

A Coming-of-Age MM Novel

# LOUD

*Places*

A. E. JENSEN

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Loud Places

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# WARNINGS & READER ADVISORY

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*Loud Places* is an MM romance with mature content and adult themes. Possible triggering content includes:

- Domestic abuse
- Violence against a minor
- Verbal abuse, including but not limited to homophobic and sexist remarks
- Emotional abuse
- Mentions of bullying
- One character loses a sibling during childhood
- One character is abandoned by parent during early childhood
- Mentions of alcohol abuse and underage drinking
- Sexual dominance (consensual)
- Breath Play (consensual)
- Demeaning language during sexual encounters (consensual)

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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**EVER SINCE** I can remember picking up a book, coming-of-age novels have been my favorites. And even though it's been a while since I've read one, I still remember some of my favorites as if it were only yesterday that I read them. *Call it Sleep* by Henry Roth, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and *The Stones of Summer* by Dow Mossman. So it didn't come as a surprise to me that my second novel ended up being just that. A story about growing up and growing into the person that you're meant to be.

*Loud Places* is a collection of moments. The past and the present weaving into one story. You will have to add in the rest. I can only tell you what my boys have shared with me. Some of it was probably too painful to tell or just didn't seem that important in the grand scheme of things—other things were just forgotten as the years went by. But I'm telling you the important parts. Those that paint a picture of my boys. Moments where they grow and where they connect. Moments where they fuck around—literally and figuratively—and where they feel fucked up. Because we all do sometimes. Mostly, I've chosen to show them how I hope my own children will continue to become as they grow up—brave, bold, and beautiful creatures who stand up for themselves and others.

It is a conscious decision on my part that Matty doesn't seek therapy while the book plays out. He may want to do that at a later stage in life—when he's ready. Not everyone is ready at the age of nineteen or twenty-five to seek professional help for their trauma. I know I wasn't—I was thirty-seven. This was never “just” a book about dealing with the aftermath of abuse—that is a different and just as important story to tell—but Matty's part of *Loud Places* is about friendship, found family and resilience.



Some of the grown-ups in this story have checked out, whereas others step up. Some are unintentionally neglectful whereas others just try to do the best they can, which is really all you can ever ask. Some are simply abusive assholes, whereas others take you into their home and their hearts because they are decent human beings. In the end, family has little to do with blood and genes. It's a title we claim but only some of us earn.

*Loud Places* is first and foremost the story of Ethan and Matty and the people who love them. Avery, Austin, Will, Millie, Ray, Belinda, and Dan. It's a story of breaking free from the ties that hold you down and the words that try to crush you. It's about letting go of the expectations of others but also from the expectations we put on ourselves. At times, it may be hard to read, so please be mindful of things that trigger you. I have tried to treat the sensitive subjects with care and respect. Above all, *Loud Places* is a story of love and friendship.

*Loud Places* is dedicated to my son, Villads. You are my beautiful, green-eyed boy. You held my hand when I was afraid to take the first step towards the rest of my life. I am proud of you every day. May you always be as free and loved as you are right now.

*I go to loud places  
To search for someone  
To be quiet with  
Who will take me home  
You go to loud places  
To find someone who  
Will take you higher than  
I took you  
—Jamie XX*

# CHAPTER ONE

---

## Ethan – Now

“**HONEY, DO YOU** really think this is a good idea?” his mother asked, a deep frown between her dark auburn brows. Although after having parented her eldest son for the past nineteen years, three months and eight days, she had to have known asking again was fruitless.

One hand firmly planted on the worn steering wheel of his silver 2005 Honda Civic, Ethan took a deep breath and answered his mom for the twentieth time since he, the day after graduation, had announced that he was gonna go look for Matty.

Sitting around the dinner table, Dan and Belinda Bishop had looked at their son with a concerned but not that surprised look on their kind, weather-beaten faces when he'd broken the news. That he couldn't stand it any longer, not knowing where Matty was. Not knowing if he was okay. It was the not knowing that was the worst. And they, as they had with everything else in life thrown their way, had taken a deep breath and nodded in acceptance. They'd tried to show understanding even though Ethan knew that it wasn't easy for this West Texan couple to let him leave. They preferred to keep their children close, so he tried to be gentle when he reminded her now.

“Mom, we've already been over this...” Ethan's sea-green eyes met her equally green ones in a silent plea. *Please, Mom. I need to do this. I miss him. Every day, I miss him.*

Brushing a stray auburn lock of hair away from his ear where it had escaped his faded Texas Rangers ball cap, her face softened, and she almost looked her age; the wear and tear gone briefly from her face. The same face that had radiated so much pride at him from the bleachers during countless Little League games under the blazing Texas sun.

He'd stopped playing at the age of twelve because Matty was no longer able to play following a complicated arm fracture. Baseball had always been their thing, his and Matty's. But there'd been no point in playing after Matty got hurt.

Ethan had started running track instead all the way through junior high and high school and what he got in return was a lean, muscular figure. Working at the neighboring farm had provided the additional layers of muscle. It was the kind of physique you could never get from working out at a gym or from paying a personal trainer an obscene amount of money. It could only come from a combination of favorable genetics, hard physical labor, and dedication. He was always taken for older than he actually was. Ethan didn't mind, though. In a way he felt older than his peers, often being the man in the Bishop home when his dad was away working at different construction sites in Austin, Dallas or further down south weeks, sometimes months, at a time.

"I know you miss him, sweetheart, but it's an awful long way to travel all by yourself. I wish you'd wait 'til next year when Ryder graduates. Then you could go together." His mom nodded at the hand-drawn map and the blank postcard lying across the passenger seat, a concerned look in her eyes. "It's not like you know where he is, hon. Not for sure."

Ethan had always been the spitting image of this kind, strong woman. So much so that his dad had often joked that the mailman must have paid one too many visits to the Bishop household when he was away working for longer periods at a time. His mom would laugh while she swatted at her husband's balding head playfully. Yeah, there'd never been any doubt in Ethan's heart that his parents were crazy about each other. If he was lucky enough, it was the kind of relationship he hoped to have himself one day. A real partner. Someone who not only got him, but stood by him, too, and knew when to push and when to not.

Drumming his left hand impatiently against his jean clad thigh, he tried to hide the annoyed hint in his voice.

"I need to do this, Mom. I can't not know. It's eating at me. It's been eating at me for three years now. You know that. I

can't wait another year. Besides, Ryder's got other plans." He bit his lower lip, failing to bite back the tremble in his voice. His younger brother was heading for a football scholarship. They all knew that. Ryder had a God given talent which was going to be his ticket out of Eden. At least one of the four brothers had that golden ticket to a future outside of West Texas within their grasp.

"I know it has been troubling you, sweetheart. We've all been worried about Matty. But don't you think that the police would have found him by now..."

He interrupted her with a *hmpff*, raising his voice an octave.

"Jesus, Mom! Do you really think that they've been looking that hard for him? A run-away teen? After what happened that night? I'm just grateful his sad excuse of a father hasn't started looking for him in earnest yet. No one's gonna look for Matty except me, Mom. No one." Whenever he got upset or excited, his Texan drawl rose to the surface and provided his voice with a melodic twang. Ethan hated that. It reminded him that he was stuck in the Lone Star State, that his escape was temporary. That there was an expiration date to his road trip. When he found Matty and made sure that he was okay, Ethan would have to head back home. He had responsibilities. People who relied on him. A family he'd helped provide for since a young age.

"Don't you talk to me in that voice, young man." His mom planted her small hand on her left hip, which was broad and curvy from bearing four children and perhaps one too many BBQ Sundays. At 5'4", she was the shorty in the family, as her husband would put it teasingly while squeezing her shoulder affectionately. In a family of giants, Ethan and his siblings had taken after their father with his 6'2" height, and at the age of seventeen Ethan had finally outgrown his dad by an inch, much to Dan Bishop's eternal regret. "And don't take the good Lord's name in vain," she concluded her chastising.

Looking down at the steering wheel, he swallowed back the lump in his throat, mumbling a reluctant apology.

“Sorry, ma’am. I just... He’s got no one, Mom. No one except for me. Who’s gonna look for him if I don’t?” Sadness and longing tinted his deep gentle voice, giving away that Ethan was no longer a child but he wasn’t a fully grown man either. His voice didn’t carry his father’s hoarseness from a lifetime of smoking Camels straight and working construction, breathing in God knows what kind of fumes, but there was still time...

Reaching her right hand through the rolled-down car window, his mom squeezed his shoulder reassuringly while nodding her head in silent resignation. As if she knew that she wouldn’t be able to talk him out of this. Ethan had always been told that he was a stubborn child and once his mind was set on something, even a band of wild horses couldn’t keep him from it.

“You’ve got enough gas money?” She raised a brow at him, while stroking her hand up and down his left arm. He felt bad that his mom asked him this because money had always been tight around the Bishop house. Construction didn’t pay particularly well when you were an unskilled laborer like his dad, often doing odd jobs around the site that no one else wanted to do.

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled, the tight feeling in his chest giving way to a light flutter of pride and excitement. He had been working every summer for the past three years at the Peterson farm five miles out of town, saving up every penny he could for this trip. Even though he would chip in with groceries or unexpected expenses at home, he’d still been able to put away a small sum each month. In addition to the money that he and Matty had been saving even way before that, he had sufficient funds to get him all the way to Maine and then some. *Maine*. Who knew if Matty was even there?

“You’re gonna call every night, you hear? I don’t wanna worry about you lying half-dead in a ditch somewhere. Or even worse, married to some smart big city guy in a shot gun wedding.” She winked at him, but he recognized the worried lilt to her voice that seeped through her calm exterior. They’d never been away from each other like this before aside from

school field trips or weekend camping trips with his dad and brothers. Being a close-knit family, his mom kept her four sons close, never failing to let them know that she spent every waken moment concerned about their well-being.

Ethan's parents had always suspected that he liked boys, so there'd been no huge coming-out-drama when at thirteen he put into words what his parents had apparently known all along. They'd told him that they may not understand the whole gay pride stuff with the rainbows and the same sex marriage, but they knew in their hearts that there was no greater love than the love they felt for their firstborn and his younger siblings.

God came second and *bigots could just go to hell* as his dad had put it without a hint of doubt in his voice when Ethan had been called a *dick-eating fag* at school at the age of fifteen. To the popular Ethan, it had been a wake-up call that not everyone would be as accepting as Matty and his parents were about his newfound sexuality. Kids could be mean and in these parts of the country it wasn't every day that a fifteen-year-old *came out*. Well, Ethan hadn't exactly come out. Karen Miller had overheard him and Matty over lunch talking about Ethan's latest celebrity crush, Ryan Gosling, and the rumor that Ethan Bishop was gay had spread all over Eden High by that afternoon. A lot of teen girls had had their hearts broken that day and Ethan had caught a small glimpse of what it was like to be Matty at school. To be at the bottom of the food chain.

Ethan's dad, however, hadn't hesitated for one second before he'd marched down to the principal's office, dusty coveralls and all. In not so many words, he'd made it clear to Ms. Dawson that he'd take over the disciplinary part of her job description if she wasn't fit for the task. Ethan filling out with muscles over the next nine months or so during a growth spurt had taken care of the rest. No one wanted to call a giant like Ethan Bishop a *dick-eating fag*. At least not to his face. Ethan had decided to keep his sexuality to himself after that and soon it had become old news that Ethan Bishop was *maybe, possibly gay*.



“I promise, Mom. I’ll call every night.” He knew that he’d won the battle when she placed a soft kiss on his cheek, leaving an imprint of the peach-colored lipstick she’d always worn as long as Ethan could remember. If his mom wanted to look real fancy for a birthday party or the Fourth of July, she’d give her nails a coating of peach too. Wetting her right thumb, she brushed the smudge away with the kind of unfiltered affection you only show someone you’ve loved their entire life.

“Good. You be a good boy, now.” Tears were starting to pool at the corners of her deep green eyes as she gazed at the laundry blowing in the warm summer breeze.

“I will. I promise.” His voice came steadfast and then spilled over in a more hesitant nuance. “What about Dad?”

“Don’t you worry about your father. I’ll handle him,” she winked, swiping at a stray tear. “You just worry about finding our boy and making sure that he’s alright.”

“Mom... Please don’t cry,” he pleaded, his voice carrying a strained ring to it. “I’ll be back before you know it. Just pretend that I’m going to college or something and I’ll be home for Thanksgiving.”

“You better be,” she laughed through her tears, wiping furiously at her runny nose. “Or I’ll come dragging you home myself.” Tapping her right hand on the roof of the silver Honda, she licked her lips.

“You go on now, baby. Wanna beat that morning traffic.” She glanced at him one last time before turning around and walking back towards the small pale-yellow house he’d lived in his entire life. Morning rush-hour in Eden consisted mostly of the odd John Deere or two, along with the school bus and a few pick-up trucks that had seen better days. But still.

Ethan nodded to himself before he gazed out of the dusty windshield. Time to go. As he turned the key and the engine sprung to life, his mom yelled over the shoulder of her pink floral dress.

“Don’t you forget now, sweetheart. Every night. You call me every night.”

Throwing one last glimpse in the rearview mirror, he waved at his mom before pulling out into the US 87 leaving his hometown Eden, population now 3581, behind.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### Matty – Then

“**WHAT DO YOU** mean it’s too far?” Matty looked annoyed at his best friend who was measuring out the distance between the Ouachita National Forest and Maine on the East Coast. The tip of Ethan’s tongue was sticking out between his lips, which told Matty that he was in deep concentration. It was a habit Ethan had had since kindergarten when they’d practiced using scissors in Ms. Clark’s class. Matty hadn’t been able to get a hang of it until Ethan had asked Ms. Clark for a left-handed pair of scissors. So typical of Ethan to always notice small things that others paid no attention to. It had always been like that, Ethan being Matty’s protector.

“It just is, Matty. I mean, c’mon... it’s like... at least...” Ethan trailed off, once again losing himself in calculating the distance between the two small Xs on the hand-drawn map.

They’d started the map nearly four years ago when they were both eight. Matty had been in the hospital for two nights after dropping a dinner plate on the kitchen floor. A broken arm for a broken plate. That was the logic of the Craig household. Matty’s mom had told the doctor that Matty had always been a clumsy child and that tripping down the stairs to the basement was nothing unusual when it came to her eight-year-old. Matty didn’t recall ever falling down the stairs to the basement, because the basement was really creepy so why would he even go there? But since his mom told the nice doctor that he’d fallen down the stairs, Matty figured it must be right. The year before, he’d taken a *fall* from the black cherry tree in their backyard. Overhearing her talking to the young ER doctor, Matty had tasted the word on his tongue. *Clumsy*. It ran in the family, he guessed. His mom had always been *clumsy* herself. Spending two nights in the hospital wasn’t that bad, though. He got to have green and pink Jell-O’s— -as many as he wanted— -and he got to watch all his

favorite cartoons on the small TV hanging from the mint-colored wall.

“Look, if you really wanna go to the ocean, we can go.” Two sea-green eyes looked at him, the green sometimes blue when the sun was just right on the Texas sky.

“Really?” Matty blurted as he flung himself at his best friend, making Ethan yell as he lost his balance and landed on his back. “We can go?” Matty swallowed back the lump in his throat as he soaked up the broad smile building on Ethan’s face. The best thing in the fucking world was Ethan’s smile. Along with red cherry popsicles, Captain Crunch and bugs. Matty knew that you weren’t supposed to curse. Good boys didn’t do that, but heck, his own father was Chief of Police in Eden, and he cursed all the time.

“Sure, man. Why not? But we gotta make it the last stop.” Ethan sported a frown between his auburn brows. The same frown that Mrs. Bishop always got when they would steal cookies from the cream-colored jar above the stove or forget to close the fence to the chicken coop. Ethan’s mom scowled momentarily when they messed up and then with a twinkle in her green eyes, she’d call them *rascals* or *rugrats* or stuff like that before she shooed them inside to wash up. Later, over dinner, she would tell Ethan’s dad about all the stuff they’d been up to, and he’d pretend to be mad, winking at them conspiratorially when Ethan’s mom was busy gathering the used plates.

After dinner they’d help clean up the toolshed as punishment, but Matty always thought that it was a strange kinda punishment, because afterwards Mr. Bishop would make a fire in the old, beat-up oil barrel and they would make S’mores. If it was a real awesome night, he’d get to sleep over in Ethan’s room with the cool lamp that cast stars and spaceships on the ceiling, tucked in under the soft blue comforter that smelled of laundry detergent and something that was just entirely Ethan.

Those were the rare nights, though. On most nights, his father’s SUV would pull up in front of the Bishops’ porch and he would talk to Mr. Bishop about the closing of yet another

oil field while he'd politely thank Mrs. Bishop for putting up with his *troublemaker of a son*. Matty would then get in the SUV and while he'd look back at Ethan's house, he'd feel the same strange tightening in his chest, which he always felt, when his best friend was out of sight.

For the rest of the afternoon, they measured out the distance between the Rockies, which Matty had drawn using the crayons Ethan had gotten for Christmas, and the ocean. Ethan, who'd always been better in school, would calculate the mileage and the money they would need for gas and meals. Matty would write everything down meticulously in the small, yellow notebook that had their entire future lined out. Matty had never been good at spelling, but Ethan always said that it didn't matter because he knew how to read *Mattish* which took some real genius at times and a whole lotta patience. *Etans and Mattys Purfekt Plases*. Matty had come up with the title of their map. At first, Ethan had objected.

"There's no such thing as a perfect place, Matty. There just ain't."

"Of course there is! Anything away from Eden with you, is a perfect place." Matty had frowned at him, a pouty expression transforming his soft features. In the end, Ethan had relented, and Matty had written the title in a bright blue crayon at the top of the map.

Once they were done, they carefully folded the map and tucked it away along with the crayons and the notebook under the loose floorboard in the tree house. Matty sometimes wondered if the crayons would be all used up before they got away. Or if Ethan would have to ask for them again for another birthday or Christmas, whichever came first. Matty never asked for crayons because drawing was for girls and Nancy boys. Real boys didn't draw. It was enough that he was sometimes mistaken for a girl when they were younger, with his sky-blue eyes and his soft blond curls. He didn't have to act like a *goddamn chick* too, his father would hiss at him. Boys went hunting or shot at targets or got in to fist fights at school. Boys needed to learn how to become men. *Real* men.

Not *girly* men like those city folks his father cursed at, when he pulled them over on the highway just because he could.

Yeah, Matty figured they'd need more crayons before they could get away. In April Ethan would be twelve and then six months later, Matty would follow behind. It had always been like that, Matty following behind Ethan, trailing along. Ever since they'd met on the first day of baseball practice at the age of five and six, when Matty had tripped on the last step to the dugout.

*Are you okay, honey?* A soft woman's voice had asked while two pairs of equally green eyes had stared down at him. Before Matty could answer, his father had pulled at his right arm, and Matty knew that when his father would pull at his arm, it was best to follow. It would bruise either way, but the tightness of the grip would be an indicator of his father's mood for the rest of the day. It wasn't that his father was ever in a good mood—at least not around his mom and him—but just like anything else, there were still degrees of his anger and meanness.

*Clumsy.* That's what his father had told the nice lady with the green eyes while he placed his large hand at the back of Matty's damp neck. Matty was a *clumsy child*. And a bit *slow* too. Matty had hardly felt the weight of the hand that had never touched him with kindness nor affection. Neither had he felt the dull pain in his right knee which he'd landed on, adding another bruise on top of endless layers of bruises. Instead, he'd gazed up at the boy standing next to the woman in the pretty green dress, his auburn curls surrounding his freckled face. Matty had never considered if he liked freckles or not. In fact, he didn't recall once in his five-year long life having any opinion when it came to freckles. But from that Sunday afternoon at baseball practice and onwards, they became one of his favorite things in life along with auburn hair and green, sometimes blue eyes.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### Ethan – Now

**SEPTEMBER 30<sup>TH</sup>, 2020.** The blank postcard pictured a painting of a small fishing boat at the docks of a small fisherman's town. Well, at first, it at least appeared to be blank. But just below the postal stamp, there was a small pencil drawn star. *Stella*. It had to be. Ethan once again read the inscription at the bottom of the postcard. Hundreds of times over the past three years, he'd repeated those words to himself; they had almost become a prayer. Or more like a promise. *Traditional fishing boat, Grant's Harbor, Maine.*

*Please be there, Matty. Please wait for me. I'm sorry it took me this long, but I'm coming for you now.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### Ethan – Now

***“THOU SHALT NOT bear false witness against thy neighbor.”*** Stopping for gas some thirty miles north of Waco, Ethan had just put the gas nozzle back at the gas pump when he noticed the small billboard in front of the roadside church across the street. The archaic words reverberated through him, and suddenly he was back at that fateful night three years ago.

*“I really don’t know, sir.”* Ethan knew it was wrong to lie. Of course, he did. Ever since he could remember, his parents and Pastor Carrington had told him so. It was a sin to lie. But what if you didn’t exactly lie? What if you just chose to keep a secret? Would that still be a sin? Ethan was pretty sure that in this case, the good Lord wouldn’t hold it against him if he kept a secret. Because the truth could be dangerous. And irreversible.

That’s why, when the police had come to his house on a warm August evening to question him about the whereabouts of his best friend Matty, sixteen-year-old Ethan had told them that he didn’t know anything. That he had no idea. Because it hadn’t exactly been a lie, had it? He hadn’t known for sure where Matty had gone off to—and he sure as shit wasn’t gonna tell Deputy Thomas Wilson that he had an idea. Because Deputy Wilson worked for Chief Craig and no matter what, Chief Craig was never to find Matty again. Ethan just wished that Matty would’ve waited for him because all along it had been their plan to run away together. That was the worst part, Ethan had thought, as he’d sat between his parents, a tight feeling in his chest. That his best friend had left town, had bailed on him. But once Deputy Wilson had gotten to the next part and the whole reason behind his late visit, Ethan had known why there was no way that Matty could’ve waited for him.



Sitting on the worn green couch between his parents, Ethan had fisted his hands in the soft fabric while Wilson recounted what had happened at the Craig house earlier that evening. Fixing his gaze on the white curtains hanging from the living room window, Ethan had heard bits and pieces from the serious conversation between the grown-ups. The monotonous voice of the deputy had blurred into the background accompanied by the occasional gasp slipping from his mom's peach-colored lips. His dad had gotten up from the couch at one point and had begun walking restlessly around the small living room until his mom had asked him to *please sit down again, Dan, you're making me nervous*.

Chief Craig had been hit over the head with a baseball bat. At least that's what Fiona Craig had told the 911 operator, when she'd called in at 7:41 p.m. She'd sounded calm and when the operator had asked her if the perpetrator was still in the house, she'd replied in a neutral voice that, no, her fifteen-year-old son had just left their home in the family truck. The operator had asked Mrs. Craig if she could please repeat that part but by then she'd already hung up the phone.

