Chase teased Mom about it, I murmured, “Think you’ll be able to ask for time off for the holidays?”

He shrugged. “I can’t imagine why not.”

Yesterday Lachlan had called Carlos and worked out the job details, and then in the evening went to his shift at the restaurant and put in his notice. I could tell he felt guilty about the latter, but he was also excited about working for Carlos.

Not only would he have a steady, full-time paycheck on par with his skill level, but health insurance as well.

Damn, a lot had happened in his life the past couple of weeks—and for the both of us the past few months. No wonder he still seemed a bit shell-shocked.

“Which reminds me,” I said when my family grew quiet. “Lachlan has some news.”

“Oooh, what is it?” Mom asked, and he blushed again. He was coming out of his shell a little more each day, and I loved seeing it, especially knowing what he’d been like in his former life. Marcie had described him well, but that was at work and with friends. His home life had been altogether different. He didn’t feel safe there, and I despised Clint for smothering that electric thunder inside him.

“I got a job at a barbershop,” he said as if it was no big deal. “I start in another week.”

Chase whistled. “That’s amazing!”

Mom and Dad smiled and clapped. They knew what that meant to him. After missing the video call when Lachlan talked to them, I took the week to think about everything, then called my family and explained how we met and what Lachlan had been through. Not only about Clint, but also about why he left his previous job at the salon, how talented he was, and what he was doing for those experiencing homelessness.

My family had been amazed and incredibly supportive. Mom had chastised me for not being more open about my depressive episode, and she’d been right. Maybe there wasn’t much they could do, but at least they’d know I was struggling instead of trying to guess why I was dropping the ball with texts and calls.

After the video call ended, I nudged Lachlan. “I hope they didn’t put you on the spot too much.”

“I’m thrilled to be included.” He shook his head. “I haven’t had real family since my mom died.”

I wanted to ask about Clint’s family, but I didn’t want to sour the mood. If he and Clint had been hiding what was happening from everyone around them, then the relationship with Clint’s relatives probably hadn’t been genuine. So instead I said, “Well, prepare to be bombarded with calls and texts if they get a hold of your number. I’m surprised they haven’t already asked. And if you end up getting your own place, expect—”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that,” he said, just as my cell rang.

I was on pins and needles, wondering what he was about to tell me, so I almost ignored the call.

“Who is it?” Lachlan asked, in that tone he used when he was feeling wary, which reminded me that despite all the good things happening, he was still waiting for everything to come crashing down around him.

I looked at my screen and frowned. “I don’t recognize the number.”

“You don’t suppose it could be…” He trailed off and grimaced. He meant Clint or Clint’s lawyer, and of course, I had the same alarm bells going off.

“I’ll put it on speaker,” I said, and pushed the Answer button.

“Hello?”

“Hi, um, is this Lachlan Byrne?” The male voice sounded shaky, fragile.

When our eyes met, I could see the dread in Lachlan’s, and honestly, I wasn’t any better. Shit, was this really happening? “Can I ask who’s calling?”

“My name is Jeremy, and I...well, Jesus, this is hard. I’m Clint’s boyfriend, and I saw a photo in his phone of a dog collar with this number on it, which I assumed was Lachlan’s.”

Lachlan squeezed his hands into fists, and then his fingers found the bracelets.

“So you decided to call the number—why?” I asked. “Are you checking up on him?” Sounded like they were made for each other.

“No, I... Clint doesn’t know I’m calling.”

“Obviously,” I harrumphed. What the hell was this?

“Fuck, I...please, let me explain,” he said in a rush. “Clint told me what happened with the dog and his ex, Lachlan. So when I saw the photo, I...took a chance and thought maybe I could talk to Lachlan. I’m assuming you know him since you answered the number that was on the dog tag?”

When Lachlan narrowed his eyes, I said, “Did Clint put you up to calling here?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Does he plan on pressing charges over the dog bite?”

“That would be dumb since the only thing the dog did was ruin his pants,” he replied, and I breathed out in relief. “Regardless, that photo is blurry, and I...well, I sent it to myself and blew it up and figured out the number.”

My gaze flashed to Lachlan's, who seemed just as confused. "Why did you go through so much trouble?"

"Like I said, I was hoping to speak to Lachlan. Marcie told me that—"

"You spoke to Marcie?" Lachlan blurted out.

"Lach, no..." I hissed. "This might be a ruse to get us to admit—"

He squared his shoulders. "If it is, then the damage is already done. But...I can hear it in his voice."

"Hear what?" I whispered.

"Are you afraid of him?" Lachlan asked Jeremy in a steady voice.

It took Jeremy a long second to reply. "Sometimes."

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" Lachlan asked.

"I think so, yes. Or maybe I'm just being irrational."