Arriving at the scene at the same time as the paramedics, the local police, which consisted of Deputy Wilson and his partner Aaron Wilkowski, had found an unconscious police chief in a pool of bright red blood which had already begun seeping into the hardwood floor beneath him. Fiona Craig, who according to the deputy looked like she'd taken a fall from the fifth floor of a building, had asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee—or she could also re-heat some leftovers for him in case he'd had to interrupt his family dinner. Guiding her to the beige recliner in the family den, Deputy Wilson had wrapped her in a multi-colored quilt and poured her a generous glass of Marker's Make. Placing the glass of auburn liquid into her trembling hands, he'd pulled out his notebook with the intention of questioning Mrs. Craig.

With her frail voice nothing but a whisper, Deputy Wilson had had to lean in closely towards the battered woman. Taking in her injuries, he'd once again asked her what had happened, but he'd suspected that the poor woman was slowly slipping into a state of shock. She appeared incoherent and withdrawn

when he tried to question her. Repeating the same sentence continuously, Fiona had rocked back and forth in the recliner, the quilt slowly slipping from her bony shoulders. *My Matty is a good boy... He's a good boy, my Matty...*

So yeah, when Deputy Wilson had asked Ethan if he knew where Matty could've gone off to, he had lied. He had lied because telling the truth wasn't an option. Because Ethan very well knew that Fiona Craig often looked like she'd taken a fall from a high building, and it must have been real bad this particular evening if Matty had taken a baseball bat to his father's head. Real bad.

Ethan shook his head, the disturbing memory of that night once again fading into the shadows. Looking at the hand-drawn map, he couldn't help smiling at Matty's innocent handwriting and how the then eleven-year-old Matty had insisted on the title that afternoon in the tree house. *Purfekt Plases*. Ethan remembered figuring that Matty needed it more than he did. Believing that there was such a thing as a perfect place out there. He hadn't had the heart to tell Matty that he'd spelled it incorrectly—if Matty believed in perfect places, he also knew how to spell the words perfectly. Matty had always been just that. Perfect in every way. Ethan didn't understand how others couldn't see that because to him it was clear as fucking day. Matty was his friend and therefore he was perfect.

Even though the map had been folded again and again over the years and the colors had faded some, he could still make out all the small Xs on the paper. The largest one of them represented some imaginary spot on the coast of Maine. A small fishing town without a name. Only now it had one. *Grant's Harbor*. He tasted the words on his tongue. Could that be it? Was Matty really in Maine? Well, Grant's Harbor was as good a place as any to start looking, he guessed.

*The name doesn't matter. Anything is better than Eden,* Matty had said. *We'll know when we get there, Eth. We'll know when to stop running.*

Ethan had finally given in. Matty had been right. It didn't matter as long as they were together. And now they weren't,

and not knowing the whereabouts of his favorite person in the world made it hard to breathe. It made Ethan want to curl up into a ball and squeeze his eyes shut. But then again, that wouldn't help him find Matty. So, he'd better get a move on.

Approximately two thousand miles lay between Eden, Texas, and the state of Maine. Ethan hoped that he would make it past Dallas and reach Sulphur Springs by early evening. Then tomorrow he'd reach Ouachita National Forest, the first stop on their map.

When his mom had asked him why he intended to stop at all the Xs instead of going straight to Maine, he'd exhaled deeply, looking into her familiar, patient eyes. He didn't know what to tell her. Except that it was like learning how to swim. He had to ease into it—he couldn't just jump in at the deep end of the pool. Ethan had never been someone who just jumped right into things. He needed to prepare himself for the coldness of the water, the depth of the pool and the feeling in the back of your mind that you could drown any minute. It had to be gradual. It just had to be.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### Matty – Then

**“HOW MUCH DOES** a boat cost?” Matty squinted at the gloriously blue Texas sky above before he turned his head towards Ethan.

“I don’t know, man. What kinda boat?” Ethan had his eyes closed, dark-auburn hair falling away from his sun-kissed face. It had been a much brighter shade when they were younger, Matty remembered, but as the years went by Ethan’s hair had turned darker still—much like the color of Matty’s own eyes. The once soft blue tones had gradually sunk into a much darker shade of blue. That was the sum of Matty’s life. Sinking. Falling from lightness into darkness.

Lying in the middle of the wheatfield behind Ethan’s house was one of their favorite pastimes during summer break. Whenever they could get away from chores, they’d run out into the field, laughing at each other until Matty would launch himself at Ethan. They’d land in a bed of straw-yellow wheat, giggling, trying to catch their breath. Matty always wondered how Ethan’s smile seemed to stretch all the way up to the corners of his sparkling eyes—and even further beyond. Like his whole being was set on fire with happiness whenever they were together. Matty had practiced one day in front of the mirror in the bathroom but no matter how much he tried, the smile wouldn’t reach all the way up into his blue eyes. Maybe it was genetic, he figured. Maybe he was just born that way. Inheriting it from his mother. Her rare, weak smiles never reached her eyes either.

“Just a small boat, you know. Some fishing boat or somethin’.” It was August and school break was almost over. While Ethan had grown several inches since school ended in May, Matty was still small for his age. He knew that. And he wasn’t only small when he compared himself to his best

friend. Matty's figure was much slighter than most of their classmates, and he was slim in all the places where Ethan was beginning to fill out with layers of muscle.

Matty knew that the other kids at school often wondered what a popular kid like Ethan Bishop was doing with the weak and skinny Matty Craig. Hell, most days Matty wondered too. But there seemed to be no doubt on Ethan's part that Matty was his best friend in the world and that Ethan intended for it to stay that way. As if the six-year-old Ethan had made a life choice that day at baseball practice that Matty was his to keep. If he could just live in a world where it was just him and Ethan, things would be a whole lot simpler. But for now, he had to share Ethan, which was okay, he guessed. Because he secretly knew that Ethan liked him best of all—well, maybe second best to Ethan's mom, Belinda. Matty didn't exactly blame her. With her beautiful, curly hair and fierce green eyes, Belinda Bishop was fucking awesome, a Texan mountain lioness if there ever was one. And she baked the meanest apple pie with the kinda crust that crumbled just right when you dug into the first bite.

A prickly sensation spread like an out-of-control wildfire in Matty's chest. Another school year meant one step closer to getting away with Ethan. One year closer to getting on the road, feeling the wind sweeping across his face. One year closer to never looking back. He knew that Ethan didn't feel the same way. They hadn't exactly talked about it, but Matty knew that Ethan wasn't running, he was going. He would come back again. For Christmases and Thanksgivings. For birthdays and maybe the Fourth of July for the parade. Matty would never come back once they left Eden. There was reason to.

"A small boat?" Ethan repeated. "Uhm, I don't know, man. But it should be fine with what I'm savin' from Peterson's and what you're gettin' from Miller's." Ethan looked at him, face contemplative for just a second. "We *will* get away, Matty. And you *will* get your boat. Don't worry about it. It *will* be enough."

It was the strangest thing. Whenever Ethan made a promise, it came true. Just like the time when Ethan had reassured him that Kelly Harrold was into him, and Matty had gotten his first kiss behind the bleachers at the football game against the Abilene Eagles. Or when Ethan had told him that he just had to ask old Miller if he could use a hand at the hardware store. Mr. Miller had given Matty a job without the blink of an eye. That was six months ago now. Matty hoped that this time it would come true as well.

“What do you wanna call her?” Ethan spoke between the straw of wheat between his lips.

“Huh? What do you mean,” Matty traced the flight of a bird across the clear, blue sky, watching it soar above their heads. The orange-red tail feathers gave it away. He knew most of the birds in this area. This beauty was the red-tailed hawk. One of Matty’s favorites. You would even see it perched on a fence post from time to time, gazing out into the vastness of the Blackland Prairies.

“The boat. What do you wanna call her?”

“I don’t know... I haven’t thought about it. Why? And why does it have to be a *she*?” Matty sat up and looked down at his best friend. Ethan had always been the smart one between them. It wasn’t that Matty was dumb or anything even though the word had often been thrown at him along with *stupid*, *useless* and *crybaby* at home and at school. Ethan told him all the time that he was smart enough. Matty just knew different stuff from what they taught at Eden City School. Like what the West Texas sky would look like exactly thirty minutes before a storm was coming. Or when the corn was just about ready to be harvested. Or the amount of different insect species in all of Texas. Matty had a thing with bugs. Yeah, he may know about things like that, but Matty wasn’t good at stuff that the teachers cared about. Or stuff that would land you a free ride to a college somewhere fancy—or heck, just anywhere—and the fuck outta Eden.

“Boats are always *shes*, doofus,” Ethan winked and ruffled Matty’s head of blond hair. That had always been their thing. Whenever Ethan would wink at Matty, he knew that he was

joking. It was okay when Ethan called him *doofus* or *dumbass* because there was always a fondness in his voice when the words were spoken. So unlike the meanness and cruelty which tinted his father's snarl when the same words were thrown at him in anger or maybe even hate.

Yeah, Matty had never really figured out why his father hated him. He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when he realized that his father despised him. No, it'd just always been that way. The feral glimmer of loathing in his father's icy blue eyes whenever he'd speak to him. Or rather at him. The hint of contempt in every little remark that he would grit out between his teeth. Sometimes the hateful slurs were accompanied by just a drop or two of spittle settling on his father's thin lower lip or landing on Matty's nose or chin.

Yeah, the beautiful boy lying next to Matty didn't have one mean bone in this body. Ethan wasn't only his best friend in the whole world. He was everything that was bright and good. He was the beacon that Matty searched for whenever he felt lost. The comforting thought, which was always in the back of Matty's mind, reminding him that they *would* get away one day soon. And that every day spent listening to his father's random ranting was just one day closer to never having to listen to that SOB again.

"*Stella*, I guess," Matty's voice came out as a whisper, almost swallowed up by the sound of the grasshoppers and of the yellow wheat swaying in the August breeze. "Like a star, you know. Shining in the night sky."

"*Stella*," Ethan repeated, turning his green gaze to Matty. "That's beautiful, Matty. I like that... *Stella*..."

"Yeah?" Matty couldn't help the feeling of joy, and pride almost, which swept through his chest and further down his body before it settled like a soft ball of cotton-candy in his stomach.

"Yeah, it's fitting, you know," Ethan continued. "You'll never be lost again. Whenever you don't know where to go next, you just look towards the sky and that star. Then you'll know exactly where to go."

“Yeah...” Matty swallowed the lump forming in his throat, blinking back the traitorous tears building at the corners of his eyes. *I already have that constant in my life. That beaconing star shining much brighter than all the rest.*



## CHAPTER SIX

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### Ethan – Now

“**THERE’S A DROUGHT** now, son, so no open fire. If you wanna cook something, you can use the facilities in the communal area next to the showers.” The park ranger, who’d introduced himself as Ken, crossed his hairy arms above a protruding belly. He had a friendly smile even though he’d probably given the same instructions a hundred times already that day if not more.

“That’s okay, sir. I already ate in Sulphur Springs, so I’m just gonna put up my tent and check out the area and the trails.” The meal in Sulphur Springs consisting of a dry cheeseburger, greasy fries, and a Coke hadn’t exactly been memorable and after only a day and a half on the road, Ethan already missed his mom’s cooking.

“Sure thing, son. Whereabouts are you from, then?” Ken scratched at his full beard, flecks of gray peeking through the dark brown, matching the spots of gray in his pale blue eyes.

“Eden, sir. West Texas. Born and bred, sir,” Ethan replied. The *sir* slipped from his lips just as easily as the *Amen* in church on Sundays—or just as naturally as the *fuck* gritted against Jimmy Harrow’s damp forehead whenever he would give Ethan a hand job in the high school locker room or the storage room next to the janitor’s office. *Damn*, there weren’t many things that Jimmy Harrow, the local butcher’s middle child, did with dedication and skill, but he sure knew how to give a mean hand job.

“And where are you headed? You off to college or somethin’?” The middle-aged ranger looked around the campsite, one eye on his surroundings at all times while he spoke.

*College.* No, Ethan wasn't going off to college. Like a faint whisper, regret coursed through him, pulling at his heart strings. It was the strangest thing really, but whenever he thought about the future—not the immediate one where he was searching for Matty, no his future in the long run—Ethan's chest would tighten, making it hard to breathe. He didn't often succumb to thoughts about the future because it only made him fucking depressed thinking about something he couldn't have. He pushed the unwelcomed thoughts away and swallowed deeply before replying.

“No, sir. I ain't going off to school. I'm just travelling around for a bit. Seeing the country. Exploring.”

“Alrighty then,” Ken nodded, touching the brim of his hat in a closing salute. “You let me know if there's anything at all, son.” Turning around, Ken stared directly at a group of twenty-somethings, music blasting from a car radio, girls bouncing around in skimpy, cut-off jean shorts.

“Thank you, sir. I will,” Ethan hollered after him, but his words were swallowed up by the music, the laughing children, and the barking dogs.

He'd planned two overnight stays in the park when he'd sketched out the trip in detail three months ago. Matty had always wanted to go camping, so he would've insisted that they bring a tent. Their plan had always been to hike around the park from sunrise until sundown and then fall asleep under the Arkansas night sky, where Matty would once again recount the different trees they'd seen that day. At least that's what they'd wanted to do. Ethan didn't know the first thing about trees, so he'd bought a field guide so that he could at least identify some of them. He would want to tell Matty once he found him.

Ethan set up the tent not too far away from the communal areas but still just on the outskirts. Always being the more outgoing of the two of them, he didn't mind the company of others. Large crowds had never intimidated him and he'd almost always been the center of attention in school. *A natural-born leader amongst his peers*, Ms. Truman had phrased it at the PTA conference his last year of junior high.

His folks had nodded in unison while fancy words like *inclusive*, *emphatic*, and *mature* had spilled from his favorite teacher's pink lips. Yes, Ethan knew that other people his age seemed to gravitate towards him, but the only company he'd ever needed aside from his family's, was Matty's. Always by his side like an extension of himself. Until he suddenly wasn't.

Ethan's mom had always joked that appearance-wise the two boys couldn't be any more different. Like night and day. Ethan towering several inches over Matty, his auburn hair a dark contrast to Matty's golden curls. Matty's eyes were as bright and blue as a Texas July sky, whereas Ethan's were ever changing from a bluish sea-green to the greenest grass. Greener than any grass you ever saw back home, that's for sure. Ethan was built, layers upon layers of muscle adorning his lean runner's physique. Matty was frail, almost. With delicate, slender features that made him appear several years younger than Ethan. But where it mattered, Ethan's mom would add, a fondness to her voice, they were the same. Heart and soul. Spirit and mind.

Ethan was pulled back to the present moment by the activity surrounding him. Other campers were starting to settle in for the night, a couple of families with small children coming back from the cooking area. A couple of dogs were barking next to a silver RV. He sent his mom a quick text to let her know that he'd arrived safely at the park. Strange how he already missed her and his dad. Heck, he even missed his deadbeat brothers. He wondered if he would continue to feel this torn for the entire duration of the trip or if he could let go of this feeling little by little with each mile he put between himself and Eden. If he could somehow let go of the constant concern for his family—the persistent need to know that they were getting by—and focus on the reason why he was on the road in the first place. *Matty*.

Grabbing his toilet bag, Ethan headed for the showers since he wanted to avoid the rush in the morning at the communal facilities. He wanted to get up early for his hike the next day. Get a good head start before the brutal July sun covered everything in a blanket of heat. From noon until late

afternoon, he was planning on hiding out from the sun near one of the many forest basins.

As he'd hoped, the shower area was pretty much deserted, only one other guy getting dressed in front of a locker. He nodded, a friendly smile on his face, as Ethan came to a stop in front of a similar locker at the other end of the changing area.

"Hey man, how are you doing?" the stranger's soft voice drifted towards him along with the scent of something spicy but not too heavy. Pine, maybe. Cedar. Matty would've known.

"Hey," Ethan's voice came out much louder than he'd intended, ringing through the silent changing area, resounding off the metal lockers.

The other guy didn't seem to notice or just didn't care, still sporting a carefree smile on his tanned face. He looked mid-twenties, dirty-blond hair that brushed against his shoulders, just curling slightly at the ends from the recent shower, perhaps. No one back home had long hair. Ethan had always thought that long hair on a guy looked too feminine for his taste, but somehow it suited the stranger.

"Cool," the stranger replied as he stuffed his wet towel into a worn backpack, long, golden locks falling into his face. *Cool*. Ethan tracked the sinewy muscles of the stranger's lower arm and his slender fingers as he pushed a wayward lock behind his left ear, revealing a small silver ring in his earlobe. For some inexplicable reason, Ethan felt a sudden urge to bury his nose in the spot just behind the stranger's ear. To inhale him. To feel him. How would he smell? And what about the dark-blond hair? Would it be soft? It looked soft. *Fuck*. Clenching his fists at his side, Ethan's gaze narrowed in on the stranger's long, slender neck. Light blue veins peeked through the surface of the tanned skin, his Adam's apple protruding slightly. In a flash, Ethan imagined his own calloused fingers wrapped firmly around the delicate throat of this enigmatic stranger. The tips of his fingers tingled with anticipation. What would his deep voice sound like if Ethan's strong hand was obstructing his airways? What would he taste like if Ethan licked across his skin, biting down, marking it?

Ethan hadn't noticed that the young man had come to a stop in front of him, a pair of striking blue eyes taking him in curiously. They weren't blue like Matty's sky-blue. These were a darker shade. Like the dark blue of his father's coveralls or the sky just before the sun set. *These are the kind of eyes you can drown in if you're not careful.* The thought had come out of nowhere and Ethan shook his head, pulling himself back to the present moment.

Suddenly, a slim hand with long, slender fingers hovered in front of him. *Piano fingers*, he remembered his mom used to call them. Ethan had anything but piano fingers. His were large and strong, broad fingers with calloused tips. Years of working on a farm would do that to you. Dark blue veins visible through the tanned skin like rivers running through red dirt canyons.

"I'm Avery." The words came out on a breath, lingering between them, before they settled deep in Ethan's chest, finding a home there.

Ethan reached out his own much larger hand and clasped it around Avery's. The skin was smooth to the touch. Much smoother than his own and Ethan felt his abdomen clench as he sucked in a breath. He noticed that his nails were torn but clean, except for the tip of the thumb and the index finger of Avery's right hand, which were smudged with something black. As Ethan looked up, he was met by the stranger's questioning stare.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," he mumbled, a shy smile pulling at the left corner of his mouth. "I'm Ethan."

"Hi Ethan," Avery continued to hold his hand, his piercing eyes not breaking contact. There was something disarming about this guy. His face honest and unguarded. Innocent, almost. An expression Ethan didn't often see in the grown-ups back home. A look which seemed to be mostly reserved for small kids like his cousins or younger siblings. Open. Unfiltered. Curious.

Avery let go of his hand and for a moment, Ethan's hand continued to linger in the empty space between them before he

dropped it to his side.

“Nice to meet you, Ethan,” Avery breathed as he bent down and grabbed his backpack from the white tiled floor beside his dirty hiking boots. With a casual movement, he tossed the backpack over his right shoulder before he headed for the exit. As he moved past Ethan, his right lower arm lightly brushed against Ethan’s right, jean clad thigh. The touch was featherlight, almost non-existent, but Ethan had to fight a sudden urge to rub at the spot.

Just before he left through the double doors of the changing area, Avery turned around, the remnants of a smile lingering in his blue eyes. Lifting his right hand in a small salute, he bit his plump lower lip. For just a moment, the color of his eyes seemed to shift, and an indecipherable frown appeared between his dark-blond brows. Wistful, perhaps. Then it was gone again, making Ethan think he’d imagined it.

“See you around, Ethan,” Avery spoke, the words drifting towards him, before settling around him like a comforting embrace. Then he was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### Matty – Then

“**THE OR... THE** orp... orph...” The letters were crawling across the page like fire ants or maybe more like acrobat ants. Why couldn’t Mr. Pierce just ask him about ants instead? Matty could tell him that the harvester ant was the largest ant species in West Texas, but that the three most common types of ants in all of Texas were the carpenter ant, the fire ant, and the leaf cutter ant. He could also tell him that even though most ant species were considered pests, a lot of them did really good stuff like improving the soil or acting as cleanup crews in nature. Ants were fucking cool. Way cooler than most humans, that’s for sure.

Why couldn’t he just get it right? Just for once. He’d practiced, goddamnit. All day yesterday with Ethan in the tree house. Matty looked at his best friend sitting two tables away to his right next to Gena Kincaid who’d grown a pair of mid-size boobs over the summer break. Everyone had noticed, including himself. Ethan nodded at him and mouthed something, but he couldn’t make it out.

“Matthew, just... just leave it.” Mr. Pierce, their sixth-grade history teacher, shook his head while sighing deeply as if Matty was doing it on purpose just to ruin his day. “Julia, will you take over, please?” Mr. Pierce continued while the life seemed to drain from his sour face with every extra minute spent in the dull, humid classroom.

Matty felt like shrinking into his seat. *Great.* Another day at Eden City Middle School meant just another day of public humiliation to him. Another day where Matty did everything he could to be as invisible as possible. Most days he failed. He didn’t know why the teachers always picked him. They knew that he was no good. That he couldn’t do it. If they would just leave him alone already.

It didn't matter that Ethan told him that he was smart in other ways. That it didn't matter to him that he wasn't book smart. *You know real things, man. Things that matter. If there was an Apocalypse, Matty, you'd be the lone survivor.* Matty could always find their way home whenever they got lost somewhere just by looking at the sun. He could always tell if a waterhole was okay to swim in or if it would leave you with an itch in your private parts for days. But the teachers didn't care about stuff like that.

He met Ethan in front of his locker in the hallway. Their next class was PE. It was better than history but still a load of horseshit. The worst part was when their PE teacher, Mr. Clarkson, would divide them into pairs and they were to wrestle. That was like playing a more violent version of spin-the-bottle. You never knew who you'd end up with. If you ended up with Jeremy Larsson, you were fucked. He'd repeated the sixth grade twice already and he towered over the rest of the boys by several inches. Yeah, if you were up against Jeremy, you were truly fucked.

"Don't worry about it, man," Ethan pushed at his shoulder, winking at him. "History sucks anyway."

"That's easy for you to say. You're not the one who's fucking shit at reading." Matty knew that it was unfair of him to take it out on Ethan, but there was no one else he could take it out on. Ethan was the only one who always had his back no matter what Matty threw at him. Which was a lot and sometimes Matty was an asshole.

Ethan pulled him into an awkward hug and ruffled his hair affectionately.