"That's called gaslighting," I pointed out. "Don't let him do that to you. Trust your gut."

Lachlan frowned. "Easier said than done."

"It is," Jeremy admitted, his voice small and quiet. "He can be pretty convincing."

I realized then that this conversation was not my place. I could never understand their shared trauma, so I handed the phone to Lachlan, kissed his cheek, and stood up.

I heard parts of their conversation from the kitchen, where I rummaged around for something to make us for lunch. I felt sick for Jeremy but also so fucking glad that he was brave enough to reach out.

And now that we knew the truth about Oscar and Clint's pant leg, that seemed minor in comparison to the connection being made in the next room between two victims of the same man.

LACHLAN

I STOOD AND BEGAN PACING, unable to believe what I was hearing. It was the same pattern of red flags, and Jeremy had only been dating Clint for seven months. I'd hung in there with him for much longer, and on my worst days, I still felt a certain shame in that.

“Listen, Jeremy, I know how hard it is to leave, to walk away. He'll charm you right back into his bed,” I confessed, my face growing hot. I was embarrassed about what Foster would think until I remembered how supportive he'd been. “But you can always go stay with Marcie. That's what I did, at first.”

“She said the same thing.”

Apparently, he'd called Marcie after her cryptic message. She hadn't told him anything about me or given him my contact information, which I was grateful for, but in this case, I would've forgiven her.

But Jeremy knew all about me because Clint had told him about our relationship. Sometimes he even compared Jeremy to me to make him feel like shit. My stomach had turned at that revelation.

Foster brought me a glass of ice water, somehow knowing my parched throat needed it, and whispered, “He’s always welcome to come stay here too.”

“*Thank you,*” I mouthed to him, then took a big sip.

Damn, I was grateful for him, every single day.

“I don’t know if you heard Foster, but he said you’re more than welcome to find a safe haven here with us too.”

“Foster?” Jeremy said, learning his name for the first time. “Is he your boyfriend?”

I hesitated, hoping Foster hadn’t guessed right earlier and that Clint was right there listening in and hearing everything I was saying. But I didn’t think so, not with the shit Jeremy had confessed.

“He *is* my boyfriend.”

Foster’s mouth turned up in a smile, and he leaned over to peck my lips.

“Are you happy?” Jeremy asked as I crouched down to pet Oscar on his pillow.

“Very happy.” I could feel Foster’s gaze pressing in on me, but I couldn’t look at him right then. “So it’s possible to move on from Clint and find yourself again.”

“Thank you for that,” Jeremy said, and I thought maybe under different circumstances, we could’ve been friends. And maybe there was still that possibility in the future, but for now I wasn’t going to even offer my number for fear of Clint coming across it in some way.

We ended the conversation with the promise that Jeremy would call Foster’s cell if he needed to talk through any big decisions. I knew from experience how long it took some

people to finally leave an abusive situation. Gaslighting was a powerful thing. It fucked with your head. Sort of how Foster had described depression messing with his.

I turned to the window and looked out at the view, trying to rein in my swirling thoughts. That phone call had been so unexpected. I wondered if that had been why Marcie had messaged me that morning. I just hadn't gotten the opportunity to get back to her yet.

Soon enough I felt Foster's heat behind me as he encircled me in his strong arms. I leaned my head back against his shoulder. "Can you believe that just happened?"

"Still trying to wrap my head around it," he said against my neck. "I'm sure you are too. How about you call Marcie and I'll make us something to eat?"

"Fuck, I love you."

Foster's arms tightened as he kissed my cheek.

"Take all the time you need."

The rest of the morning went by in a fog as I spoke to Marcie and got all the details about how Jeremy had reached out to her and asked her advice after Clint had squeezed his arm so hard, he'd left a bruise.

"Sounds familiar," I muttered, and hoped against hope that Jeremy would decide he'd had enough. I wasn't sure what more I could do except try to keep the lines of communication open with him, and Marcie had the same sentiment. He had numbers and support. The rest was up to him.

After lunch, we ran errands together, then took Oscar for a long walk around the city and ended up at the harbor. The water was sparkling in the sunlight, reminding me of the

diamond studs my mom used to wear. I hadn't asked Jeremy, but I hoped he had some family and friends to turn to as well.

That night as we lay in bed, Foster pulled me close. "You have a lot going on. A new job, the phone call with Jeremy... take the time to breathe."

"That reminds me." I turned to face him. "Before Jeremy called, I was going to talk to you about—"

"It can wait, if it's too much."

In the glow of the full moon through the window, I could see the forehead lines and the downward cast of his mouth. There were things worrying him too.

"You're always telling me to take my time. And that was what I thought I needed to do." I reached out and brushed my fingers along his jaw. "Being here with you has been the absolute best. But I'll admit I was scared I was fooling myself. That I would fall into another situation where I was giving up everything for someone else."

"I would never—"

"I know that." I cupped his cheek. "You're a good person. But this isn't about you; it's about me."

"I understand," he replied, kissing my palm. "Maybe it's a good idea to talk to a therapist about all you've been through. In the future, I mean. After you're settled in your new job."

I nodded. "I love that you're always thinking about what I need."

"It's what you do when you love someone."

I sighed dreamily and kissed his lips. "You need to make sure you're taking care of yourself too."

“I definitely am.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I teased. “Sometimes you forget the towels in the washer, and I have to run them through the cycle again.”

Foster snickered. “What exactly are you saying?”

The decision clicked so squarely in my chest, it ached. “I want to live here with you and build a life together. But I need to pay half of the rent as soon as I’m able.”

“I…” He sucked in a breath and blinked repeatedly. “Not at all what I expected you to tell me.”

I froze, suddenly doubting myself. “If you still want me.”

“I’ll always want you,” he replied, and I breathed out. “Are you sure?”

I took his hand and placed the palm right up against my heart. “I want to go on walks and get coffee at our favorite spot. I want to dance to Beatles music because it reminds us of our moms. I want to hold you when you’re in the gray, and we’ll look up at the stars together.”

“Fucking hell.” Foster kissed my eyes and nose and lips. “That sounds perfect. I don’t want you to worry about where your next meal is coming from or that I’m going to take advantage of you. That’s not love. You know that, right?”

“I know that now.”

In turn, he took my hand and placed it against his chest. “I love you with all my heart. Can you feel it?”

I blinked back tears as his pulse throbbed against my skin. “I can feel it.”

“I promise to remind you as much as possible.”

“Until we’re old and gray?” I whispered.

He leaned his forehead against mine. “Until we’re old and gray.”

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

Foster

“LOOK AT THAT LINE! It’s around the corner,” Lachlan remarked as I parked the mobile van along the curb. Not only did Lachlan still offer haircuts under the bridge, but I’d converted part of this monstrous van into a reading library where houseless people checked out books and were offered exchanges upon their return.

The idea came to us one night over dinner with Marcie, and when Lachlan mentioned it to Carlos at work the next day, he’d jumped on the notion, offering to foot the bill for the van if we took care of the amenities inside.

So now we offered services every Sunday morning, and it was unbelievably rewarding—almost like a spiritual experience. Urban Cuts was advertised on the side of the van, which helped boost business, so it was a win-win.

“Looks like we’ve got quite a morning ahead of us,” I replied with a wink.

There was a gleam in Lachlan’s eyes as he opened the van door and stepped out. He was energized by this kind of work, and he was damned good at it. Not only by being his charming and personable self, but also by working through the fatigue

until he got through everyone who wanted his undivided attention. He'd had his fingers reset the summer before, so they no longer gave him problems except for what he called a phantom ache, like a whisper memory of what he'd been through.

Lachlan believed it was meant to happen, all of it, so that he could do something more rewarding with his life, and I tended to agree with him. Meeting him changed my life for the better too.

Some weekends Carlos joined us, others Marcie, because they liked to give back as much as we did. But today it was just the two of us and Oscar, who loved all the attention he got from those waiting in line.

“Hey, man, how are you holding up?” Lachlan patted the shoulder of a guy named Eddie, who was only nineteen. He had schizophrenia and ended up on the streets after being released from a state hospital. Lachlan was afraid he had a hard, long road ahead of him, and that had been the catalyst for finally relinquishing his tent and rolling cart to keep this guy safe. “You here for a cut?”

“Nah, I wanted another book.”

I smiled and motioned him inside the van so he could browse the stacks of reading material. I'd expanded my collection to include all sorts of fiction and nonfiction books, and sometimes newspapers and magazines. Eddie especially enjoyed the self-help and mental-health offerings—the idea of stocking up on those occurring to me after reading a powerful book recommended by my therapist. Mental health might've fallen on a higher rung of Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs, but for those experiencing homelessness, I thought perhaps they went hand in hand. The more I listened to people's

stories, the more evident it became that one fed into the other, and it was a hell of a hard cycle to break out of.

Eddie traded in the book he'd checked out last week for another, and then was on his way. He was suspicious of crowds, was always looking over his shoulder, and mostly kept to himself, so him showing up at all was a feat. But he obviously got something out of it. I included a granola bar with each book lent, and I could see him munching on it as he rolled away from the curb.

I looked down at the book he'd returned—*The Power of Letting Go*—and thought about my own struggles with mental health. I was managing my depressive episodes better, and I was getting stronger about finding that reason inside me to get up and feel hopeful about the day. The reason to keep living. That hadn't always been the case in the past, something I'd never admitted to myself before.