"C'mon man, let's blow this shithole," he mumbled into Matty's damp neck. It was a recurring thing between them. They both knew they couldn't. Matty would get the beating of a lifetime if his old man found out that he was skipping school. Ethan would get a disappointed frown from Mrs. Bishop and that would be the end of it.

No, when Ethan said *let's blow this hole*, he never meant right this second. Not today and not tomorrow. Not next year



or the year after that. No, it was a silent promise between them. A secret oath just like in the movies. *Brothers*. That's what Ethan would call them. They were brothers and they would always be together, and they would always have each other's backs. Matty couldn't recall when exactly Ethan had begun calling him *brother*. In a way it was weird because Ethan already had three brothers, but Matty never corrected his best friend because he liked the warm fuzzy feeling that spread in his chest whenever Ethan would say it. It made Matty feel good. Warm and safe. Wanted.

As they headed off to PE with Ethan's left arm slung casually across Matty's shoulders, he reminded himself that he could do this. That this wasn't forever. As long as he had Ethan by his side, he could handle anything thrown at him. All the headshakes and the *useless cry-babies*. All the gum thrown at him on the school bus, or a locker stuffed with wet toilet paper. All the giggles and the punches. He could take it all. Because Matty knew that just like the sun rose in the East and set in the West that one day when Ethan would wink at him and say *let's blow this shithole* that it would be true.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### Ethan – Now

“HEY MAN, HOW'RE you doing?” Ethan sensed the presence of the other guy dropping down next to him before the softness of his breathy voice skated across Ethan's left cheek.

“Hey,” Ethan replied as he stared at the water stretching out in front of him. He was sitting in the shade of several large trees, sheltering him from the brutal noon sun. He didn't know which kind of trees because he'd given up on the so-called *Beginner's Field Guide to North American Trees*. *Beginner's my ass*, he'd thought to himself as he'd thrown the paperback against the trunk of an unidentifiable tree. All the illustrations had looked pretty much the same to him. Matty would've known, though.

Ethan turned towards the guy he'd met yesterday in the changing rooms. *Avery*. He tasted the name on the tip of his tongue. *Avery*. He'd never met anyone before by the name Avery. No one back home was called that. Ethan had always thought that it was a girl's name, anyway. Maybe it was unisex. Just like those perfumes that were unisex, too.

He observed Avery rummaging around in his backpack for a few seconds before he released a loud *aha* and turned to Ethan, a triumphant smile on his tanned face. Holding out both of his hands, a shiny red apple in each of them, he nodded eagerly at Ethan, blue eyes beaming with excitement.

“Pick one,” he grinned. “I know for a fact that they are gloriously addictive because I ate five yesterday and two this morning. I saved you one, though.”

*I saved you one*. The sentence drifted toward him as Ethan tried to catch the meaning. Avery seemed to almost speak in a foreign language. *I. Saved. You. One*. Who said things like that to a stranger? No one in West Texas, that's who. Ethan's chest

tightened at the image of Matty, lost somewhere, and he quickly forced it away into the back of his mind, saving the worry about his best friend for later when he was back in his tent.

Ethan reached out and grabbed the red apple from Avery's outstretched right hand, briefly brushing his fingers against the smooth skin of the other man.

"Thanks," he whispered before wiping the already meticulously clean apple against his worn jeans.

"Excellent choice," Avery blurted, his entire body lighting up with the same excitement that was already painted all over his beautiful face.

Ethan couldn't help it, a loud laugh escaping his lips, taking him by surprise. There it was again. That feeling he'd had yesterday in the changing room. Almost as if Avery could peel away one layer after another of his armor just by his mere presence. Ethan had never met anyone like that before. Back home people didn't just walk up to complete strangers, offering them apples and speaking in sentences with exclamations. Nah, that wasn't the way things worked in Eden. You'd end up with an ass-whooping if you ran around hollering at strangers. Avery would've stood out like a decorated Christmas tree at a Fourth of July bonfire.

Still smiling disarmingly, Avery took a large bite from his crisp apple, loud crunching sounds and appreciative moans coming from his full, pink lips.

"So, what's it going to be?" he spoke, a single drop of fruit juice escaping his lower lip and coming to a rest on his chin. A few days' worth of dark-blond stubble covered the otherwise smooth, unblemished skin.

"Huh?" Ethan couldn't look away from the drop of juice, lingering on Avery's round chin. He wanted to lick it from Avery's stubble-covered skin. Taste it on the tip of his tongue while the sweetness from the apple melted together with the taste of male. As if Ethan was almost separated from his own body, he felt the hardening of his dick behind his jeans, a distant reminder that he hadn't jerked off for two days. He

hadn't felt comfortable doing it in his paper-thin tent or in the communal showers yesterday.

"Are you just going to sit there all day and stare at the water? Or are you going to get in there?" Avery nodded at the water basin, the green surface glistening in the noon sun.

"I'm... I'm not sure." He managed to force the words from his lips, his voice sounding strained and awkward. "I was tryin' to figure out if it was okay, ya know?"

"Only one way to find out," Avery's melodic voice swept through the clearing as he threw the rest of his apple into the underpass and began freeing himself from his sweaty sky-blue t-shirt. Ethan failed to bite back a moan as Avery's flat, tanned stomach appeared inch by excruciatingly sexy inch while he swiftly removed his t-shirt. It was like the velvet curtains in one of those old movie theaters, being pulled aside, revealing a spectacular image.

"You won't know until later." Ethan got up as well and nodded out at the still surface of the water. "I mean, if it's good or not."

Avery threw his t-shirt on top of his backpack before he looked straight into Ethan's eyes, the piercing blue of his irises penetrating him. Miles and miles of tanned skin and mouth-watering lean muscles spread out in front of Ethan. His gaze zeroed in on Avery's nipples that were just a shade or two darker than the rest of his flawless skin. He settled his gaze on the naked pec muscles covered generously in freckles, but hairless.

It occurred to Ethan that he'd never found freckles hot before. In fact, he'd never really thought about freckles one way or another. But on Avery, they were. *Hot*. He wanted to lick each one of them. Tracing the outline with his starved tongue. Tasting them. Biting them. Whereas his shoulders were the shoulders of a swimmer, Avery's waist was narrow as it disappeared into the green fabric of his threadbare hiking shorts. His stomach was flat and defined, but not with the kind of muscles you would get from working out. No, it was the same kind of muscles Ethan had himself from running track all

the way through high school. His hips, also slim, beckoned for Ethan to wrap his large hands around them and press his thumb into the spot just below the protruding hip bone, leaving a print behind that would later turn into a purple mark on Avery's otherwise unblemished skin.

"C'mon, man. I'll go first. If Nessie's out there, she'll feast on me, and you can tell the authorities that I put up a brave fight until the bitter end." As he spoke the final words, Avery reached a clenched fist in the air, his long blond hair brushing his shoulders.

Ethan felt the beginning of a laughing fit brewing in his stomach. What the fuck was happening? What was the deal with this guy? He was fucking crazy. Full on laughing, Ethan looked at Avery, who was now removing his hiking boots and dusty socks at a rapid pace.

"It doesn't matter if you go first, man." Ethan shook his head but began to remove his own clothes as well. Even though he'd stripped in front of guys before at school and in front of Matty when they went swimming at the gravel pit, he, for the first time in his life, felt self-conscious.

Avery, who'd gotten a head start, had removed his shorts and was down to his gray briefs. The muscles of his thighs were just like the rest of his body. Long, lean, and delectably golden. Ethan couldn't help moving his gaze along the firmness of Avery's defined thighs and down to a few wayward freckles just above his knees. He watched as Avery grabbed the waistband of his briefs with his thumbs and index fingers before he pulled them down and stood naked in front of Ethan.

Swallowing back the pool of saliva building in his mouth, Ethan removed the rest of his clothes while he tried his best to not ogle Avery. He really did try his best, but then again, he was just a nineteen-year-old guy whose sexual experience was limited to a few rushed locker room hook-ups with Jimmy Harrow or some nameless stranger from an app. There was no doubt that Avery was the hottest guy he'd ever seen. The guys on Pornhub had nothing on him. *Nothing.*

Avery's flaccid cock rested against his right thigh, a nest of groomed, golden hair surrounding it. He was not overly thick like the bulky jocks in the videos who always seemed to have an anaconda swinging between their thighs. Somehow, he reminded Ethan of the Greek statues they'd seen pictures of in school in Mr. Pierce's history class. He couldn't recall exactly what their history teacher had called the young men, all of them naked. Some of them were warriors, stretching swords out in front of their lean torsos. Ethan had always wondered why they were naked. Who in their right mind would go fighting without any clothes on? He kept searching for the word. Something with *A*... He couldn't remember.

"Ready?" Avery smiled at him, and he was pulled from his lust-induced daze. Then, without another word, Avery ran into the still blue water, screaming at the top of his lungs like some primal being from another time and place. His firm ass cheeks stood out like two milky-white globes against the glowing skin of his rippling back muscles. Two sexy dimples at the base of Avery's spine were winking tauntingly at Ethan, as he remained frozen on the bank, mesmerized by the image in front of him.

*Adonis*. The word slammed into him like a freight train, hitting him in his gut like the single greatest revelation of his life. *Adonis*. That was what Mr. Pierce had called the stunning god-like creatures in the photos of his history book.

Ethan couldn't pull his eyes away from Avery as he finally disappeared under the surface before emerging again a few seconds later, shaking water from his long, blond hair. Drops of water cascaded down his chest and wayward sprays got caught by the sun, glistening like tiny rainbows in the air.

"C'mon man, it's fucking amazing!" he yelled back at Ethan, who remained stunned on the bank. "Get in here!" he grinned.

*Fuck it!* Ethan thought to himself as he quickly removed the rest of his clothes, throwing them next to his backpack on the ground. *Fuck it*. Then he took off, out into the cool blue water, green eyes fixed on the beautiful male figure in front of him.

## CHAPTER NINE

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### Matty – Then

**“THANK YOU, MA’AM.”** Matty pocketed the ticket and slung his old duffel bag over his shoulder as he headed for the Greyhounds. San Diego, Washington, Austin. There it was. Saco, Maine. His ride outta Dodge.

*Useless piece of shit.* Those were his father’s departing words before Matty had hit him twice over the head with his old Little League baseball bat. The first time the bat connected with his father’s skull was when his old man had been about to lunge at him, angry spittle hitting Matty in the face. The second time was when this giant of a man had dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor, blood trailing down his forehead, a stupefied look in his eyes. Yeah, his old man sure didn’t see that coming. Well, better safe than sorry, right? Better safe than sorry.

Matty had never understood those chicks in the horror movies who would just hit the bad guy once and then run out into the woods in their skimpy shorts screaming their fucking heads off. Tits bouncing everywhere. Everyone knew that you always hit twice. He and Ethan had always laughed their asses off at the dumb chicks. They’d at least had that in common. Matty had always wanted to fuck the hot blondes whereas Ethan had his eyes set on the buff jock in the tight tank top named Chad or Chuck or some shit like that. It didn’t matter. Chad or Chuck or Chip always ended up dying anyway, often with their pants around their ankles while they were going at it with one of the blondes.

Matty had dumped his father’s truck in a deserted parking lot in an industrial area in Waco and then walked the five miles or so to the bus station. He didn’t have much to carry. Only a few changes of clothes, his pocketknife that Ethan had given him for his thirteenth birthday, and the photo from their first

Halloween together. Mrs. Bishop had taken the picture right before they'd gone trick or treating. Man, had they felt like big-ass boys. Out on their own after dark.

The photo had been folded and unfolded numerous times and there was a deep crease down the middle. But you could still make out that Matty had been Spiderman and that Ethan had been a cowboy. Man, he'd already loved spiders back then. No matter how many times you would destroy their web—not that he ever did; no, that had been Miley Carson, that sick fucker—they would always start over again and rebuild it. Stubborn little fuckers. You could learn a lot from bugs if you just got your head outta your ass and took a close look at them. Pests, people would call them. But to Matty they were fucking heroes. Bugs would still be here long after humans were gone, that's for sure.

If there was one good thing about being the son of a policeman, it was that you knew what to do when you wanted to fly under the radar. As soon as he'd jumped in the truck, Matty knew that the clock was ticking and that he needed to get rid of it asap. He dumped it as soon as he got to Waco where he also cleared out his bank account. All the afternoons and weekends working at the hardware store had amounted to quite a bit of cash. Enough to get him to Maine and get settled. He'd forged his mother's signature when he took out the account. He was only fourteen then. One year ago. Was it only a year ago?

A sinking feeling settled in Matty's stomach. They were supposed to go together. He and Ethan. After graduation. They had it all mapped out and planned. All the places they would experience together before they'd end up in Maine. Ethan would save for a return ticket. Matty didn't need one. But he couldn't wait no more.

This time it had been far worse than any of the other times that his mom was given a beating. He'd always wondered about the expression. *To be given a beating*. You weren't given shit when the fists came pounding down on you. To be given something implied that you wanted to receive it in the first place. No, his mom had never asked for it even though those



were the exact words that usually spurted from his father's lips. *You fucking asked for it, you stupid bitch.* And all due to a wrong brand of beer. It didn't matter that she whispered at her husband while her hair was held in an iron fist, pupils dilated with fear, that Mr. Chapman's grocery store had been out of Velvet Hammer. Eden's respected Chief of Police had gritted through clenched teeth that *"it'll be a cold day in Hell before I touch a Lone Star and you fucking bitch damn well know that."* That was just before he'd slammed his fist against his wife's nose, probably breaking it again, and then throwing her skinny frame against the fridge. Yes, that's when Matty had gotten his Little League baseball bat. It turned out that it didn't look so little once it connected with his father's head.

The downside of being the son of a policeman was that you knew that even though the United States was a big-ass country, it was still hard to hide with all the technology and stuff. And the fact that his father wasn't just some deadbeat no-name bastard in a trailer park somewhere... Yeah, that didn't exactly help things either. Hitting the Chief of Police twice over the head with a baseball bat? Yeah, it didn't take a fucking genius to figure out that it would land you a ticket to juvie. So, he had to keep his head down. At least, for a while.

That meant no phone, no credit cards, and no buying a new car. Matty didn't mind taking the bus. It meant that he at least got to see some of the country driving through. If he couldn't hike his way through some of the places he and Ethan had mapped out together, he could at least watch the vast country through a dusty window from a Greyhound.

Blinking back the burning tears behind his eyelids, Matty decided then and there that he wouldn't feel sorry for himself. He'd never once in his miserable fifteen-year-old life felt sorry for himself, and he sure as shit wasn't gonna start now. No way. He knew that he was lucky. Lucky to get away in one piece and without being too fucked in the head. Sure, he always hunched over when he heard loud voices or yelling, trying to make himself as small and inconspicuous as possible. And he didn't feel too comfortable either when people much larger than himself would stand too closely behind him or

invade his personal space. But he could've been dealt a much worse hand, he guessed.

At least, that's what his father used to tell him with short intervals. *You think you have it bad, you fucking pussy? This is nothing. NOTHING! I was once tied to a beam in your granddaddy's barn for two days without food or water—you haven't had it hard until you've pissed yourself, boy. Now, get outta my face.*

For a second, Matty thought about his mom. Sure, he was gonna miss her. He loved her. Of course, he did. And he felt sorry for her. For the things life had thrown at her. But he had a long time ago made peace with the fact that she, too, had to decide at some point. Stay or go? Continue to be his father's punching bag or get the hell outta Eden. No one could make that decision for her.

Matty couldn't help wondering what she'd tell Deputy Wilson when he arrived at his boss's house. How would she explain her right wrist which was most likely broken? Or the wide laceration through her forehead? Or the multiple fractured ribs? Because she always had fractured ribs when her husband had given her a good and sound workover.

And what would she tell the deputy once he saw his boss lying bleeding on the floor, a bloody children's baseball bat next to him? Matty tried to push away the intrusive thoughts. Not his fucking problem. For once in their miserable lives, the two people who called themselves his parents had to sort out their own shit. He would be long gone by then. No one would know where to find him except for Ethan. *Please come find me, Ethan. As soon as you can.*

Matty chose a seat all the way in the back of the bus. The fewer people who would walk past him and get a look at him, the better. After placing his duffel in the luggage compartment above, he sat down in the multicolored synthetic seat. Looking out at the busy bus station, he wondered what Maine would look like. His new home. His first real home, hopefully.

He knew that there would be the ocean and that it would be fucking beautiful but aside from that? He suddenly felt like

laughing hysterically. Who the fuck cared anyway? Anything was better than the shithole of a place that someone in a fit of sadistic irony had chosen to call Eden. Even if he had to sleep on a windy beach for the rest of his life, it would still beat his hometown by a fucking mile any day of the week. By a fucking mile.

# CHAPTER TEN

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## Ethan – Now

“**SO, WHERE ARE** you headed?” They were lying next to each other on the bank, under the shade of a giant tree, the branches almost reaching the ground. Some of them even dipping into the shallow water near the edge of the basin. Wrapping around the two of them like a massive, green tent, the sun peeking through the leaves at various places. Avery was chewing on a grass stem, eyes closed, lashes golden like the rest of him. They were still naked aside from their briefs which Ethan had been the first to hastily put back on once they’d emerged from the water.

“What makes you think that I’m headed somewhere?” Ethan asked, sneaking a final glimpse at Avery’s nearly naked form before he opened his eyes fully. He suddenly felt bold.

“Oh, I see, I’ve encountered an existentialist.” Avery sat up, leaning on his elbow, a serious look on his face. “Ah, yes, the age-old question. Are we ever truly headed somewhere or are we just running around in circles? That is indeed the question.” Avery brushed at his chin, a curious frown between his dark-blond brows. Then he burst into laughter, tracing the grass stem along Ethan’s naked, right arm. “It’s okay, man. You don’t have to tell me. I’m all for a hint of mystery,” Avery smiled, the seductive curve of his full lips making the hair on Ethan’s arms and legs rise to attention.

The way Avery was lying casually on his side, resting his head of blond hair in his hand, drops of water still lingering on his perfect skin. He was mesmerizing. His entrancing eyes pulling at Ethan, making his heart skip a beat. Or maybe it was all just in his imagination. Maybe he was just fucking horny. Maybe it was both.

He felt a sudden urge to reach out and wrap his hand around Avery’s slender neck and pull him against him. To

plunge his tongue into Avery's mouth and taste him, devour him. To bury his fingers in his still damp hair and twist it forcefully until a whimper was forced from his lips. Somehow, he imagined that Avery would let him. Yes, he was pretty sure that he'd let him. That he would submit to Ethan in the most natural way and that that submission would be fucking sublime. The encounters he'd had with Jimmy in high school had been hot, fulfilling a momentary need to get off—Jimmy had submitted to Ethan's roughness but there had been nothing intimate about it. It hadn't satisfied Ethan's craving to completely own someone. There hadn't been this connection that he was feeling with this near stranger after such short time together.

Swallowing, Ethan collected himself, feeling his arousal building just below the surface, wondering if Avery had noticed that he was miles away.

"Maine," Ethan spoke in a low voice, the tinkling sensation of the stem on his arm almost stealing his voice. No one had ever touched him that way before. Teasingly. Tauntingly. Seductively. He should have felt naked and exposed, but instead he just felt excited.

"Maine, huh? What's in Maine?" He noticed Avery shifting next to him as the grass stem moved across his right shoulder, leaving a trail of delicious heat behind on his skin.

Exhaling, Ethan closed his eyes again. He wasn't ready for Avery to see the sadness reflected in his eyes when he spoke. He knew that it was there, lurking behind the green of his irises. A constant reminder that an important part of him was missing. *His other half*, Ethan's mom used to call Matty affectionately. *His sidekick. His partner-in-crime.*

Ethan licked his dry bottom lip, his own voice almost unrecognizable to him as it spilled from his mouth, no more than a whisper.

"My best friend. My best friend's in Maine." Then, for some reason he felt a sudden urge to let Avery in. Just a little. "Or at least, I hope he's there." Regretting it as soon as he'd spoken the words, Ethan got up, almost jumping to his feet as

if the ground was on fire. “Uhm, I better get going. Wanna get back before dark.” The words came out rushed, his gaze fixated on the ground, avoiding Avery’s inquisitive stare.

Avery stood as well, reaching out his right hand, settling his grip on Ethan’s left upper arm.

“Hey, wait up. I’ll come with you. Just hold on a sec.” For a moment, Avery looked almost distraught, regret darkening his soulful blue eyes, turning them almost indigo. “I’m sorry, man. I shouldn’t have pried. It’s none of my business. Me and my big mouth. I never know when to shut up. It’s one of my numerous flaws.” His stream of words came to a stop when Ethan started laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” The seriousness covering Avery’s beautiful face began giving way to a stunning smile. “I’m not joking, you know. Just wait until you know me better. I have a long list of flaws and vices, just wait and see. Uncontrollable rambling when embarrassed. I apparently need to add that to the extensive list as well.”

Ethan couldn’t take his eyes off Avery. He was fucking adorable as he stood there, golden locks still dripping with water and arms gesturing all over the place. His cheeks were pink from embarrassment and the exposure to the sun.

“I’ve never met anyone like you before,” Ethan blurted. “People don’t talk the way you do where I come from.”

“No? That’s okay,” Avery shrugged while bending to pick up his hiking shorts from the ground. “People don’t talk this way either where I come from.” He shrugged before he pulled on his shorts and then his t-shirt. “Like I said, it’s a flaw.” Avery did, in fact, look like he’d been scolded for talking in such a way.

“I don’t think it is,” Ethan mumbled, starting to pull on his jeans. “I think it’s more like a gift, you know. To be able to make people laugh. It’s...” Ethan searched his mind, the word he was looking for escaping him.

“Annoying? Infuriating? Invading?” Avery countered, biting his bottom lip in thought.

“Disarming,” Ethan breathed. “It’s disarming,” he repeated, eyes coasting across the still surface of the water. “To be able to make strangers smile.”

“But I made you sad first. It was only when I started rambling that you laughed.” Avery brushed his right hand through his wet hair, a few drops of water settling on the shoulders of his sky-blue t-shirt.

“But you didn’t know that thinking of Matty would make me sad. You couldn’t have known.” Ethan’s stare fixated on a small branch bobbing on the surface of the water. “I’m mostly sad when I think of Matty. I miss him like crazy.” Ethan bit his lower lip, searching for his own discarded t-shirt. Why he felt the urge to open to this guy he’d met only just yesterday, he couldn’t yet decipher. But it didn’t scare him. It enticed him.

“Mattie?” Avery’s voice sounded almost wistful, his blue eyes darkening. “Your friend’s name is Mattie?”

“Yeah.” Suddenly Ethan’s own sadness gave way to another feeling. Regret poured from Avery’s body and transferred through to his own until it settled in Ethan’s chest like a clenched fist around his heart. Avery looked away, out at the still water.

“My sister’s name is Mattie,” Avery murmured, voice coarse with what sounded like withheld sadness. “Well, Mathilde really. But I always called her Mattie.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### Matty – Then

“**AND HOW OLD** did you say you were?” The lobsterman’s bulky frame towered several inches over him as he took in Matty’s crumpled t-shirt and worn tennis shoes.

“Eighteen?” Matty squinted at the bearded giant in front of him, the mid-morning sun reflected on the surface of the sea.

“Is that a question or a fact?” The fisherman bent over a large container filled with today’s catch which he’d just placed on the dock when Matty had approached him. He removed a few strings of bright-green seaweed from one of the lobsters, inspecting it, before looking back up at Matty.

Matty squirmed under the scrutinizing gaze of the middle-aged man. He didn’t look like a guy you could bullshit. But he’d given off a vibe of openness, kindness even, which was why Matty had approached him in the first place out of the several other fishermen on the docks. Taking a deep breath Matty looked directly at the weather-beaten face of the older man, while he forced his voice to appear steady.

“Fifteen and ten months,” he replied, determination coloring his voice, without looking away, fists clenched at his sides.

The lobsterman wiped at the sweat which had settled below the edge of his red, knitted hat. Weird wearing a knitted hat in the middle of August but Matty guessed it might be a lot colder out on the open sea. The wind had been brutal this morning when he’d woken up on the beach to the sound of screaming seagulls and waves crashing against the shore. It had settled a bit since then, turning into a nicer, cooler breeze.

“Look, kid. I stopped counting my years out in months a long time ago... This is hard work. Dangerous at times. This ain’t no job for a kid.” His deep voice was kind, but the



message was clear as day. To him, Matty was just a kid and of no use.

Only, he wasn't, was he? A kid didn't travel all the way across the country all on his own, did he? A kid would've been out riding his bike with his friends by now or perhaps doing his house chores. Or maybe, if it were a lucky kid, he'd be scarfing down a piece of peach cobbler, chasing it with a glass of cold milk while his mom was looking at him fondly or his dad was peeking over the top of his newspaper. But Matty wasn't a kid. He hadn't been one for a long time.

"I'm strong," he stated firmly, trying his best to keep the tremble out of his voice. "And I ain't afraid of nothin.' I've had my fair share of broken bones and they weren't from climbing trees or riding bicycles." Matty felt the traitorous tears building along with his desperation and he bit his lower lip to fight them off.

"Easy there, Rambo," the fisherman smiled at him, a stain of oil smeared under his left eye. Maybe he'd tried to wipe sand from his eyes at some point. "I believe you. You look pretty fierce to me," he winked.

"Screw this," Matty mumbled in front of him. "You're just like the rest of them. You see what you wanna see. Sorry for wasting your time, sir." He reached for his duffle, brushing at the tears which were now slipping from the corners of his blue eyes.

"Hold on, now, kid." A large hand landed on his left shoulder, the weight grounding him at once. "I didn't say I couldn't use a hand around here. But you aren't stepping foot on that boat before I say so. Hell, I don't even know if you can swim." He pointed out at the dark-red, mid-sized wooden lobstering boat behind him. *Harriet* was painted in white cursive along the side. *Boats are always shes.*

"I can swim just fine, sir," Matty blurted, blue eyes lighting up with eagerness. "I'll do anything you throw at me. I ain't picky. I used to work in a hardware store doing all sorts of manual labor." The words came tumbling from Matty's lips, a faint spark of hope building in his chest.

“Alright, alright, easy now.” A broad smile revealing large, even teeth spread on the older man’s wrinkled face. “It’s peak season now, so I could use an extra hand with getting *Harriet* ready in the mornin’ before headin’ out and cleaning it in the afternoon and such.” He pointed at the deck of the boat which clearly needed sweeping and tidying. “And Millie—that’s the missus—I’m sure she has an entire list of odd jobs around the house. Always bugging my tired ass—pardon my French—as soon as I show my irresistibly handsome face around the house.”

“I can do that! I can start on the list right now... Or the boat.” This was the fourth place Matty had been to this morning. He’d lost the overall count by now. Over the past few weeks, since arriving in Saco, Maine, Matty had been hitchhiking between small coastal towns asking for work. No one wanted to take on a kid. Maybe ten years ago, sure. But with the safety regulations these days, it was just too risky, he was told again and again. No one wanted the authorities up their asses. Besides, lobster fishing was a struggling business and most of the fishermen that he’d encountered were just scraping by as it was. Or at least, that’s what they’d told him. Maybe they just saw the same useless boy that his father kept telling him that he was.

His savings had dwindled into a handful of bills and for the past few nights, he’d slept on the beach. It wasn’t too cold, but he knew that he couldn’t keep this up. He hadn’t brought any winter clothes since he didn’t own any. Never had. West Texas never got so cold that you were in the need of winter gear. Most of the year, his worn denim jacket had been sufficient. But the East Coast was different. Soon cool August evenings would turn into freezing fall nights, the ruthless wind chilling him to the bone.

The fisherman cleared his throat, glancing out at the sky where clouds were gathering, moving at a fast pace towards the coast.

“Nah, kid. There’s rain headed our way, so we’re done for today. You can help me load the truck instead.” Pointing at the stacked containers with lobster, he continued. “I need to drop

these off at some local restaurants. Let's see what you're made of, Rambo." He winked at Matty, who inspected the large stack of containers. "Then we'll get you settled in at the house. See what Millie's cooking for lunch." Throwing an empty case onto the boat, the fisherman wiped his large, tanned hands in his coveralls before he held his right one out towards Matty. "The name's Will, by the way. Will Hart. And I assume yours ain't *Kid*."

Matty couldn't help grinning as he grabbed Will's hand and shook it eagerly. It was strangely warm but with callouses from what Matty assumed was years of hard work in all sorts of weather. Matty's stomach growled at the mention of lunch, reminding him that he'd skipped breakfast, wanting to save his last cash for a hot meal later in the day.

"I'm Matthew. Matthew Carter," he spoke timidly, the increasing wind blowing the sentence away as soon as the words had left his mouth. Strange how the weather changed from one minute to the next here by the ocean, whereas back home one devilish hot day seemed to bleed into the next without any major changes. *Carter*. He'd decided to drop the name *Craig* during the bus ride to Saco. Leave it behind, along with the rest of his old life. It wasn't his name anymore. It was his father's name.

"Good to meet you, Matthew." Will dropped his hand and nodded at the duffel on the dock. "Where's the rest of your stuff?"

"This is it," Matty replied, picking up the worn bag. "I travel light." He tilted his chin slightly, looking at the older man challengingly.

"So, I see. Well, nothing wrong with that. Where've you been sleeping?" Will picked up three containers stacked on top of each other and started walking towards the small town, which was really no more than a clutter of houses, a few stores and some cafes and restaurants. Matty hurried to pick up three as well, the muscles in his arms protesting from the unexpected heaviness of the content. Trailing after Will, his duffel resting across his left shoulder, the now fierce wind

rearranged his curly hair, blowing disobedient locks into his eyes.

“On the beach,” Matty raised his voice, the wind continuing to intercept his words.

“Yeah, I figured as much.” Will was already several steps ahead of Matty, his much longer legs putting distance between them.

“Yeah?” He already liked Will. He was different from most grown-ups. He somehow reminded Matty of Mr. Bishop. Friendly instead of judging. Laid back and easy to talk to, it seemed. “How’d you figure that?” Matty grinned.

“Well, for one, the sand in your hair kinda gave it away.” Will came to a stop in front of a large blue truck which had seen better days, perhaps even decades. Rusty patches bled through the old blue paint and one taillight was busted. Will skillfully arranged the crates on the truck bed before reaching out for Matty’s containers. Placing them on the truck bed too, Will inspected a rather large spot of rust just above the left front wheel.

Matty was wiping furiously at his unruly hair, trying to get the sand grains out now that Will had drawn his attention to them.

“Don’t bother with that. Millie’s used to the sand everywhere. You’ll get used to it too. The sand and the wind. Takes a while for some newcomers.” Will paused as he seemed to ponder upon something. “But it ain’t so bad. It’s the tourists that’re the real pests around here. But don’t take my word for it. You’ll see for yourself soon enough, Matthew Carter.”

“Mr. Hart, sir?” Matty squinted against the noon sun.

“Yes?” Will wiped at his forehead, a brow raised in question.

“It’s okay if you call me Matty. Most people do,” he spoke, attempting to smooth out his crumpled t-shirt. Suddenly, standing in front of this kind stranger, Matty felt conscious of his appearance.

“Well, I ain’t most people, but I’ll make you a deal. If you lose the *Mr.* and the *Sir* and call me *Will*, I’ll call you *Matty*. It’s all the same to me, son.”

Nodding in agreement, relief spread through *Matty*’s chest. Funny how differently the day had turned out from what he’d expected when he’d woken up that morning on the deserted beach.

“Yes, sir, I mean *Will*, that’s fine by me.”

“Then it’s fine by me too, son,” *Will* winked before opening the door to his truck.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### Ethan – Now

**“SO, YEAH, WHEN** they finally brought her to the hospital, it was too late.”

Ethan sat paralyzed next to Avery who was leaning against the trunk of the large tree from which his hammock was suspended. Avery had hung it there, next to Ethan’s small tent, when they’d returned from their hike that afternoon.

“She died?” Ethan whispered, fireflies surrounding Avery’s golden locks like a constantly moving halo.

“Yes. Meningitis. By some miracle she didn’t give it to me. Which was the strangest thing because we always ended up in the same bed at night.” A wistful smile skated across Avery’s pale pink lips as he looked to the Arkansas night sky bursting with stars.

“Jesus. I’m... I’m so sorry, man.” Ethan found himself lost for words. He’d never lost anyone who hadn’t been ready to go. His Granny Layla had been an old lady when she’d fallen asleep in her favorite garden chair, never waking up again. Uncle Pete had refused the cancer treatment the fancy doctors in Austin had tried to push on him. Some trial medication or something, promising at least six more months of puking his guts out and disappearing into nothing. He’d told his sister, Ethan’s mom, that the good Lord had a plan for him, and it *sure as shit didn’t involve being degraded into a goddamn skeleton wearing a diaper!*

So no, Ethan had never lost anyone who hadn’t gone willingly. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what it was like to lose a sibling. The concept of losing any one of his three brothers—however annoying little assholes they were—was unfathomable. It left him with a sense of emptiness in his chest and a feeling of unparalleled dread in his stomach.

“How old was she, your sister?” Ethan asked, looking at Avery.

“Six. Mattie was my baby sister. I was five when my parents had her. I had already accepted my fate as an only child when she came along. From the moment I saw her, it was like she was made just for me, you know.” Avery started fidgeting with the hem of his t-shirt and Ethan felt a sudden urge to reach out and still his fingers. “Like she was this special gift.” The last part left his beautiful mouth as a whisper, lingering in the space between them battling the dancing fireflies.

Ethan nodded, unsure what to say. What could he say? What did you say to someone looking as lost and devastated as Avery did in this moment, remembering his beloved, dead sister? So instead of speaking, he let Avery continue.

“And in a way, Mattie did become more mine than anyone else’s. My mother was working on her dissertation back then and my father was teaching his classes at MIT. So yeah, she was mine. And I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. She was such a sweet baby. Never fussing or crying. Always happy to be just where she was. With me.” A sad smile drifted across Avery’s remarkably handsome features, his indigo eyes glistening with unshed tears. “When she outgrew her crib and was old enough to walk, she would climb out of her bed at night and tiptoe on her little feet across the hallway to my room. ‘*Avy, you asleep?*’ she would whisper, her sweet, sugary toddler breath warm against my cheek. Of course, I was never asleep. I was always just waiting for her.” Avery nodded, a solemn frown on his face. “Now, I guess, she’s the one waiting for me.”

The bitterness was tangible and contradicted the beauty of Avery’s voice. A lonely tear had escaped the corner of his left eye and had gotten caught in his light brown lower lashes. When Avery blinked, it was sent trailing along his cheek which was now half in shadow from the moonlight. Ethan only just now realized that Avery’s left eye was slightly darker than the right. He hadn’t noticed earlier in the day. Or maybe it was

just Ethan's blurry vision disturbing the blue or his mind playing tricks on him due to the late hour.

Suddenly, Avery laughed but the sound came out strangled. Bitter.

"Never believed in any greater power before that day in the hospital when my parents told me that Mattie was gone. But that night, sleeping alone for the first time in years, I prayed. I begged God that he would take me too. It was ridiculous, I know. But at the time, I didn't want to live in a world, where Mattie didn't exist." He smiled weakly at Ethan, the smile never reaching his tormented eyes. "Some nights I would pray that I'd never had her. Because then I wouldn't know the all-consuming pain of losing her."

Avery's bottom lip trembled as he spoke the last words. He looked so fucking lost. Just as lost as Ethan himself had felt for the past three years without Matty. His Matty. The cruel coincidence of their mutual loss reflected in that one name left Ethan's skin crawling. Only a slight difference in spelling distinguishing one loss from the other. One more permanent than the other, perhaps. At least, he hoped so.

Ethan scooted closer and clasped Avery's shaking fingers, still fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. One by one, he pried Avery's fingers from the soft cotton. Tangling the fingers of his right hand through Avery's, stilling them, he brushed the thumb of his other hand along Avery's swollen bottom lip.

"I'm so sorry," Ethan whispered. Leaning in, he searched Avery's eyes for silent permission. Finding what he was looking for, he removed his thumb from Avery's bottom lip and placed his hand at the back of his slender neck instead. Weaving his fingers through the still damp curls, Ethan licked his lips before placing them against Avery's chin. "I'm so sorry," Ethan repeated, his voice muffled against Avery's velvety skin. "I'm so..."

The final *sorry* was swallowed up by the softness of Avery's lips and the neediness of his tongue. Ethan's mind went blank and suddenly there was only the damp ground beneath him, the starlit sky above him and the all-consuming



feeling of Avery all around him. If he'd thought for just one moment that Avery's spicy scent was intoxicating, then the taste of his lips and his tongue was even more addicting. It was like diving into a cave from which he never wanted to emerge. It was the sum of all his erotic teenage fantasies and adolescent wet dreams. It was too much and still not enough. It was thousands of tiny butterflies taking off in his stomach and making their way into every limb of his body. Chasing Avery's teasing tongue with his own, he tried to contain his elation, but his body kept chasing an even higher level of bliss. One word had gone on repeat like a broken record in Ethan's mind, while his heart pounded away to the same rhythm. *More. More. More.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### Ethan – Then

“WHAT WAS IT like?” Matty could hardly contain his excitement, nearly jumping up and down on the spot in front of Ethan. They were hanging out under the bleachers, sharing a lukewarm Mountain Dew. It was 104 degrees today and their damp t-shirts clung to their lean teenage bodies like a second skin. The heatwave was supposed to last at least into the middle of next week. Even for West Texas, it was hot.

“I don’t know,” Ethan mumbled, cheeks flushed, the pink sliding down his neck and disappearing behind the neckline of his sweaty, olive-green t-shirt, the green making his eyes pop.

“Aww, c’mon man, you’ve gotta give me more than that!” Matty pushed at Ethan’s shoulder, pouting. “At least tell me if it was better than kissing Michelle Greyson. Or what’s-her-name? You know, with the big...” Matty held his hands against his own flat chest, mimicking a pair of bouncing medium-sized breasts. “You know, cantaloupe size?” A goofy grin spread across Matty’s flushed face while he wiggled his dark-blond eyebrows suggestively at Ethan.

“Tanya Pierce?” Ethan replied, an impatient frown on his forehead. Why were they talking about this?

“Yeah, exactly, man. Tanya Pierce. Those tits, man... I tell ya...” Matty adjusted himself, a dopy, dreamy look covering his face.

“Jesus, man, knock it off.” Ethan nodded at Matty’s semi-laughing at his friend’s one-track mind. Matty had sex on his mind. Like most teen boys, he was completely in the grasp of his hormones, obsessed with the opposite sex. With his skinny body, unruly hair, and big blue eyes Matty, on the other hand, was not the object of desire for the girls their age. Teen girls didn’t hold their breath when Matty walked down the hallways

of Eden High School. They didn't push out their chests or flip their hair enticingly to catch his attention. No, they had their lust-filled eyes fixated on Ethan who in return had his gaze planted firmly on any piece of juicy jock ass in sight.

But Matty was a whole lotta talk and very little action to back it up. The thing was that Matty was a truly great guy. More sensitive than most of his peers. If it weren't for Ethan, he would probably have been bullied even more than he already was. But somehow Ethan's popularity acted as a buffer against the depravity and meanness of their classmates. Matty never partook in the other boys' preferred group activity: cat calling the girls in their year, who'd become women overnight, while simultaneously grabbing their junk like they were cool fucking cowboys or some shit like that. Ethan hated that kind of behavior. So did Matty. He could pretend to be a tough-as-shit guy when he was shooting the shit with Ethan, but inside Matty was all heart. Unfortunately. Because that made him an easy prey—at school and at home.

“It was way better than kissing a girl, man. Waaay better.” Ethan dragged out the last part while he rolled his eyes in mock ecstasy, a soft moan escaping his Mountain Dew covered lips.

“Yeah? What was so great about it?” Matty suddenly sounded sad.

“I don't know, man. It's like... You know how girls are all soft and stuff? And they smell sweet, like flowers or strawberries or... cherry gum.” Ethan took another lengthy sip from the soda can and wiped at his mouth with the neck of his t-shirt. He'd always done that. His mom would shake her head at him in resignation, ruffling his auburn hair fondly, reminding him that he wasn't a small child anymore. He could use a napkin or, as a last resort, the back of his hand.

“Yeah, so...?” Matty was getting impatient. “Spill it, Eth.”

“So, guys don't taste like that. Or at least, Jimmy Harrow don't. It was more like... minty... and like... like salami, maybe. Salty. Spicy. I don't know, man. Why are we even

talking about this?” Ethan brushed at the back of his neck, suddenly feeling shy.

“Because we’re brothers. And brothers share stuff like that. And what do you mean, he tasted like salami?” Matty reached for the nearly empty soda can and finished it in one last pull.

“Well, he did. I don’t know why. Jesus! Maybe he had a salami sandwich for lunch or maybe that’s just the way guys taste. What the fuck do I know? He tasted different, that’s for sure.” How could he explain something to Matty, which he didn’t really understand himself? How could he possibly put into words how a single kiss had changed his entire perception of himself. There was no way.

Because it wasn’t just that Jimmy Harrow was a good kisser or tasted a certain way. Or that he was cute as fuck with his fluffy, blond hair and tight quarterback ass. Or that he smelled faintly of sweat and coconut scented sunscreen. Maybe it was the hardness of his body instead of the softness of a girl’s? Or the way he’d plunged his tongue unapologetically into Ethan’s mouth after throwing his gum into the trashcan next to the janitor’s office. Maybe it was because he’d moaned greedily around Ethan’s tongue instead of giggling sweetly. Hell, maybe it was just the sum of all those things. Ethan didn’t know for sure. It was just different. Spectacularly different.

“So, does that mean you’re gay now or somethin’?” Matty looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Like Shirley Wilson’s older brother, Kenny. You know, the one who lives in San Diego with his boyfriend?” Matty bit his lip, uncertainty suddenly reflected in his blue eyes.

“I don’t know. I think so.” Ethan hadn’t really thought that far ahead. What it meant to have finally kissed a guy when he’d fantasized about it so many summer nights, lying in his humid bedroom, unable to look away from the old poster of C.J. Wilson, while he stroked himself lazily. It was only early afternoon and he’d kissed Jimmy Harrow during the ten o’clock recess. How did you know in a matter of a few hours if you were gay or not?

“Does that mean you’re gonna move away too?” Matty suddenly sounded hopeful, a light lilt to his voice.

“I don’t know, man. It’s not like there’s a whole lotta gay guys in Eden.” Ethan laughed but it didn’t reach his green eyes. “Maybe it’s better being gay in Maine, you know?”

“Of course, it is,” Matty blurted, a big grin covering his adolescent face, dimples popping, which was a rare occurrence. It only happened around Ethan, and even then, not often. “Everything’s better in Maine, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, I guess so, man.” He didn’t doubt that everything was better in Maine, but he always worried what would happen to his mom and brothers if he wasn’t there to help around the house when his dad was away. He’d never considered it an option to live elsewhere. Ethan knew that he would just worry endlessly about his family if he was too far away for too long. Did they have enough money for the twins to go to summer camp? Was his dad able to find a new job at a construction site when his current employment ended? Was he safe at the site? Did his mom have enough money for the groceries? What if something unexpected happened? What if...

They were interrupted by the bell, their future put on hold for another couple of hours until they could escape to Ethan’s tree house and continue indulging in their shared hopes and dreams for a future far away from Eden. A future, where daily slurs and random beatings weren’t on the list of Today’s Specials for Matty. Where Ethan didn’t have to worry about another fatal accident at yet another construction site and if his dad would never come home again. Or if his brother Ryder would get that sought after scholarship or what it would be like having a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### Ethan – Now

“**SO, HERE’S WHAT** I was thinking.” Avery smiled, while Ethan made what seemed like his tenth attempt at stuffing his tent into the much too small bag. Why the fuck did they always make the bags so damn small? It was the same with his sleeping bag. He didn’t get it.

“Fucking useless piece of crap!” Ethan yelled, kicking at the culprit—the waterproof, travel-size tent his parents had gifted him for Christmas last year. It’d been the only thing he’d asked for along with the backpack. He’d already saved for the sleeping bag and the pad himself.

“Here, let me do that.” Avery’s slender fingers grabbed the bag from out of Ethan’s hands and he skillfully managed to fold and pack the tent away without as much as breaking a sweat.

“Thanks,” Ethan mumbled, bending to retrieve his sleeping bag from the ground, handing it to Avery with a shy smile. “Wanna give this bad boy a try too?”

“Of course.” Avery winked at him and repeated the procedure, this time with the army green sleeping bag. “So, as I was saying before I was so *rudely* interrupted...” His voice had taken on a mock offended tone. “I’m going to Boston. You’re headed to Maine. Why don’t we go together?”

The words were casually spoken almost as if they’d known each other for years and not met only just yesterday. Then again, he’d seen Avery naked, knew he had a dead sister, and they’d exchanged saliva. That ought to count for something, right? And Avery for sure didn’t give off any Dahmer vibes. On the contrary. For some reason, Ethan felt more comfortable in this stranger’s company than he did at home with people his

own age that he'd known all his life. Well, at least since Matty was gone.

“Uhm... Okay, but I'm not going in one stretch, you know? There are some places I wanna stop at.” Ethan scratched at the mosquito bite on his left wrist which he'd gotten yesterday when they'd stayed out until late.