Lachlan had also gotten some help. Last fall was a particularly rough period of time. Jeremy had finally left Clint and filed assault charges against him. Lachlan testified at the trial, which meant he had to face Clint again, but he was a trooper, and the therapy sessions helped, along with extra cuddles from me and Oscar.

Clint walked away with a first-degree misdemeanor charge for an attempt to physically harm. Not a felony or jail time, but probation and community service. It was more than most domestic-violence victims got unfortunately.

That chapter of his life behind him, it made Lachlan more determined than ever to advocate for a battered-men's shelter in the city. He began taking social-work courses at CSU with that goal in mind. He, Marcie, and Jeremy became thick as thieves through the whole experience and hung out whenever

they could. Jeremy had also moved away from Akron, settling in a near west-side suburb.

When the line for books lagged, I helped Lachlan where I could with shampoos and handing out toiletries as well as socks and undergarments, which were sorely needed. We budgeted for the items between the two of us, and sometimes it ate into our rainy-day fund, but we agreed it was worth it to help those in need.

By noon, we were exhausted, but we drove away from the bridge with gratified smiles on our faces. We parked the van in the Urban Cuts lot, where it would remain until Carlos or any other employees needed it. They had become like family to Lachlan, the customers too, and it was exactly what Lachlan needed in his life.

He'd tried to reach out to his father once last year, but it hadn't gone well. I admired him for trying, but sometimes you just had to cut toxic people loose.

But Lachlan had more than enough support now between friends and my family, who had embraced him with open arms. He loved Chicago, and we planned to return every holiday. Who knew he was so sentimental about traditions and routines. I loved that about him.

Speaking of, we'd recently celebrated the two-year anniversary of the day we met. Oscar had been included, of course, and we spent the day hiking in the Metroparks and then got ice cream for all of us afterward.

We held hands as we trekked home and discussed plans for the upcoming Independence Day weekend. My family would be coming into town, and I was so anxious and excited, I was practically thrumming.

Little did Lachlan know that at the planned get-together with family and friends, I was going to propose. Well, me and Oscar. Mom had come up with the idea, and I loved it. I would tie the ring box around Oscar's neck with a bandanna that read: *Will You Marry Me?* Marcie had helped me decide on the ring, which was a simple brushed-silver band, and I'd had the bandanna specially made. I only prayed it would go off without a hitch. If Lachlan said yes, it would make me the happiest guy on the planet.

Once home, we showered together, kissing and jerking each other off. Then we napped on the couch with Oscar before straightening the house and getting ready for our dinner out, something we did when we didn't feel like cooking.

"You look handsome," I said, meeting Lachlan's gaze in the mirror.

I still enjoyed seeing that rosy flush on his cheeks as he turned to kiss me. "So do you."

We grabbed our phones and keys and walked to the elevator with our fingers laced together.

It was a simple life. A happy one. One I had always imagined while looking up at the stars.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading In the Gray! I hope you enjoyed it!

Stay tuned for teasers, bonus content, and/or release dates for my future books by joining my Facebook reader group or newsletter. Follow the links below!

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Roosevelt College Series:

XOXO

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Franklin U Multi-Author Series:

Making Waves (#7 but also stands alone)

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Moon Flower

Moon Spell

Easton U Pirates series:

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So This is Christmas series:

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Under My Skin series:

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Reawaken

Reclaim

Redeem

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The Darkest Flame

The Faintest Spark

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The Sweetest Goodbye

Co-written with Nyrae Dawn (AKA Riley Hart)

Free Fall series:

Touch the Sky

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Paint the Stars

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Pretty Perfect

Pretty Sweet

Pretty Wild

Co-written with Felice Stevens

Heartsville series:

Last Call (MMM)

First Light (MM)

M/F books that can all standalone:

All of You

Before You Break

Whisper to Me

Promise Me This

Two of Hearts

Three Sacred Words

Twelve Truths and a Lie

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Once upon a time, Christina Lee was a wardrobe stylist in New York City. She spent her days schlepping clothes, hailing cabs, and on the hunt for the perfect lip gloss, which became a bit of an addiction—along with books and coffee. You could always find her perched in a corner booth of a favorite diner sipping a dark roast and reading.

She currently lives in the Midwest with her husband and son—her two favorite guys. She's been a clinical social worker and a special education teacher and while very rewarding, they still didn't feel like an exact fit. It wasn't until she began writing a weekly column for the local newspaper that the bells went off in her head. She could finally draw from her real-life experiences and vivid imagination to write fiction—and she's never looked back.

Christina writes romance in different sub-genres, but mostly with LGBTQ characters because representation matters and *everyone* deserves a happily-ever-after.