“I'm in no hurry. I'm not starting work until September.” Avery's voice came out forced, a distant look in his eyes.

“Yeah?” Ethan suddenly realized that he probably knew the most personal and intimate thing about Avery after their brief time together, but ironically enough, he didn't know how old Avery was or what he did for a living. “What do you do?”

“I'm starting a position at Boston University. I have a degree in archeology and one in anthropology. But classes aren't starting until September.” The last part ended on a question as he looked at Ethan.

“Shit, you have a degree? That's cool man. You're really smart, huh?” Ethan teased, biting at his bottom lip tauntingly. He'd never met anyone with a university degree before, let alone two. He'd had a feeling since they'd met the day before that Avery was educated. It was just an air the other man gave off. Not arrogant or overbearing. No, it wasn't like that. Avery was enlightened about the world. And the way he spoke. It sounded knowledgeable. Sophisticated at times. Like one of those documentaries where a college professor would recount about the first pioneers or the Gold Rush.

“Maybe,” Avery smiled scrunching his nose, making his eyes wrinkle adorably.

He was exactly the type of guy that Ethan would usually go for. Everything about him screamed erotic masculinity at its best. Avery's tall figure and lean build. Slender yet strong limbs. Golden skin splattered with the occasional freckle or birthmark, giving Ethan a constant urge to lick Avery's long neck just where his blond curls met his square shoulders. The piercing blue eyes, which constantly seemed to change color. Sky-blue, at times almost ice blue like yesterday when the sun had been at its highest in the sky, and then a dark indigo at

night. A dark pool of blue you could almost drown in if you weren't careful. Yes, everything about Avery triggered Ethan's own physical needs. Everything about him spoke to the blooming sexuality deep within himself. Images of fisting Avery's hair at the back of his neck, black pupils blown wide with lust and anticipation, flashed momentarily through Ethan's mind and the familiar tingle at the base of his spine spread slowly to the rest of his body. His own tanned hand wrapped tightly around Avery's long, elegant neck while Ethan whispered filthy words into his ear, tugging warningly at the small, silver hoop in his left ear with his teeth.

"It's nothing special, really," Avery interrupted his heated daydream. "I'm not a genius like my father or a renowned literary scholar like my mother..." The bitterness clinging to the word *mother* was tangible as it hovered in the space between them and dueled the indifference in his eyes.

"I could never do that. I mean, go to college or university. It's not that I wasn't good in school or anything. I kinda was. It was just never in the cards for me. It's okay, though." Ethan shrugged, feeling anything but okay with the prospects for his future. He knew that working at the Peterson farm was a cop out. A way of avoiding being honest with himself about what he really wanted out of life. So instead, he continued to lie to himself and the people around him. "I mean, it's not like I'd know what to study anyway. So, it's a good thing that it's not part of the plan, right?" Ethan attempted a casual smile, but it died prematurely at the corner of his mouth, before vanishing entirely.

"Don't do that," Avery spoke softly, reaching for Ethan's left hand. "Don't make yourself out to be anything less than you are. Don't ever think that you wouldn't have what it takes to claim your place in the world." His grip tightened on Ethan's wrist, grounding him. "You're what? Eighteen? Nineteen?"

"Nineteen," Ethan swallowed, his voice quiet as he looked down at his dusty sneakers, the tips scuffed from wear.

"Nineteen, huh?" Avery circled his thumb around the mosquito bite. "You don't need to know what you want to do



with your life when you were nineteen, Ethan. Jesus, I'm twenty-eight and I'm still not sure if taking this teaching position in Boston will turn out to be the biggest mistake I've ever made. I just spent nine months digging in the ground and documenting Native art and now I'm supposed to spend most of my day behind a desk or in an auditorium..." He released Ethan's wrist and held up both of his hands, the cuticles torn, nails cracked and the dark stain on his right thumb and index finger still visible.

"Why were you digging in the ground?" Ethan looked directly into Avery's eyes.

"I was part of an excavation at Big Bend. That's where I've been up until we met." Avery had lowered his hands, fists clenched at his sides, knuckles white against his otherwise tanned skin.

"Sounds fun." Ethan smiled hesitantly, scratching at the bite. He had a vague idea what an excavation was. He'd never been to Big Bend, though.

"It was. It was amazing. That's why I studied archeology in the first place." A light had appeared in Avery's eyes and his shoulders seemed to relax once again.

"So why don't you just do it again?"

Avoiding his gaze, Avery nodded at Ethan's wrist, an angry red around the center of the mosquito bite.

"Don't scratch at it. It'll only make it worse. I've got some balm in my bag." In a swift move, Avery turned around. Walking to the large tree where his hammock had hung unused the entire night, Avery bent over his bag, providing Ethan with a spectacular view of his tight ass. The denim material clung to his narrow hips and firm cheeks like a second skin, making Ethan think all sorts of inappropriate thoughts. Like what it would be like to take Avery up against a large trunk of a tree. Or on a bed of pine needles and multicolored leaves in the woods. Avery's lean toned legs wrapping around his own hips while they moved simultaneously. Feeling himself harden behind his shorts, Ethan quickly pushed the image of a debauched Avery away even though he had a vague idea that a

thoroughly fucked version of Avery would look even hotter than he already did.

The jeans were worn but definitely not the inexpensive no-brand kind his mom used to buy at Walmart. He couldn't see the tag from here, but he had a feeling that Avery was a Levi's kinda guy. There was something casual and real about him which felt disarming. So disarming in fact that Avery had ended up spending the night in Ethan's tent.

They hadn't done anything. Sure, they'd kissed a bit before they'd both collapsed on top of their sleeping bags, hot and exhausted from the hike and the swim. They hadn't spoken about it this morning—if it had just been a one off after Avery had shared his story about his sister Mattie or if it could potentially happen again. Ethan hoped that it would. It had felt like more than just Avery seeking comfort. There'd been this magnetic pull between them, making them gravitate towards each other. Ethan didn't have much to compare it to but it sure as shit felt different from tongue-fucking Jimmy Harrow's spearmint-flavored mouth during recess.

Returning, Avery took hold of Ethan's wrist and inspected the bite. It wasn't too bad. Still a bit reddish around the center but he was used to the mosquitos back home. Squeezing some of the balm on the tip of his right index finger, Avery began rubbing it onto Ethan's skin meticulously. With soothing, circular movements, his slender finger traced the outline of the bite and then continued further up along Ethan's arm, making it tickle deliciously.

“Anywhere else?” Avery asked, his deep voice coming out breathily, stirring Ethan's dormant dick back to life behind his loose cargo shorts.

“Maybe.” Ethan almost didn't recognize his own voice. It sounded labored as if something was obstructing his airways. He swallowed deeply. “Could be spreading to other parts of my body. Could be serious.”

“Yeah?” Avery's warm hand had reached Ethan's shoulder, drawing small circles on top of his t-shirt, his touch nearly burning through the worn fabric.

“Yeah. I think it’s best if you check on it from time to time. You know, maybe in a few hours or so and then again tonight.” Ethan moaned when Avery pushed his thumb into his shoulder joint and started kneading it, a sign of silent agreement.

“Sounds good,” Avery hummed, his eyes shifting, taking on a darker color. “I may need to apply more balm, too. Give you a good rub over. There could be more bites hiding away.”

“Uh huh.” Slowly melting under Avery’s skillfully administered touch, Ethan could only consent to that. His limbs were slowly going mushy, and he reached out, grabbing Avery’s shoulder, while steadying himself. “More balm. Definitely. Good idea.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### Matty – Then

**“SHIT!”** REACHING FOR the large cardboard box on the top shelf of the cabinet, something had hit him square on the forehead. *What the fuck!* Matty swiped his fingers against his right eyebrow, hissing as he felt moisture coating his fingers. It stung like hell, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of queasiness spreading in his stomach. He inspected his hand, fingers covered in bright-red blood.

He should’ve just used the small stepladder in the corner behind the basement door. Reminding him to do so had been the last words Millie had spoken before Matty had run down the squeaky stairs to the basement. Why the fuck didn’t he just use the ladder?

*Stupid, useless piece of shit.* His father’s go-to sentence whenever Matty fucked up or just uttered a word—which was too often if you asked Eden’s Chief of Police. The words instantly went on repeat in his mind along with a ringing sound in his ears. *If I want any shit outta you, ya sonofabitch, I’ll squeeze your head, ya hear me, boy?* Matty could almost feel the spiteful spittle land on his cheek and smell his father’s nauseating aftershave, making his stomach churn as his body remembered. Yes, his body remembered everything, like codes printed into a memory card. Matty was programmed to be alert. To be always on guard. One moment of putting his protective shield down and there would be a price to pay. He was *lucky* if his father charged at him with a random, hateful slur instead of a broken bone.

When Matty had arrived in Saco, he’d gone to a drugstore first thing because the trip on the Greyhound had given him a persistent headache. As soon as he’d walked past the personal hygiene section, he’d recognized the heavy, suffocating smell of Old Spice and he’d almost lost his breakfast in the middle

of the aisle. He'd turned on his heel and made a quick escape, headache be damned.

He looked at the concrete basement floor, the cardboard box on its side, broken shards of multi-colored glass spilling out of the opening and covering the floor. *Fuck*. Why couldn't he just get one thing right in his miserable excuse for a life? He was just supposed to get Millie the box of dessert bowls for her rhubarb trifle and now he'd fucked up again.

One month. Matty had lived with Will and Millie for just one month and he'd already screwed up epically. One month experiencing what it was like being part of a real family for the first time in his life aside from the sleepovers at Ethan's house. A measly thirty days of "*will you pass me the potatoes, hon?*" and "*see you in the morning, son.*" Thirty days of lying in the small bed in the interim guestroom in the attic listening to the muffled voices coming from the downstairs living room. Cheerful chuckles and whispers of fondness accompanied by Willie Nelson's melancholic voice. By now, Matty knew the song by heart. An ever-present soundtrack in the kitchen when he would do the dishes with Millie. *In the twilight glow I see, blue eyes crying in the rain...*

When the wind picked up some nights, the walls of the old cottage would creak and whine, the white-washed shutters on the front of the house hitting the shingles with a soft thud repetitively. Matty would lie awake listening to the wind as it swept across the dunes surrounding the small house. *Western red cedar shingles*. That's what Will had told him when he'd asked about the almost black and blotchy surface of the small fisherman's cottage.

"My grandfather built it with his own hands. Hard to believe, but the cedar was red when it was built in 1915. The climate here takes a toll, though. And it don't discriminate, son. People *and* houses. Everything gets a withered look over time if you just stick around long enough. You'll see."

Matty had looked at Will's kind, weather-beaten face and then back to the outside wall of the house. Yeah, he could see what the older man meant. Matty had secretly jubilated over Will's implied notion that he would indeed stick around in

Grant's Harbor. That someone wanted him to stick around. No one at his house had ever asked him to stick around—more like *get lost* or *piss off*. He wanted that, too. To stay. More than anything—that and to be reunited with Ethan.

“Not like those new tourist cabins they're building up the coast. White cedar. Sure does look pretty and fancy. But white cedar ain't as tough as it's cousin.” Will had knocked on the hard surface of a shingle, a solid sound escaping it. “Nope, pretty and solid doesn't always go hand in hand. Not like my Millie. I got lucky that one time, Matty.” Will had gotten a faraway look in his gray eyes. “She was a nurse when I met her in Biddeford. I was up for the day to get an x-ray of my wrist. It'd been bugging me for some time, kid.” Will had twisted his left wrist around in a circular movement. “And there she was, all bright eyed and pretty, in her white nurse uniform. Never really understood what she saw in a brute like me, but that's a story for another day.”

That'd been a good day. A great day, even. Yeah, Matty's father was right. Matty was a screw-up. Well, it'd been good while it lasted, right? Great, if he was being honest with himself. It was weird at first. Being around Millie at the house and working alongside Will at the docks sorting the lobsters or cleaning the deck. It took some getting used to, alright. Being acknowledged and praised instead of ignored or yelled at. It was always one or the other at the Craig house.

“This is Matty. He's staying with me and the missus for a while,” Will would introduce him to the other lobstermen at the harbor, while he placed his large hand on Matty's shoulder, giving him a fond shake. “Don't know what we'd do without him, to be honest. A real God send, this one.”

The other fishermen would nod in agreement, looking at the broken trap that Matty was fixing with some wire. He still lacked the same level of skill that Will had, but what he lacked in experience, he made up for in enthusiasm.

“Looks good, Will,” the younger guy, Austin, would nod in recognition at him while addressing Will. Austin went out on the ocean every day with his father, Ray O'Neil. Matty

often ran into Austin at the docks, but he was yet to talk to him aside from a brief *hi* or a shy nod in passing.

“Yeah, he’s getting a hang of things, alright,” Will would smile, ruffling Matty’s hair which had taken on a permanent state of unruliness since he’d arrived in Grant’s Harbor. There was a lilt of devotion in the older man’s voice, pride even, if Matty was being honest.

“Matty, hon, are you alright?” Millie’s concerned voice rung down the stairs and pulled him out of his cocoon.

“Shit,” Matty mumbled, looking at the mess he’d made. He bent to pick up the box, more shards of colorful glass spilling out onto the floor, catching the outside light shining through the basement window.

“I’ll be right up,” he yelled back. Looking around in the basement, his eyes landed on a broom leaning against the stone wall. He meticulously began sweeping up the bits of colored glass that he could just make out through the veil of tears in his eyes. He jumped when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, hon, are you alright?” Millie looked curiously at the pile of glass shards and then at the cut on his eyebrow.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to,” Matty blurted, dropping the broom from his hand, wiping at the tears lining his cheeks. “I’ll pay you back. I swear to God, I’ll pay you back, Millie.”

“Shush, now, sweetie. Let me look at that cut.” She grabbed his hand and led him up the stairs and into the kitchen where the smell of sweet and tart rhubarbs hit his nostrils. Will looked up from his spot at the small, wooden table where he was prowling through the Sunday paper, a worried frown building between his bushy, gray brows.

“Hon, will you get the first aid kit in the bathroom?” Millie spoke to her husband over her shoulder as she turned Matty’s head towards the mid-afternoon light slipping through the thin linen curtains partially covering the kitchen window. Carefully prodding at the puffy skin around the wound, she scrunched

her pointy nose. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches, sweetheart. It nearly stopped bleeding.”

Returning to the kitchen, a look in his eyes which Matty couldn’t decipher, Will handed his wife the small first aid kit. Then he disappeared down the stairs, his large feet thumping on the whining steps. Swiping at the cut carefully, Millie looked at Matty’s trembling lower lip.

“Now, how many times have I told that stubborn, old fool to move that box onto a lower shelf. Do you think he’ll listen? That giant thinks everyone is just as tall as him. Nah. Just a matter of time before it fell...”

“I’m real sorry, Millie. I’m such a klutz, I know. I’ll pay you back. I promise.” New tears were gathering at the corners of Matty’s blue eyes which mirrored his regret and concern.

“Don’t you worry about those old things. Between you and me, hon, I always hated those ghastly bowls. A wedding present from Will’s Aunt Mable. Awful taste, that horrible woman.” Millie winked at him before she leaned against his left ear, whispering secretively. “The way I see it, you did me a favor, sweetheart.” Then she patted him fondly on his still damp cheek before throwing out the used cotton pad.

Stunned, he looked at the older woman as she went to stir the pot of chopped up rhubarbs spinning on the stove. Humming in front of him, she was the picture of everything which was good and homely. So far from what he’d grown up with. If he’d spilled something or, God forbid, broken something back home, Matty would’ve felt the burning welts from his father’s leather belt on the back of his thighs by now. He was still stunned by the absence of the anticipated, domestic catastrophe when he heard heavy thumps on the basement stairs.

Retreating into the corner next to the humming fridge, Matty braced himself for what he knew was coming. What he’d known was coming all along. What was surely coming now after Will had inspected the damage he’d caused in the basement. The figure of the large fisherman appeared in the door frame, clutching something to his chest with his right



hand and some piece of navy fabric draped over his left arm. Gray eyes beaming and a broad smile plastered across his rough face, Will turned to his wife.

“Dessert’s saved, Millie.” Victoriously he held out three intact dessert bowls in front of his wife, who in return mumbled an ambiguous *wonderful* while winking at Matty conspiratorially as she accepted the bowls from her husband. The scene played out in front of Matty in something close to slow-motion. His brain was working overtime to accept the fact that he wasn’t going to get punished in some way or another. It was hard for his nearly sixteen-year-old mind to wrap around the fact that in the Hart household, A led to a different kind of B than in his father’s house.

Turning to Matty, still sporting a disarming smile, Will held out the piece of clothing towards him, excitement written between the wrinkles of his aged face.

“It’s my old canvas coveralls. Thought maybe you could use them down at the docks. They’re a bit worn but I think they’re only a size or two too big for ya, son.” Patting at his bulky stomach, Will winked at his wife as he held out the coveralls in front of Matty. “It was before I met Millie and was subjected to her cruel culinary skills. You won’t believe me when I say that I used to be quite fit before this wicked master of cookery hooked her evil claws in me.”

“Oh, will you cut it out, you old fool,” his wife retorted with a good-natured scowl. “Make yourself useful instead, will ya, and set the table. Matty and I have things to discuss that’re not for your ears.”

A sting of concern made its way through Matty’s chest, and he looked hastily at Millie who continued to stir the pot. Then, speaking over her shoulder, she continued.

“Last time I checked *someone* in this household had a birthday coming up.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### Ethan – Now

**“MEMPHIS, BABY!”** ETHAN beamed at Avery sitting next to him in his old Honda Civic as he pointed to the sign. Ethan had just pulled off at Exit 51 towards Brooks Rd and Graceland and *Burning Love* blasted from his old car stereo. Ethan’s unfiltered excitement transferred to Avery who laughed in return while shaking his head adorably, golden locks flying all over the place in the wind coming through the cracked side window.

Graceland had been at the top of Ethan’s list of places to go when he and Matty had started the map. Now, sitting here next to Avery, it seemed like another life entirely. So much had happened since he and Matty had hung out in his tree house, planning their future. Ethan had always imagined that he’d experience Graceland with Matty, who wasn’t really an Elvis fan, but went along with the idea because he knew Ethan worshipped the King. Ethan felt a sting in his chest, and he briefly rubbed his right hand across his left pec muscle. *It should’ve been you and me, Matty. It should’ve been.*

He looked at Avery, who was tapping his hand on his jean clad thigh along with the building climax of the music coming from the radio. Ethan’s gaze zeroed in on the faded black stain on Avery’s index finger. You could still make it out.

“Why are your fingers stained?” he asked, nodding at Avery’s hand.

“Huh?” Avery looked up at him, a puzzled look in his brilliant blue eyes.

“Your fingers?” Ethan repeated. “I’ve been wondering since we met. Why are they stained with black? Is it paint?”

“Oh,” Avery smiled, enthusiasm coating his deep, velvety voice, eyes lighting up with exhilaration. “I draw.”

“You draw? What kinda stuff do you draw?” Of course, Avery drew. He had that artsy vibe going on with his longish hair and delicate mannerisms.

“Different things but at Big Bend I replicated some Native rock paintings we found. Comanche.” Avery paused briefly before he continued, a faraway look in his eyes. “I’ll show you later if you like. They’re beautiful. The originals are thousands of years old.” A worried frown materialized between his brows. “A lot of the Indigenous artwork has been vandalized so part of the project is to replicate the drawings and have them exhibited in Boston at the MFA.”

“The MFA?” Ethan repeated, unsure what Avery was referring to.

“Yes. The Museum of Fine Arts. They have an entire gallery dedicated to Indigenous art. It’s quite spectacular, really. I’ll show you some time.”

*I’ll show you some time.* There he went again, this enigmatic being, throwing words at Ethan that implied that this wasn’t just a random encounter or a fleeting collection of moments, which would soon be no more than a faded pile of memories.

Ethan nodded, considering for a moment if he should share this particular part of himself with Avery. Then something told him that Avery would listen. And appreciate the vulnerability that Ethan was showing by sharing this part of himself with someone who had been a mere stranger a few days ago.

“Matty used to draw. He was real good at it too, you know. He wasn’t allowed to draw at home because his dad was an asshole. *‘Drawing is only for pussies and faggots,’*” Ethan mimicked the derogatory voice of Chief Craig while he stared out the windshield, green eyes locked on the road in front of him.

Avery nodded but didn’t say anything, his blue eyes suddenly a shade darker than before as if they were mirroring the pain in Ethan’s voice. There was a sensitivity to Avery. The way he seemed to get Ethan and embrace his emotions entirely.

“You know those kinds of people? Who look at you and all they ever see is something flawed? Something they can use against you. To make you feel small and worthless?” Ethan paused, turning to Avery, who swallowed deeply, his protruding Adam’s apple visible behind the translucent skin of his lean neck. “Yeah, Mr. Craig, well, *Police Chief* Craig, Matty’s dad, was like that. He’d get this mean look in his eyes whenever he looked at Matty. Chill you right to the bone.” Ethan shuddered before continuing. “You ever had people look at you like that? It’s almost as if they steal a small part of you. Something that’s lost forever, you know. I always used to wonder why he hated my best friend so much.”

A lump settled in Ethan’s abdomen as he recalled the numerous times that Matty had sat down next to him in the school bus, a slump to his narrow shoulders and too often a new bruise on his upper arm, just peeking out below the hem of his t-shirt.

“Some people just hate for the sake of hating,” Avery nodded. “Mostly it’s just the image of themselves they see when they throw slurs at others or put a fist to someone’s face.” He looked distraught, fumbling with the hem of his threadbare, blue t-shirt.

Ethan had laughed so hard this morning when Avery had appeared freshly showered in front of him, wearing the worn t-shirt. *Keep on Digging and Never Throw in the Trowel* was on the front, written in some ancient font that Ethan didn’t recognize.

“Yeah, I know. Matty’s dad is like that. Grade A asshole. And Chief of Police. Worst combo if there ever was one.” Ethan laughed grimly at Avery before continuing. “So yeah, Matty would draw at my place whenever he got the chance. Mostly in the tree house. That’s where I kept all my crayons and where Matty would hang his finished sketches and drawings.” He suddenly laughed, recalling his wish lists for birthdays and Christmases. “I never drew myself but each year at the top of my wish list, I’d put a set of crayons... fucking asshole...” Ethan trailed off, a single, furious tear appearing at the corner of his right eye.

Avery reached out and placed his slender hand on Ethan's thigh, squeezing it in silent reassurance.

"You'll find him. And when you find him, you'll see with your own eyes that he's okay. You *will* find him, Ethan." Avery stated the last part matter-of-factly like it was beyond any doubt that Ethan would be reunited with Matty again.

"You don't know that." Ethan's voice was barely audible through the music blasting from the stereo and the wind coming in through the open window.

"You're right," Avery nodded. "But still, I have a feeling that you will. I've found things that should never have been found, some of them hidden away for thousands and thousands of years. Paintings I'd only ever read about, dreamed about. And suddenly they manifested in front of my eyes. Visualization is a powerful thing, Ethan. And so is hope."

"Yeah, you may be right. I really hope so. I just need to know that he's okay, you know?" Ethan bit his lower lip, cheeks taking on a soft pink color.

"Yeah, I know. But one way or another, you will know. And only then, can you deal with the knowledge you receive... Look!" Avery pointed at the large sign ahead of them.

*Graceland. Matty, I'm in Graceland. I'll see you in Maine, my friend. Just wait for me a little while longer.*

"Memphis, baby!" Avery repeated Ethan's words, shouting them out of the open window while Elvis was now singing about *suspicious minds*. His mom's favorite song. "Woohooo, here we come!"

Taking a deep breath, Ethan shook off his sadness and grinned at the beautiful man sitting beside him. Avery was fucking gorgeous as he sat there, shifting in the old car seat. If they hadn't been on the road, Ethan would have leant in and kissed the fuck out of him. Tasted him and sucked on his delicious tongue. Yeah, he'd definitely do that later if the opportunity arose. Fuck, who was he kidding? Ethan would make sure that it did.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### Matty – Then

“**DO YOU NEED** help with anything else, Millie? I don’t mind doing the dishes, too.” Matty had just cleared the table following yet another nice meal in the Hart household. Millie had made a fish pie—Matty had never tried fish pie before and had been reluctant to taste it. But as he’d watched Will scarf down the steamy white sauce oozing from the crispy-golden crust, Matty had tried a small piece of fish. The taste had exploded on his tongue, and he’d ended up stuffing himself full on Millie’s delicious, home-made pie.

“You can relax now, hon. You’ve had a busy day at the docks, I hear.” Millie started filling the sink with hot water, pouring in some soap.

“I... I’d really like to help. I can relax later.” The truth was, he liked being around Millie in the kitchen with the smell of lavender and coffee hanging as a faint whisper in the air. The quiet music from her favorite country radio station, Millie humming along to Kris or Dolly. It reminded Matty of home—or at least, what he’d always imagined a real home should feel like. Ethan’s house. It reminded him of Ethan’s folks and their welcoming home.

“Well, if you’re sure, hon, I’d love to have you keep me company.” Millie smiled at him affectionately while she dipped the first plate into the water. Bumping her shoulder against his, she winked at him. “I’ll wash and you can dry.”

Nodding eagerly Matty reached for the kitchen towel hanging next to the door to the basement. Millie handed him the first plate and he carefully started drying it and then placed it in the cupboard to his right.

“So, Matty, how are you liking it down at the docks? Will’s not too hard on you, right?” She winked at him, while

she continued with the dishes.

“No, ma’am. It’s going real good, I think. They’re all real nice and helpful. And... And I just love being by the sea, ma’am.”

“Hon, enough with the ma’am. I knew you were a polite young man the first time you said it. No need to say it again. Just call me Millie. That is after all my name.” She smiled softly, her pale blue eyes nothing but kind and sincere.

“Okay. Millie, ma’am.” Shaking his head furiously, cheeks heating up with embarrassment, Matty sighed. “Sorry, Millie.” He grinned cautiously. “Just Millie.”

“That’s right, hon. Just Millie.” The older woman grinned back at him.

They continued in comfortable silence, Millie humming along to the songs of *home*, *long lost lovers* and *working hard in the coal mines*. Everything was just so nice. It was. Matty swallowed back the lump building at the back of his throat, tears pooling in his eyes. He was not gonna cry! There was no reason for crying, for fucks sake! So why did he suddenly feel like hugging Millie to his chest, burying his face in her neck and crying? It was ridiculous. But it was how he felt, nonetheless.

He felt like crying for all the moments like these that he should’ve had growing up. Every child deserved at least a handful of these moments of safety, comfort, and affection, but no matter how hard he tried, not even one came to mind. Even when he was making biscuits in their old kitchen with his mom, the dreaded return of his father was always looming in the back of his mind like a black cloud. Even when he wasn’t in the house, his father’s dark presence put a damper on every little moment of joy. It was then and there, standing next to Millie that Matty decided that if he ever had kids himself, he would spend every day trying to fill their little lives with as many happy moments as possible. No child of his should ever have to go to sleep, his or her stomach aching from fear or hunger. No way.

“Are you alright, honey? You’ve gone all pale and quiet on me,” Millie’s solacing voice wrapped him in an invisible blanket, pulling him back from his stray thoughts. “I know, Dolly has that effect on me sometimes, too...” she winked.

“Yeah...” his voice came out faint and frail. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Because, you know, if there’s anything, anything at all, you tell me, okay sweetie? Or you tell Will.” The older woman nodded at the living room where Will was watching ESPN for the latest football standings.

Matty couldn’t help wondering what his mom was doing right now. Was she okay? Did she miss him? He’d thought that he’d be missing her more than he did by now, but then again, how could you miss someone who’d disappeared several years ago? Because she had. She’d checked out of her own life a long time ago, leaving Matty to deal with the aftermath of his father’s wrath all by himself. He wasn’t angry with his mother for withdrawing emotionally from his life—it wasn’t indifference either that he felt. If he were to describe the feeling which inhabited his chest and clutched at his heart, it was sadness. Sadness for the life that he could’ve had, if he’d been born in this house in Maine instead of in his father’s house in Eden. Sadness over all the kind words and fond caresses he’d missed out on. Of all the jokes and the laughs. Of all the *good boys* and *goodnight hons*.

Turning towards Millie, he cleared his throat.

“Millie?” His voice came out hesitant, unsure.

“Yes, hon. What is it?”

“I really like being here... With you and Will.” Again, he felt the annoying tears building.

“Aww, sweetheart, we love having you here, too. So much.” Millie took the kitchen towel from his grasp, drying her hands before she placed it on the kitchen counter. “You’re just such a breath of fresh air, truly.”

“Yeah?” The feeling of hope blooming in Matty’s chest transferred to his voice.



“You sure are, Matty. Heck, I haven’t seen Will this energetic in a long time, having to keep up with a young fella like you.” She winked, brushing at a tear which had trailed down Matty’s cheek. “Oh, hon, come here,” she cooed, while pulling him against her chest, holding Matty in the softest embrace. Her lips brushed against the top of his head while she mumbled words of comfort into his hair. “It’s okay, my sweet boy. Everything’s okay.”

They stood like that for a while, Millie holding him like he couldn’t recall ever having been held before. Her soft breath on his face, her heart beating against his own. Her good heart. Millie Hart had a good heart. Suddenly, Matty felt like something lifted. Something eased from his chest, making him breathe more freely. Releasing himself slowly from Millie’s warm embrace, he looked at her, blue eyes meeting her blue ones in return. Briefly, uncertainty coursed through him, but then exhaling deeply, Matty spoke.

“My home...” he trailed off, looking down at the linoleum kitchen floor as Millie reached for his hands. “My home was not a nice place, Millie.” Biting his lower lip, he looked back into Millie’s eyes, which had gone all moist. Brushing a lock of hair away from his forehead, Millie smiled at him.

“Oh, hon... I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay...” Matty mumbled. “It is what it is, I guess.”

“It’s not okay, sweetie. It’s not okay at all.” Millie’s usually gentle voice had taken on a firm lilt to it. “Who in their right mind wouldn’t be nice to a sweet boy like you?”

A sob escaped Matty’s lips. With one *sweet boy* Millie started chipping away at all the *stupid sonofabitches* and *useless crybabies*. He could almost feel it inside his bones, how at least some of them were erased from his long-healed fractures. Perhaps if he could just stay long enough in this house, he could slowly rebuild himself. Heal. Yeah, if he could just stay long enough. Maybe even for good.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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### Ethan – Now

“SO... I HAVE a confession to make. I wasn’t exactly being truthful the other day...” Ethan bit his bottom lip as he stirred his coffee, looking away from Avery.

Avery leaned across the table in their booth at the roadside diner they were having lunch at. In a mock horrified voice, he gasped.

“Oh no, don’t tell me... Your real name is Alfred, you’re forty-five and a travelling salesman in... no, don’t say it,” Avery held up a finger, eyes serious, a frown between his dark-blond brows. “Vacuum cleaners!” he blurted. “Am I right?” He grinned at Ethan, eyes full of trouble.

Ethan nodded, hiding a grin behind his right hand.

“Yes, you’ve got me there...”

“So, let me get this right...” Avery pulled at his pink bottom lip with his front teeth as he leaned in even closer, whispering conspiratorially at Ethan. His breath smelled like strawberry jam and vanilla ice cream and Ethan felt his dick thicken behind the confinement of his jeans as it strained in Avery’s direction. He shifted in his seat and raised his right eyebrow at Avery in question. “So, what you’re saying is that when I kissed you behind the men’s room earlier, I was in fact kissing a forty-five-year-old salesman... Yes!” Avery pumped his fist in the air. “I always wanted to be with an older guy. That’s so fucking hot, Ethan. Sorry, I mean Alfred.”

Ethan chuckled, shaking his head before he took another sip of his coffee. It was half and half and with two spoonsful of sugar, just the way he liked it. Avery had wrinkled his nose in disgust when Ethan had ordered the coffee, taking a noisy draw of his strawberry milkshake. Ethan had teased him that he would never have figured that a twenty-eight-year-old

university professor wouldn't be addicted to coffee. Avery had raised his index finger between them and added "*assistant professor, good sir,*" while he'd continued to suck on the red and white-striped straw like his life depended upon it. Ethan wondered what those sinfully luscious lips would feel like wrapped around his own cock while he had a firm grip on Avery's golden hair or around his long, slender neck, pressing his thumb against his pulse point.

"Sorry," Avery smiled, oblivious to the havoc that his assault on the straw was wrecking inside Ethan. "I'll be serious now. Tell me." He offered Ethan one of his irresistible smiles that he'd grown so addicted to during the short time they'd known each other.

"I'm... uhm... it wasn't exactly true when I told you that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. Well, I mean, if I could just pick and choose, you know..." Ethan spoke the sentence in a rush, not looking up from the half-finished cheeseburger in front of him.

"Okay. I mean, that's only fair, right? We'd only just met. Now that we're ancient friends and swapping saliva in public places, you can tell me." Avery reached out his hand and linked his fingers with Ethan's. A shy smile escaped Ethan's lips, contradicting the seriousness of his frown.

"So, Matty's dyslexic. He used to get a lot of shit in school. Not just from our classmates but also from our teachers. Some of them used to be real mean about too, you know." He looked up at Avery who nodded for him to go on. "I always felt so helpless, seeing the best person I know struggle like that. We used to read together every afternoon in the tree house, but the next day in class it would be as if everything was written in a foreign language, and he'd be lost all over again."

Bracing himself for the next part, Ethan started playing with the salt and pepper set on the table between them, a tortured expression covering his face, his green eyes darkening.

“They’d call him retard, our so-called friends. I mean, that would’ve been one thing, right? At least, he had me at school and I’d usually get them to shut up. No, the worst part was when he got home with yet another failed English paper or history report. His father would mostly hit him where it didn’t show. But I’d know. I’d know as soon as Matty sat down next to me on the school bus, wincing in his seat.”

“Jesus!” Avery blurted, shock momentarily coasting across his face. Ethan’s hands were trembling by now, and Avery stroked his thumb reassuringly across the tanned skin of his right hand.

“I wanted to kick the shit outta that asshole, but I was just a kid and even if I’d been strong enough, it would’ve just landed me in juvie.” Chewing on the inside of his cheek furiously, Ethan looked into Avery’s eyes, a few tears gathering at the corners. Looking at Avery was like looking into a mirror, his eyes moist from unshed tears as well, a disgusted frown pulling at his mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” Avery whispered. “I’m so sorry that this happened to your friend. No child should have to go through that kind of cruelty.”

“Yeah, that’s why we wanted to run away together. Right after graduation. Or that was the plan at least.” Ethan untangled his fingers from Avery’s firm hold and ran both hands through his auburn hair. “So yeah, that’s what I’d wanna do. I’d wanna teach dyslexic kids like Matty. Give them a safe place to learn in. Give them the opportunity to get a degree if they’d want that. Or just be able to go to school every day without being bullied and knocked about.” Ethan trailed off, anger in his eyes.

“That sounds amazing, Ethan,” Avery whispered, his kind eyes bright with admiration. “You should definitely do that. You would make a great teacher. You’re not only smart, but you’re also emphatic and engaging and that’s the most important thing.” Eagerness was slowly building in Avery’s voice as he kept his eyes on Ethan.

“I can’t do that. I could never do that,” Ethan murmured, his voice heavy with resignation. “My folks don’t have that kind of money. They can barely make ends meet as it is. I still have three younger siblings living at home. My dad’s away working construction most of the time, busting his ass for a near starvation wage. I’d never ask them for that kinda money. They only get by as it is because I chip in.” The more he voiced the reasons for the improbability of this dream coming true, the more he felt like getting up and running out the door. And just keep on running until his head was devoid of these naïve, unrealistic ideas. He suddenly felt angry with not only his life circumstances but also with himself for initiating the conversation in the first place.

“You wouldn’t have to. There are scholarships. You have good grades, right? From high school. You would be an excellent candidate for a scholarship, and you would most definitely qualify for financial aid, especially if you chose a college out of state. It’s not that difficult to apply. I could help you...” Avery started searching through his phone, which he’d left on the table between them, his voice filled with enthusiasm.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ethan replied. “I’m not gonna go. I’ve got a job lined up at a farm when I get back home.”

“What do you mean? Of course, it matters! It’s your dream, Ethan. And it’s within reach. You could...” Avery shook his head in disbelief.

It dawned on Ethan that Avery came from an entirely different world than him. A world of possibilities and *why nots* instead of *no ways*. A streak of jealousy flashed through his chest. Ever since Ethan could remember, he’d had responsibilities around the house. As soon as school was out, chores awaited him at home—often, he’d take care of fixing stuff that his dad would usually do when he was home. *My little man*, his mom always called him. *I don’t know what I’d do without you, hon. You’re my little man*. School breaks were spent working for Mr. Peterson, contributing to the household when his dad was between construction jobs. There was no

way Avery would understand something like that. How could he?

“Just leave it alone, Avery, okay? Just leave it.” Ethan scooted to the end of the booth and searched through his backpack for his wallet. “I’m not gonna go. I know you mean well, but it’s none of your business.” He cursed himself for even making it Avery’s business in the first place by telling him. Dropping a few bills on the table, Ethan slung his backpack over his right shoulder, before mumbling at a stunned Avery, “I’ll see you outside.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### Matty – Then

“**MATTY! LET’S CALL** it a day after this lot. It’s too damn hot today, kid...” Will brushed at his sweaty forehead, nodding at the stack of empty containers on the dock they’d just started rinsing off. It had been a shit day at sea, most of the traps were only holding two to three lobsters each, and at one point, Matty had almost keeled over when the sun had started beating down on them in earnest. It had been the worst catch in the one year he’d been staying with the Harts.

“Yeah, sure thing, Will.” It was fucking ruthless today. Any kind of refreshing breeze had abandoned the usually very windy Grant’s Harbor and the air was standing still, unforgiving heat pouring off every surface. It wasn’t like the heat back home. No, you got used to that kinda temperature because it was a steady thing, all day, every day, seeping into the late hours of the night too. Matty sometimes wondered if this tolerance of devilishly high temperatures was part of every West Texan from the day you were born. Imprinted into your every cell. Into your blood. But this heat was different. It was unexpected. All-consuming and suffocating.

“Yeah...” Will continued as he reached for another container. “No man or beast should be forced to be outside in this kinda weather.” He scrutinized Matty for a moment. “You’ve had enough to drink today, son? You know water won’t do it for ya alone.”

The start of a smile blossomed at the right corner of Matty’s mouth. How fucking endearing that a rough-looking fisherman from Maine was worried about a West Texan born and bred managing the heat. It always resulted in a warm fuzzy feeling in his chest whenever Will or Millie worried about him. It made him feel important and worth something. Like if something were to happen to him, they’d be sad. Or if

he were to leave, they'd come look for him. Yeah, he kinda had a feeling that they would.

"I'm good, Will. Had a soda a little while back." He grinned at Will while brushing at a persistent, wayward curl spilling onto his sticky forehead. *Yeah, I'm good.* He was great, even. Life in Grant's Harbor was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before in his nearly seventeen years on this planet.

The best thing about life in this small corner of the world was that it was fucking predictable. You always knew what to expect. There were no sudden outbursts of rage or random hateful slurs. No iron fists coming outta nowhere or stray smacks to the back of your head followed by a *get outta my way, you fucking mamma's boy*. To most people there was probably nothing exotic about predictability, but to Matty it was fucking intoxicating. It was like a drug he couldn't get enough of. Once he'd had a taste, he was hooked.

The now familiar sound of a motor-driven lobstering boat arriving at the docks made Matty look up briefly from his task. It was the O'Neil boat. *Victoria*. The boat belonged to Ray O'Neil who worked alongside his only son Austin out on the ocean six days a week. He'd only spoken to Ray a few times, but Matty liked him already. A man of few words just like Will, Ray had a dry sense of humor that would appear like a lightning bolt from a clear blue sky when you'd least expect it. Matty liked that. It reminded him of Ethan's dad back home.

Matty hadn't had more than a handful of exchanges with the young O'Neil, so what happened next was rather unexpected and Matty would later refer to it as God's eighth wonder. Or his bisexual awakening once he'd had time to Google it and dissect the moment in detail later that night. It felt like a scene from one of those lame eighties movies where everything suddenly happens in slow-motion, an upbeat soundtrack accompanying images of a hot guy running along the beach or shaking out his wet hair—a hot as fuck guy. Strange how Matty had always imagined this exact moment—the *moment*—as something else entirely. Because in all his



daydreams and fantasies, in all his teenage wet dreams or extensive spank bank material, it had always been *the girl*.

Mostly, she'd been a blonde, girl-next-door type of chick. Big tits spilling out of a tight tank top. Skimpy, cut-off jeans. If he was feeling really adventurous, his dream girl would even sport a belly button piercing and would be licking a cherry popsicle obscenely, moaning a *hey Matty* while twirling her pink tongue around the tip of the melting ice. Oh yeah, Matty knew exactly how to get his teen libido from A to B in a matter of seconds. But never, in any of his jack-off sessions, had it been the image of a guy that had occupied his thoughts. *So, what the actual fuck?*

As soon as the boat reached the docks, Austin jumped from his dad's boat, his tight, white t-shirt clinging to his sweaty chest like a second skin. Working quickly, a concentrated frown between his black brows, Austin skillfully started securing the boat. Ray hollered something at his son and Austin laughed at him, shaking his head, an amused look in his eyes. Looking up, he smiled cheekily at Matty who nearly dropped the container that he'd been stacking on top of another onto his feet.

Austin started pulling his t-shirt over his head, revealing a firm set of glistening abs and a broad set of tanned, muscular pecs before shaking out his damp hair. Austin was fucking built. You wouldn't know since he usually sported the same kinda canvas coveralls that the rest of the lobstermen wore. Trailing his eyes over Austin's remarkable upper body, Matty's gaze eventually landed on the dark trail of hair starting just below his belly button, leading all the way down to the hem of Austin's low-hanging, green board shorts.

Suddenly, it dawned on Matty why it was commonly referred to as a *happy trail*. He suddenly felt like giggling which was pretty fucking random and weird too. He'd seen Ethan naked countless times, but he'd never felt like this. He was completely awestruck by Austin and his supreme hotness. Drops of sweat trailed down Austin's chiseled jaw and further down his neck and Matty had a sudden urge to lick at Austin's

protruding Adam's apple. Or perhaps even bite it. *Shit*. Yeah, he really wanted to taste it.

"Hey man," Austin winked, briefly touching Matty's shoulder with his own as he blew past him, a breeze of ocean and male sweat invading Matty's nostrils causing his lungs to almost combust.

"Hey," Matty whispered as he proceeded to turn around, checking out Austin's broad, sculpted back and bouncing ass as he headed for the outdoor showers. A generous handful, he thought to himself, momentarily looking at his own calloused hands. Yeah, definitely. The fact that he was clearly checking Austin out had become irrelevant at this point since his horny, inexperienced teenage mind had become all mushy. Halfway there, Austin turned around, a wicked smile pulling at the right corner of his full mouth, dimples popping.

"Hot, huh?" he yelled at Matty, waking him from his lust-induced daze.

"Sorry, what?" Matty replied, clenching his fists, noticing a weird buzz in his ears. Maybe he hadn't had enough to drink. Maybe he was in fact having a heatstroke.

"It's hot today, huh?" Austin grinned teasingly, wiping at his sweaty chest with his equally sweaty t-shirt.

"Yeah, right," Matty forced out, before continuing like a fucking genius. "Hot."

"Later, man." Austin smiled, biting his plump bottom lip, briefly scrunching his nose, before turning around, walking away.

"Later," Matty whispered, fireworks going off in the back of his mind as well as in his suddenly much too tight cutoffs.

As Austin reached the showers and turned on the water, it was pretty much checkmate for Matty. Stunned out of his mind, he watched as water cascaded down Austin's chest and further down his glorious six-pack. Swallowing back what was obviously drool, Matty momentarily felt jealous at the water licking along the smooth, tanned skin. As Austin pulled off his board shorts and stood in a pair of tight navy-blue briefs, an

inappropriate, desperate moan escaped Matty's lips. At first, he didn't realize that the weird, strangled sound had come from his mouth—hell, it sounded more like a seagull choking on an old French fry or some weird mating call. When he finally did, he felt his cheeks heat up while at the same time goosebumps covered his entire body.

“Matty!” Will's voice boomed through the hot, stale air, and when he turned around, Will looked at him questioningly.

“Sorry, what?” Matty managed to force out, surprised that drool didn't spurt from his lips as well.

“Are you alright there, son? You're not having a heatstroke, are ya? I must have called your name three times already?” A worried frown appeared between Will's bushy, gray brows.

“Sorry... Nah, I'm good. I'm great.” Matty rubbed his eyes, slowly waking from his stupor.

“You done, son? You ready to call it a day?”

“Yeah, I'm done, Will.”

“Let's go then,” Will smiled, nodding briefly at Ray who was pulling a beer out of a cooler. “See ya around, Ray.”

“Sure thing, Will. See ya around, Matty,” Ray nodded, eyes crinkling at the corners, his prematurely wrinkled face bearing witness to years and years out at sea. Matty wondered if he stayed long enough in Grant's Harbor if his own face would look like that one day. He kinda hoped so. It would mean that he'd lead a long and happy life, doing what he loved the most.

“See ya around, Mr. O'Neil,” Matty smiled before he turned around, trailing after Will to the truck. As they passed the communal showers, they were once again empty, without a trace of Austin and if it hadn't been for a pool of water seeping into the sandy ground, Matty could have explained away his momentary lust-induced meltdown as just a heat-provoked mirage.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### Avery – Then

**“CONGRATULATIONS PROF. LAPORTE.** We are looking forward to having you as part of our esteemed faculty in September. I know that you will be a great addition to our *International Sand Club*.” The dean, Mrs. Levin, shook his hand eagerly. “One of my all-time favorite movies, *The English Patient*,” she whispered conspiratorially at Avery while blushing like a schoolgirl on homecoming night. “But don’t tell Prof. Levin. He’ll only get jealous.”

*TMI.* Wasn’t that what the cool kids said these days? Too much fucking information, Dean Levin. Avery had no interest whatsoever in learning what rocked his future boss’s boat—or bed—and if her hubby, who also happened to be one of his future colleagues, got jealous or not.

Sure, Ralph Fiennes also rocked Avery’s world any day of the week. Not in the almost mummified burn victim version but more so in the hunky, heavily tanned archaeologist type. Wouldn’t Avery have loved to be Kristin Scott Thomas in that bathtub scene? Or up against the wall at the 1940s Christmas party being fucked into oblivion while sucking on Ralph Fiennes’ date-covered thumb? Yes. The British actor was the embodiment of male hotness but unfortunately so far from any real-life archeologists Avery had ever encountered.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m excited to start.” Avery swallowed behind the lump building with increasing speed at the back of his throat. *Liar.* That’s what he was. A fucking liar and a fake.

“When are you headed back to Big Bend, Prof. LaPorte? Do you have time for a quick luncheon with some of the other members of our faculty?” The dean corrected her tan suit jacket before gesturing at the large wooden door to her office.

*Luncheon.* How many fucking times had he sat through one of his parents' dead-boring luncheons as a child, a teenager and even as a grown-up. A gathering of old, dusty professors belonging to the so-called intellectual elite in Boston and some younger, aspiring ones too, who were so far up their older colleagues' asses that they were surely coughing up moth balls. Avery's mother mingling around the dining room in her way too little black dress with a double dry martini clasped between her red-painted fingernails while at the same time *impulsively, of course* quoting Proust and *compulsively* flirting with her husband's MIT colleagues.

Fucking Proust. When Avery was eleven, his mother, Doctor Ursula LaPorte, had dragged him to a two-hour lecture of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* by a Proust scholar visiting from France. Yes, those had been two fucking hours which Avery had been looking for ever since along with the ninety minutes he'd spent in the hotel lobby waiting for his mother to return from doing God knows what in a hotel room with the French scholar. So no, Avery had no intention of going to any fucking luncheon anytime soon.

"I would have loved to join you; however, I have promised to be back by the day after tomorrow at the very latest to lead an excavation." *Liar.* They weren't counting on him to lead the group of colleagues flying in from Greece for at least a couple of weeks.

Avery was there to record the Comanche drawings solely and he was mostly done with that. However, the thought of sitting through a *luncheon* with his esteemed, future colleagues held the same allure right now as burning your hands on a pot of scalding hot water or poking your eyes out with a rusty fork.

"Oh, how unfortunate," the dean crooned. "But we can't keep our heritage waiting, can we now? It's good to know that our newest member of our faculty has his priorities straight. When it comes to our culture and history, we are but mere servants, aren't we Prof. LaPorte?"

*Shit!* This was his life now and he had no one to blame but himself. If he heard the word *faculty* one more time, he was

going to scream.

“Indeed, ma’am.” Avery didn’t feel like going into a longish discussion on how it wasn’t really *their* shared cultural history since his family originated from France and he suspected that Dean Levin, too, had European roots. No, those who could in fact show a direct line of DNA back to the Comanches had either fallen victim to numerous genocides a long time ago or had by now been forced into a waspy, contemporary society.

“Well, have fun Prof. LaPorte. I’ll be excited to see the fruits of your hard labor once you return to our little corner of the academic world.”

*Can’t wait.*

“I can’t wait, Dean Levin. I hope you have a nice summer and I’m looking forward to joining you in September.” Avery reached for the doorknob, adjusting his leather bag on his left shoulder.

“Well, thank you, Prof. LaPorte. Prof. Levin and I are joining a couple of friends from France in Provence shortly.” The dean’s face glowed with anticipation while she handed her secretary a portfolio.

“Amy, will you be so kind as to send Prof. LaPorte all the necessary passwords and documentation? He’ll be joining our staff in September and will require housing?” The dean looked at Avery questioningly.

“Yes, please. That would be lovely.” There was no way in hell that he was moving back in with his parents even though they owned a large brownstone in the city. Their marriage was a farce only held together by identical ambitions and a mutual pursuit of academic acclaim. He’d rather be buried alive next to Tut Ankh Amon before he’d move back in with them. That house hadn’t resembled a home since his little sister Mattie left it so abruptly when he was eleven. Nothing really had if Avery was being honest with himself. He’d felt lost ever since losing the one thing which had made sense to him in a world that was, at its best, shallow and dull, and at its worst, suffocating and depressing.

*Yes.* He would require housing on campus. But not until September. For now, he was getting the fuck out of academia and back into the desert. Who knew. Maybe the university in Athens would send some hunky professor to Big Bend, whom Avery could spend the next couple of months fucking up against a rock wall. Or if Avery was truly lucky, he'd end up being the one being fucked by a Greek Adonis named Yanni on the red desert sand. *Yes,* that'd keep his mind off his looming future for at least a little while. Nothing like a good, brutal railing to re-set your mind.

Yeah, who knew? Anything was possible on the road away from the asphyxiating world of academia. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### Austin – Then

“**FUCK! JUST ASK** him. No big deal. Just fucking ask him,” Austin cursed himself for being such a coward as he parked his truck in front of the bait shop. He couldn’t quite remember when it had started but he’d had a crush on Matty for ages. Well, maybe not ages, but it sure felt that way. It couldn’t have been more than a year in any case, but to Austin every damn time he ran into Matty at the docks it felt like every second, every minute, was drawn out, stretched out before him. Almost like time stood still the moment he looked at Austin, those piercing blue eyes giving off an untouched innocence which stood in sharp contrast to Matty’s often guarded body language.

With his wild blond hair, pouty lips and frail build, Austin had the urge to go completely caveman-style whenever he was in the close vicinity to Matty. To throw his small, lithe figure over his shoulder and run away with him. Hide away with him. Austin didn’t exactly know the circumstances of Matty’s arrival in Grant’s Harbor a little over a year ago, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that Matty needed protection. From whom or what exactly Austin didn’t know, but there was a vulnerability about the younger boy—*younger* being the keyword here—that made Austin want to wrap his arms around Matty and never let him go again. Keep him from harm and fucking destroy anyone who even looked at Matty the wrong way.

Jesus, yesterday at the docks he’d been *this* close to asking Matty if he wanted to go swimming. He’d felt the words on the tip of his tongue, begging to be spoken. Fleeting, Austin thought he’d recognized the same kind of longing in Matty’s eyes that occupied his own heart. The kind of longing which was beyond any physical kind of need. The kind of bottomless yearning which had its origin in loss or neglect. Perhaps even



pain. But something had held Austin back from asking. Or rather *someone*.

Austin didn't fear rejection. That was kind of a given thing being a gay guy in a small town—hardly anyone was gay in Grant's Harbor or at least they didn't advertise it in the local paper. Those who'd come out in high school had gone away for college in the city, but that had never been the plan for Austin. From early on, he'd known that he wanted to work alongside his dad as soon as he was old enough to do so.

No, Austin always went to one of the closest cities if he wanted to hook up with someone. He wasn't exactly a fan of rushed, casual hookups but it took care of that itchy sensation in his bones whenever he just needed to be with another guy and get off. For the most part, he felt kinda awkward afterwards because he mostly wished it had been in a real bed instead of in a dirty toilet stall or in the back of his truck if he was lucky. None of the guys Austin hooked up with hung around long after they'd gotten off. And it wasn't that Austin wanted to cuddle or anything with these random, nameless guys, but he had an idea in his head that he'd one day like to be held—or even better yet wrap himself around someone else—after sex. Lately, whenever he pictured himself holding someone firmly against his chest, it was a mop of blond hair that he sighed into, while sky-blue eyes looked up at him through hooded lids.

So, no. It wasn't the possibility of rejection that held Austin back from asking Matty out. No, it was Will Hart that he feared more than anything. There was no question that the older fisherman had taken an extraordinary liking to the kid. His voice even changed when he addressed Matty. There was an unparalleled softness to Will's eyes when he looked at Matty or spoke of him. It was clear to anyone that the usually reserved and rough-looking fisherman had invited the kid into his heart and that you would have to get Will's approval if you were to even look at Matty with any kind of interest.

Besides, Austin didn't know if Matty was even interested in going for a swim. Or going out. Or... Fuck, he knew that Matty was younger by a few years, but there was a wariness in

his eyes that told Austin that Matty hadn't been a kid for a while. It was the same cautiousness that Austin saw reflected in his own steel-gray eyes from time to time when he looked in the mirror. A cautiousness resulting from the fact that if the grown-ups in your life failed you, there was no other choice than to grow up fast. Had the grown-ups in Matty's life failed him? And how? A fifteen-year-old didn't just one day end up on the docks asking a random stranger for a job, if he came from a decent, loving home.

Austin was interrupted when Will's beat-up truck parked behind his own in front of the bait shop. First, the older man jumped out and shortly after Matty followed. He was pretty much always at Will's side—either working at the docks or tagging along wherever Will went. It was hard to get Matty alone, that was for sure. You'd have to be a fucking Secret Service agent to shake Will if you wanted to have a chance at talking to Matty in private.

“Hey, man,” he nodded at Matty who blushed instantly, his freckles multiplying every day, it seemed, from the intense July sun. Not that Austin was counting them or anything. That would be ridiculous. Right? Reluctant blue eyes regarded Austin questioningly, before Matty parted his pink lips.

“Hi.” Fidgeting with the hem of his threadbare, white t-shirt,

Matty looked back at Will who was entering the shop.

“You comin', son?” Will spoke over his shoulder as he nodded at the owner, Mr. Olsson, who was stacking the shelves with imported beer.

“Actually, there was something I wanted to ask Matty,” Austin inserted, looking directly at Will for permission. He didn't know where the courage stemmed from but he kinda felt that it was now or... not now.

“Sure thing, Austin. Matty, I'll just be a minute, alright? You holler if you need me,” Will spoke, an unsubtle raised brow at Austin before he disappeared inside the bait shop.

Shuffling his feet on the sand-covered sidewalk, Austin looked at Matty, biting his lower lip. *Just fucking ask him, you idiot!*

“So, I was...” he started, brushing his right hand through his jet-black hair which he’d inherited from his mother.

“Yes!” Matty blurted before Austin could think of how to phrase his question. A pair of eager eyes beamed at him, cheeks hot pink by now. “Whatever it is you’re gonna ask me, the answer’s yes!” Matty jutted his round chin forward, a determined look in his eyes.

*Well fuck me*, Austin thought. That hadn’t exactly gone as he’d expected. He couldn’t help laughing at the bold straightforwardness of the younger guy. He briefly felt like toying with Matty but decided against it. He knew that it must have taken a lot for Matty to be vulnerable like that and he didn’t want to ruin the moment. *This fucking moment*. He chuckled softly as his gaze connected with Matty’s once again.

“Do you wanna go swimming?” Austin registered the words spilling from his lips as he felt goosebumps spreading all over his skin. Which was ridiculous since it was the hottest month of the year.

“Yes!” Matty blurted, his eyes not leaving Austin’s.

“Okay...” Austin chuckled. “Like, now, or...?”

“I can’t,” Matty mumbled, a cute, annoyed frown between his brows.

“Oh, okay...” Austin swallowed as he felt the heaviness of disappointment settling in his chest.

“See, I promised Will to help him paint the toolshed, and we’ve been meaning to do it for days now, but it’s just been so damn windy and then Mr. Winnegan couldn’t order the right color before today, and Millie is very particular about her colors, so now we kinda have to...” he trailed off, looking apologetically at Austin, slender fingers still pulling at the distressed-looking hem.

“That’s okay,” Austin bit back a smile. Matty was freaking adorable as he stood there rambling, shuffling his feet in a pair

of worn Chucks.

“But I wanna go. For sure. I mean, not today but tomorrow?” A hopeful glimpse spread across Matty’s face and in that moment, he was the cutest fucking thing that Austin had ever seen. Shy yet trusting. Innocent yet mature. But most of all just impossibly gorgeous.

“Okay, tomorrow. I’ll pick you up? Around seven?”

“Yeah, seven is good. Seven is perfect.” Matty grinned broadly, his unmistakable happiness transferring to Austin like an out-of-control-wildfire.

“Okay,” Austin whispered, his heart trying to pound its way through his chest at the thought of being alone with Matty. To finally be alone with him. *Shit, he was gonna be alone with Matty!*

“Okay. I gotta go. See you tomorrow?” There was a light lilt to the boy’s soft voice as if he needed for Austin to reassure him that they were in fact meeting tomorrow. In an unwavering voice, Austin spoke, his eyes not leaving Matty’s.

“Yes. I’ll see you tomorrow, Matty.”

“Seven o’clock?”

“Seven o’clock.”

Matty nodded, still smiling, before he turned around and disappeared into the bait shop. Austin stood, a goofy grin splayed across his face, his heart still pounding as if he’d just run a goddamn marathon.

*Fuck*, he thought to himself. He needed to jack off at least twice tomorrow before going to the beach with Matty, even though he doubted that that would do the trick. Austin had a feeling that he could jack off until his dick was covered in friction marks, and it still wouldn’t put a damper on the neediness he felt whenever he was close to Matty. Well, at least they’d be in the water most of the time. *Fuck*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### Ethan – Then

**“YOU FUCKING CHEATED, man!”** Matty yelled at him as he threw his old bicycle by the side of the gravel road. He wiped at the sweat on his forehead and squinted at Ethan. “We agreed on five! Not three.”

“No way, dude. I clearly said three. Who would go on five anyway? It’s always been *one-two-three-go!*” Ethan kicked at the ground stubbornly, dust filling the space between them, coloring the tips of his sneakers red.

“Whatever,” Matty mumbled in front of him. “Let’s just get in the water...” It was a blistering hot July day and nearly every day since school was out, they’d ridden out on their bikes to the deserted gravel pit. No one had used it for a while—abandoned, it had been left for free-range kids like Ethan and Matty to swim in the basin at the bottom of the pit.

They headed down the steep side, their worn sneakers slipping on small rocks, adding a few scrapes and bruises to their already busted up knees. Ethan had just turned ten in April whereas Matty didn’t turn that corner until October. July was their favorite month of the year. Fucking school was out and they could roam the fields and the dusty country roads as much as they wanted. For the most part, Matty could get away with sleeping over at Ethan’s place, giving him a reprieve from life at the Craig house.

When they got to the bottom of the pit, they both quickly stripped out of their dirty clothes stained with triple berry jam and down to their underwear. Still boys, their legs, and arms skinny, even though Ethan had always been more built than Matty, who looked a few years younger than he was.

As they stood next to each other, Ethan glanced at his best friend and noticed the scattering of fresh bruises along Matty’s

left hip and upper leg. The ones on his upper arms had faded slightly, faint yellows and purples in the outline of five phantom fingers. Ethan couldn't recall a time when Matty hadn't been covered in bruises in various colors. It had just always been like that for as long as he could remember. In various stages of healing, some were dark purple, black even while others were green or yellow. Matty's frail body was like an almanac of carefully inflicted pain: *Monday, a fist to his left upper arm. Tuesday, a boot to his abdomen, Wednesday, ten welts distributed evenly, almost meticulously across the back of his pale thighs...*

For a while now, Ethan had stopped believing that Matty was a clumsy child. Well, at least he wasn't any clumsier than Ethan was, and he sure as shit wasn't covered in bruises from head to toe. And in any case, they weren't the kinda scrapes and cuts Ethan had, which were mostly on his elbows and knees from falling on his bicycle or in the playground at school. No, they were more like actual prints as if a large hand had pulled roughly at Matty's slender upper arm or if a pair of knuckles had connected with the soft tissue. Ethan often wondered that with the number of bruises on the outside, how Matty must feel on the inside.

Matty caught Ethan's stare and shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"It's getting worse," Ethan whispered, nearly choking on the words.

"Yeah, maybe..." Matty drew in a breath, his shoulders in a resigned slump. "It's mostly when he's drunk. Or when I get in the way."

"Matty... We could tell someone, you know."

"Yeah? Who are we gonna tell, Eth? Huh? The police?" Matty looked at his best friend, the words a bitter ring to them.

"Yeah, maybe," Ethan replied, looking out at the turquoise water.

"And how do ya think that would go down? My father is the police, Eth. And my mom will just deny it all anyway."

Matty didn't blink, his voice devoid of any kind of emotions.

“You don't know that, Matty.” But Ethan knew that Matty was probably right. After all, Fiona Craig didn't strike Ethan as someone who would stand up for herself, let alone her son. And everyone in Eden was afraid of Chief Craig anyway.

Matty shook his head, blond curls everywhere before he started walking into the chilled water, his slight figure gliding through the still, bluish green surface. Once the water reached his stomach, he turned around and smiled at Ethan. If you didn't know Matty, you would think that he looked just like any other West Texan kid smiling under the fierce July sun. But if you looked close enough, you would see that the smile never reached his sky-blue eyes. They were for the most part expressionless, devoid of any kind of emotion, good or bad.

Blinking away his unshed tears, Ethan looked at the best person he knew and started walking out into the water towards Matty. It was in that moment, as he felt the cool water brush against his shins that Ethan made a promise to himself. That even if he was just a child, he'd do whatever he could to protect Matty. Even if it meant getting hurt in the process. Or hurting someone himself. Because somehow in his young mind he already knew that Matty was gonna need protecting. And he was gonna need someone to have his back. And the grown-ups in Matty's life weren't exactly volunteering to be the ones to do that. So, Ethan decided it was gonna be him.

It wasn't a choice, as far as Ethan saw it. It felt just as natural as brushing your teeth in the morning or using your right hand instead of your left to write your history paper. It was *instinctual*. He'd learned the word just last week when they'd watched a documentary in Ms. Henley's biology class. It was about penguins. Thousands and thousands of penguins. The baby penguins all looked the same to Ethan—super cute and fluffy, calling out desperately for their parents coming back from the sea. And amid all that chaos, an ocean of black and white, desperate calls of hunger, every adult penguin in the end managed to find exactly their baby. Every single time. *Instinctual*, Ms. Henley had called it. The distinct sound of their baby was imprinted into every adult penguin, even

though they all sounded the same to the human ear. That's the way he felt about Matty. How he'd always felt about his best friend ever since that day at baseball practice when Matty had literally stumbled into Ethan's life. Matty was his baby penguin. His to protect. And he'd always know how to find his way back to him. *Instinctually.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### Matty – Then

“**WHY MAINE OF** all places? You’re from Texas, right?” Austin asked as he looked towards the waves beating against the shore. It wasn’t exactly beach weather today, but it still beat Eden and its dust-filled air threatening to suffocate you any minute.

“I don’t know...” Matty cast a quick look at Austin, who lay next to him on a bright yellow beach towel, leaning on his elbows, gray eyes gazing at the ocean. “I just knew that I wanted to see it. The ocean, I mean.” Austin nodded in silent agreement, a lock of black hair falling into his eyes. Damn, if Ethan had been here, he would’ve been all over Austin with his young Elvis-look. But Ethan wasn’t here. He was back home. *Home*. The word gave off a sour taste on the back of his tongue.

“Yeah, I know. There’s nothing quite like it. It never gets old, and I’ve been staring at it ever since I can remember,” Austin chuckled, his deep voice spilling from his full lips. Matty bit his bottom lip and for a moment he imagined that it was Austin’s lip. Like biting into a plump peach... Yeah, he bet it’d feel just like that. All ripe and full. He wondered what Austin would taste like. Minty maybe, like Ethan had once told him that guys tasted. Hopefully not of salami. Yuck, Matty hated salami ever since that one time he’d eaten the last piece of one, and his father had forced him to eat one salami after another until he threw up. *That’ll teach ya, you fucking bastard*. Yes, that had sure taught Matty something. That hunger was just a feeling. Just like hate. And that while he could suppress the feeling of hunger, hate was much harder to ignore. It took some effort and some days it consumed you entirely.

Focusing back on Austin, who continued to smile at the ocean, Matty unconsciously licked his lips and nearly failed to bite back a moan before he swallowed it instead. *Shit*. The hair at the back of his neck stirred to life even though it was a warm day—at least a warm Maine day—and with panic, he realized that something else was beginning to stir too. *Fuck*.

“So, what was it like growing up in Grant’s Harbor?” Matty blurted, his voice coming out all squeaky.

Austin turned his head toward him and momentarily a dark shadow seemed to flash across the steel-gray of his eyes—then it was gone again. Matty could almost believe that he’d imagined it all together if it wasn’t for the numerous times he’d seen it in his own eyes when looking into a mirror or a storefront window.

“It was good. You know, I think it was like growing up in any other small-town USA. Familiar, safe, sometimes boring.” Austin smiled at him, a vulnerability in his features that Matty hadn’t noticed before.

Yeah, only he didn’t know, did he? He never had. What Matty wouldn’t have given for *familiar, safe, and sometimes boring*. He would probably give up his right arm which still ached on some days ever since his father had broken it in three places. *A complicated fracture*, the emergency doctor had called it, and they’d had to call in an orthopedic surgeon from Waco to fix it. Well, the arm was fixed alright. His father had cursed all the way home from the hospital that the specialist had charged him twenty percent of his fee—the part which wasn’t covered by the insurance provided by the police force.

Matty had felt inclined to say that the next time his father decided to beat him or throw him down the stairs, he just needed to make sure that he didn’t break it in a complicated way again. Because at the age of twelve Matty knew at least two things with a certainty no child should ever know. That it wouldn’t be the last time his father broke a bone in his body—and that he needed to get away sooner rather than later because one day his father might break something that couldn’t be repaired.

“Wanna go for a swim?” Austin’s deep voice interrupted his thoughts and Matty realized that he was grabbing his neck. Yeah. Still in one piece. He shook off the feeling of dread penetrating his skin, settling deep in his bones. Yeah, it was over. His father would never touch him again. He just needed to stay hidden away in this little corner of the world.

“Yeah, sure,” he replied as Austin got up and started pulling off his gray hoodie, revealing first a hard, smooth stomach and then a broad, tanned chest. It wasn’t that Austin was huge or anything. It was just that compared to Matty, he seemed massive. Matty looked down at his own slight frame and suddenly felt insecure and conscious of the fact that he was still very much a skinny teenager, longish limbs that hadn’t yet filled out with muscle. Well, at least not the type of muscles which adorned Austin’s body.

Austin threw his hoodie next to the towel and brushed at his right pec muscle. His skin was golden, glowing in the light from the bright sun. His nipples stood out, slightly darker than the rest of his skin, and a light dusting of black hair rested between his pecs. Yeah, Matty was reminded that even though they were both in their teens, Austin very much resembled a man whereas Matty still looked boyish. He swallowed as his gaze settled on Austin’s stomach and at the black trail of hair leading into his swim trunks where it disappeared. Austin was fucking built. But not in a jock kinda way. Not in a *I-spend-all-my-free-time-in-a-gym* kinda way. No, it was more in a *I’ve-been-working-alongside-my-dad-on-the-docks-ever-since-I-can-remember* kinda way. Matty swallowed back the drool which had begun gathering in his mouth and stood as well.

Austin winked at him as he licked his bottom lip suggestively. Or maybe that was just the way that Austin licked his lips and Matty was imagining things. He started pulling off his own sweatshirt and paused momentarily as he once again took in the outline of Austin’s carved out abs. *Fuck it*, he thought to himself as he pulled off the sweatshirt in one swift movement. He dropped it next to him on the sand and gazed expectantly at Austin, who quickly looked away at the sea.

“You ready?” Austin asked, gazing at the waves, his words almost swept away by the wind. A nerve in his left temple was ticking, his jaws clenched.

“Yeah,” Matty mumbled, wondering what he’d done wrong. Because he must have done something wrong to make Austin’s demeanor change like that. *Look what ya made me do, you little pussy.* The hateful words slammed into him like a tidal wave, threatening to break him into a million pieces and scatter him along the shore.

“Austin...” he whispered but his voice must have been swallowed up by the wind because Austin took off, running towards the ocean. Matty watched his broad back muscles as they moved and rippled under the gloriously glowing skin. How his firm, solid thighs emerged from the hem of his swim trunks, dusted with black hair. The way his waist narrowed at the hips and the outline of his firm ass behind the synthetic, blue fabric. In that moment, Matty knew what Ethan meant when he referred to a guy in a magazine or in a movie as *fucking hot* or *eye candy*. Austin was a fucking hot piece of eye candy and Matty couldn’t help but laugh out loud at the ridiculous notion that someone like Austin would ever want to be with someone like him. For all he knew, the older boy had just taken pity on him when he’d asked him to come swimming.

Matty reached the water as Austin threw himself against a gigantic wave, emerging shortly after, shaking out his wet hair, a breathtaking smile on his face. *Fuck. Fuckity fuck.* If he’d for one second thought that Austin’s body was a work of art under the caressing rays of the sun back on the beach, it was nothing compared to the impact it had on Matty now, all smooth, wet, and glistening. Drops of sea water trickled down Austin’s abs and further into his happy trail, where they settled and reflected the light of the sun. Austin grinned at him before he splashed water in Matty’s face.

“Wha—?” Matty shook his head and licked at the drops of salty water that had landed on his lips. “What the fuck, dude?” he grinned back at Austin before he was met with another splash of water.

“What’s wrong?” Austin laughed. “You afraid of a little water? The desert rat doesn’t like to get his fur wet?” Austin winked, his silver eyes lighting up with mirth.

“Desert rat?” Matty countered. “Who the fuck did you call a desert rat?” A giggle moved from his stomach and into his throat. Without further consideration, Matty launched himself at Austin, water splashing all around him. If he’d expected for one moment that Austin would try to evade him or dive underwater, he was mistaken. In one swift movement, Austin caught him mid-air and wrapped him in a firm hold between two massive arms. *Hmff.*

As wet skin connected with wet skin, Austin tightened his hold around Matty, who felt like all air was being sucked out of his lungs in one instant. Stormy-gray eyes pierced his own and Matty suddenly felt inclined to spill all his deepest, darkest secrets to this glorious being in front of him. *Yes, I was the one who stole apples from Mrs. Walton’s orchard. Yes, I masturbated to a class photo in the sixth grade. Yes, I took twenty dollars from my father’s wallet but only because I was hungry, and he hadn’t allowed me to eat in two days. Yes, I think you are the hottest human being I’ve ever seen in my pathetic life and if you’ll let me, I’ll lick you from top to bottom.*

If it wasn’t for Austin’s smooth voice interrupting his crazy, delusional thoughts, Matty could’ve gone on and on. Hell, maybe he’d even admit to killing Kennedy. Who knew?

“You.” That one word slipping from Austin’s pink lips nearly made his heart stop. Searching Matty’s eyes, a smug grin covering his mouth, Austin coasted his hands lower where they finally settled on Matty’s slim hips. “You’re the desert rat. A cute one for sure, but still a rat.”

Before Matty could digest the word *cute* and begin to dissect what he’d meant by it, Austin grinned and submerged underwater, pulling Matty with him. In an instant, everything grew silent. Gone were the screams of the seagulls and the roaring noise of the waves. Gone were the motorboat engines in the distance and the pounding of his own heart. Left was only the grayest of gray staring back at him, the sensation of

Austin's large hands wrapped safely around him and the echo of one word coursing through his body. *Cute. Cute. Cute. Not ugly. Or stupid. Or useless. Not pussy. Or crybaby. Or retard. Just cute. Cute. Cute. Cute.*

Matty closed his eyes and swallowed, the simple, monosyllabic word settling in his chest. Then he felt a soft, cushiony pressure just coasting across his bottom lip. It was barely there, just a whisper of a touch, but he didn't have to open his eyes to know that it was Austin's lips against his own. Austin tightened his hands around Matty's waist, pulling him closer against his broad chest. His tongue peeked out and swept ever so slowly and tentatively across Matty's upper lip before nibbling at it teasingly. Foreign sensations exploded inside Matty, lighting him up, making his heart pound furiously in his chest. *Strange, how much my life has changed,* he thought as he, in a moment of boldness, swept his own tongue against the right corner of Austin's mouth. *How strange, yet how wonderful.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### Ethan – Now

**“I’M SORRY IF I overstepped.”** Avery rested his forehead against the back of Ethan’s shoulder. “It’s just that I think you’re so fucking brilliant and kind and sweet. The world needs more people like you, Ethan, pursuing a career as a teacher.”

Avery’s velvet hair tickled Ethan’s neck while he spoke. They’d decided to stay at a motel halfway between Memphis and Jackson, breaking their trip to Nashville in to two. That was the closest to a conversation they’d had that afternoon after leaving the diner. The silence had hung like a looming thundercloud between them. The monotonous humming of the car engine the only soundtrack to their miserable car ride along with the scratchy sound of Avery’s charcoal against the rough paper of his sketchbook.

Ethan wasn’t upset with Avery. It was himself that he was angry with. Why he’d felt the sudden urge to share that part of himself with Avery when he’d never even voiced it to his own parents or Matty, he couldn’t explain. He should’ve buried that childish and unrealistic dream a long time ago. He needed to let it go. It would only bring him misery in the long run that he kept thinking about what his life could be like if he went to school and became a teacher. The sooner he put the last nail in that coffin, the better.

“It’s okay,” Ethan mumbled as he turned around. “I’m not mad at *you*, Avery. It’s my own damn fault for mentioning it. But can we just let it go?”

He pinned Avery’s chin between his thumb and index finger and tilted his face. Avery’s blue eyes were dark and alluring in the dim streetlight seeping through the window of the small motel room. Avery nodded his head slowly, a deep sigh slipping from his sensual lips. Pouty lips that were just

begging to be bruised with kisses or stretched widely around Ethan's cock.

He suddenly felt bold. Avery was stunning as he stood there in front of him, the evening shadows hitting his beautiful face from different angles, revealing lines and contours that Ethan hadn't noticed previously. Avery stood out like a stunning being outside of any place and time, his features nearly feline in the sparse light. A sharp contrast to the sad, bland colors of the run-down motel room and the poorly hidden smell of chlorine and cigarettes. The dismal decay of the seventies' décor blurred into the background, leaving only Avery in the light. He was the embodiment of everything Ethan found desirable, molded into one perfect form. Ethan had never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Avery in that moment.

He wasn't overly experienced, but he had a pretty good idea of what went where and what he needed from a guy. Ethan knew from the hurried encounters in the high school locker room with Jimmy Harrow that he liked to be in charge. Sure, he hadn't shied away from having a finger or two up his own ass if Jimmy used enough spit, but Ethan still needed to have a firm hold around Jimmy's neck while he'd fucked Ethan's hole with his slick fingers. Not firm enough to leave marks but still bruising enough to make Jimmy gasp for air from time to time. That had been his second favorite sound in the world back in high school. Jimmy gasping for his next breath. His favorite was the choking noises he made when he was gagging on Ethan's erect cock, slurping down his cum eagerly, tears trailing down his pretty cheeks.

Ethan preferred his guys on the larger side. A guy he could manhandle a bit. Who wouldn't mind being slammed roughly against a locker or grabbed by the hair. A lover he could whisper filthy promises to like *you feel my cock, bitch?* Or *shut up and put your mouth on me.* Ethan loved nothing better than to bury his cock deep in the throat of a muscular dude. It made him feel powerful. In charge. Like there was one aspect of his life where he was the one making the rules. The only reprieve Ethan got from the nagging thoughts in his head was when he dumped his load into the wet heat of a ready mouth



and screamed out all his frustrations about a future in fucking Eden, Texas.

He leaned in and whispered against Avery's velvety skin,  
"Kiss me."

Compliant, Avery closed the miniscule space between them and ghosted his lips across Ethan's. The action was controlled and featherlight almost as if Avery wasn't sure that he'd heard Ethan correctly. Sucking in a breath, he pressed his lips against Ethan's again, this time more firmly. The pressure of Avery's moist lips against his own ignited something within Ethan. A hunger which had been dormant for a long time. Like a wild animal finally being coaxed out of hibernation by distant promises of spring.

Slipping his tongue between Avery's lips, he allowed himself to taste him thoroughly. Avery's tongue was salty from the pretzels he'd picked up at the gas station outside Memphis with just a sweet hint of vanilla still lingering from the strawberry milkshake. Swiping his tongue lazily along the inside of Avery's warm mouth, a withheld moan escaped Ethan and he felt it vibrate all the way through his body.

Avery brushed his searching tongue along Ethan's lower lip, licking and biting as he continued along Ethan's stubbled chin and down to his Adam's apple. Ethan closed his eyes, swallowing deeply as he took a firm grip on the back of Avery's neck. He tangled his fingers through the unruly hair, twisting his hand slightly, pulling a needy moan from Avery's mouth. Ethan felt the aftermath of the moan vibrate on the skin of Avery's neck where he held him.

Pulling Avery roughly away from him, he looked at the kiss-drunk face of the man in front of him. Because Avery was a man. There was no doubt about it. And it suddenly dawned on Ethan that he was no longer a boy himself. He was a man, too. And in that moment, he felt like one.

"What do you want?" Ethan demanded while he tilted Avery's head back, the sinewy veins protruding underneath the tanned skin of his slender neck. His electric blue eyes were glazed over with lust and anticipation. Biting his lower lip,

another delicious moan escaped Avery's bruised mouth, igniting a house party in Ethan's pants. Erase that. It was a fucking block party. His cock was so hard by now, trying to make a prison break from the confinement of his jeans.

Ethan twisted his fist tighter around Avery's hair, withdrawing a mewling sound from the other man, an already blissed out look on his face.

"Anything you're willing to give me," Avery breathed, his eyes wide open, his penetrating stare piercing through Ethan's.

The last remains of Ethan's guardedness crumbled to a pile of dust on the floor.

"Anything?" he asked, raising an auburn brow at Avery.

"Yes," Avery whispered. "Anything."

A wicked smile ghosted across Ethan's mouth while he released his fist from Avery's hair.

"Strip," he demanded as he sat down on the bed, not taking his eyes off Avery.

Obediently Avery began to slowly remove his shirt, pulling the hem from his pants. He looked directly at Ethan as he undressed, his stunning body shaking with uninhibited need. Ethan leaned back on the beige comforter, resting on his elbows, as he watched Avery bend down to untie his hiking boots.

"Slower," Ethan ordered. At the instruction, Avery looked up, black pupils blown wide with lust. Ethan felt awestruck at this obvious evidence of Avery's arousal. His slender fingers skillfully untied the boots, and he slowly removed them before he rose to pull down his pants.

"Turn around," Ethan whispered, licking his lips languidly. Obeying, a satisfied smirk covering his mouth, Avery turned around and began to pull his cargo pants down, revealing a pair of tight, gray briefs clinging to his firm ass.

"Briefs, too," Ethan gritted out, adjusting himself. He pressed the palm of his hand against his straining erection and

the small hairs at the back of his neck stood up with excitement.

Avery's delicate fingers grabbed the hem of his briefs as he slowly pulled them down and stepped out of them. Even though Ethan had seen Avery naked before, he was still left stunned by his unclothed form partially covered in shadows. He was perfect. Flawless skin and lean muscles. Almost hairless except for the sparse dusting of light-brown hair around his long, elegant dick which Ethan remembered from their swim. An urgent need to lick along Avery's slender spine took hold of him.

"Bend over," Ethan spoke while he rose from his position on the bed.

Without as much as a word or a look, Avery bent at his hips in the sexiest display of sweet submission, revealing a glimpse of his pink hole in the process.

"Fuck!" Ethan blurted as he took in the gift which Avery was offering him so freely. So unashamed. "Look at you, Avery, offering up your ass so willingly."

Ethan came to a stop next to Avery and placed his left hand at the base of his spine, pulling a needy whimper from Avery's mouth.

"Are you always such a needy slut? Giving away your pretty hole for free?"

"Yes," Avery whispered, shifting on his feet.

"Yeah, I bet you are, aren't you?" Ethan trailed his fingers along the crease between Avery's peach colored ass cheeks which stood in sharp contrast to the rest of his tanned body. "Look at you, a whiny, whimpering mess. You can't even fucking help yourself, can you? Dripping all over the floor. So fucking pathetic." Ethan spoke without even considering his words. It was all Avery. His smell and his grunts drawing the words from Ethan's lips. "If it wasn't for the carpet, I'd make you get down on your knees and clean it up with your bratty tongue."

The last part released another deep moan from Avery followed by a *please*.

“Are you begging already?” Ethan smirked as he continued to stroke Avery’s ass with one hand while pressing the other against his own hardness. “So soon? Now where’s the fun in that, Avery?” Something about the other man’s easy surrender appealed to his need for dominance. It wasn’t that he wanted to punish Avery for his neediness and obedience. It was more a deep-seated urge to be in charge.

“Yes,” Avery whispered. “Please.”

Leaning over Avery’s beckoning ass, Ethan grabbed both cheeks roughly and spread them while he spat directly at Avery’s pink hole, withdrawing a shout from his lips. With his right thumb Ethan began to smear his own saliva around Avery’s clenching hole and he noticed that Avery’s toned legs had started shaking. Leaning down, his own still clothed chest meeting Avery’s naked back, he whispered against his sweat covered neck.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want you,” Avery whimpered, while his ass pushed against the tip of Ethan’s finger in search of friction. His straining dick pointed directly at the gray carpet, dripping continuously, leaving small stains on the already filthy surface.

“You sure?” For some unknown reason he felt like drawing this out. He wanted to tease Avery, keeping him just at the point where he was about to lose it. He’d never drawn out his hookups with Jimmy or his random meetings with strangers in the city. They’d always been hurried encounters, impersonal means to an end.

“Yes. Please,” Avery replied immediately like an obedient schoolboy. His entire body was trembling by now, clearly nearing his limit.

Without a word, Ethan plunged his index finger into Avery’s spit covered hole, his other hand still holding a firm grip around Avery’s neck.

“Fuuuck,” he winced, and Ethan could feel the sound echoing around his finger in Avery’s tight channel and against his palm restraining Avery by the neck. Pumping his finger brutally in and out of Avery’s wet, welcoming entrance, Ethan continued to coax needy noises from his lips. Ethan licked at the back of his neck, lightly grazing the skin with his teeth.

“You ready for more?” he murmured against the salty skin.

“Yes,” Avery panted.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please. I’m ready for more.” It almost sounded like Avery was crying and for a second Ethan was worried that he’d gone too far. That he’d pushed him over the limit. But then Avery continued.

“Please, Eth, can I touch myself?”

Smiling against the moist skin, Ethan sighed with relief before answering.

“Yes, you little whore. You can touch yourself.” Avery’s right hand immediately grabbed on to his hard cock, sparkles of precum adorning the angry-red mushroom head. “But you can’t come. You’re not allowed to come before I get my fill and your stomach is stuffed with my seed.”

“Thank you,” Avery replied, shaking his head in eager agreement, as his hand found a steady rhythm, jacking himself.

He’d never pushed another person this much before. And Avery just gave in so easily, so willingly, no questions asked. It humbled Ethan. The unconditional trust which Avery placed in his hands. And more than anything, it spiked his arousal. It was the single most erotic moment of his life, he realized, as he continued to fuck Avery’s greedy hole with his fingers. The rhythmical sound of Avery’s hand beating against his cock slick with precum. The moans. The smell of musk, sweat and Avery’s own unique scent. It was suddenly hard to contain his own desire, his senses being bombarded all at once.

Abruptly, Ethan withdrew his finger from Avery’s ass and pushed him to his knees, still a firm grip on his neck.

“Take me out,” he demanded as he moved in front of Avery, who compliantly released the grip on his own cock and began unzipping Ethan’s jeans. As soon as Avery began to push them down, Ethan was met by the distinct smell of his own arousal. It hung in the space between them, heavy and musky. Avery licked his lips as he relieved Ethan’s hard cock from his briefs. The inside of the white cotton fabric was smeared with stickiness, and he was just about ready to explode. But he didn’t want to come before he was inside Avery’s gorgeous mouth.

Grabbing Avery’s chin with one hand, he stroked his rosy cheek with the other.

“Open up,” he purred and just like magic, Avery’s pink lips parted before him, tongue licking at his bottom lip in needy anticipation.

“Can I touch you, please?” Avery’s voice came out raspy and dripping with desire.

“Yes.”

Gripping the base of Ethan’s thick hardness, Avery leaned in and swiped the tip of his warm tongue across Ethan’s cockhead.

“Shit, that’s it,” Ethan hissed, finally getting some much-needed relief. It had been fucking worth it though, drawing it out.

Avery dipped his tongue into the slit and scooped out some liquid, smacking his lips in appreciation. Like a cord, the stickiness formed a connection between Ethan’s cock and Avery’s tongue. But it suddenly felt like more than just a physical bond. He realized that he hadn’t felt this emotionally close to another person since Matty had disappeared so abruptly from his life. Feeling a sting in his chest, he quickly pushed the image of his best friend away, focusing his attention solely on Avery.

Grabbing his lover’s sweaty hair, he stuck his thumb in Avery’s mouth and pried it open forcefully. Avery immediately sucked the digit in to his mouth, humming contentedly. Eyes

closed, cheeks flushed, he looked like Ethan had already fucked him punishingly for an hour or two. He was perfect in his serene submission. Giving himself to Ethan so easily. In this moment, he knew that there wasn't anything that Avery wouldn't give him. He was not going to fuck him today, though. Not yet.

Pulling his wet thumb from Avery's mouth with a pop, he swept his pulsing cock along Avery's glistening lips.

"Open your eyes, Avery. I want you to look at me while I fuck your mouth."

Avery opened his eyes slowly, piercing blue irises looking up at Ethan, pure, unfiltered lust in his eyes. Then he opened his mouth wide, sticking out his tongue and Ethan's length pushed past his lips. Taking it easy at first, he tried to read the expression on Avery's face. Slowly but surely, he invaded more and more of Avery's mouth until he felt his cockhead hit the back of his throat.

Gagging, tears appeared at the corners of Avery's expectant eyes. Caressing his cheek, Ethan coaxed,

"Relax, baby. Let me in."

Eyes taking on a darker shade of blue, Avery relaxed his throat around him while he breathed heavily through his nose.

"That's it. You're doing so good," Ethan encouraged, and he noticed that Avery's eyes sparkled from the praise. Swallowing around Ethan, he took even more of his hardness, and tears began making their way down his flushed cheeks.

"Shit," Ethan hissed, tightening his grip on Avery's damp hair, increasing the pace of his thrusts. "You're doing so good for me, baby. Taking all of me like a good little slut."

Avery's eager grunts and slurps vibrated around his cockhead and Ethan recognized the delicious tingle at the bottom of his spine. He was close, but he didn't want it to end yet. If he could just hold on a little longer and prolong this feeling of bliss. Of peace.

"Touch yourself," he ordered, and Avery immediately grabbed his neglected cock and started stroking himself

gratefully. Shedding his last inhibitions, Ethan was now fucking his throat with abandon, chasing his release greedily. Avery was a trembling mess by now, a mixture of saliva and precum spilling from his abused lips and trailing down his already glistening chin. Cheeks flushed and pupils blown wide, a panicked look in his eyes, he was moments away from coming.

“Don’t you dare come before I tell you to,” Ethan warned, tightening his grip, and setting a grueling pace. Then he felt the glorious tightening in his balls and seconds later he spilled his release into Avery’s throat, a nearly primal roar escaping him. Avery eagerly swallowed his entire load, slurping and moaning shamelessly, a few drops spilling from his violated lips while his eyelashes fluttered lightly.

Spent and sated, Ethan bent down, resting his sweaty forehead against Avery’s. Panting, he carefully kissed his lover’s equally sweaty skin. Shaking beneath him, Avery’s entire body was buzzing with pent-up need.

“Eth? Can I come now, please?” Avery mewled, the smell of Ethan’s release pouring from his mouth. Smiling into Avery’s hairline, Ethan closed his eyes, his body relaxing into the aftermath of silent satisfaction.

“Yeah,” he breathed unable to disguise the smile in his voice. “Yes, you can come now, Avery.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### Matty – Then

“I **THINK YOU’RE** the prettiest boy I’ve ever seen. And the sweetest, too.”

If anyone would’ve told Matty that the second kiss in his nearly seventeen-year-long life would be underwater by an otherworldly hot guy from Maine with the same name as the fourth largest city in Texas, he would’ve laughed in their faces. He would’ve howled with laughter until tears started springing from his eyes. And then he would’ve secretly fist pumped. He—a country boy from West Texas? What were the odds? First, it was underwater. He’d seen it in a movie once and couldn’t wrap his teenage mind around how that was even possible. Second, it was with another guy. Not a girl. But a guy. Third, it was Austin. *Austin*.

“Matty? Are you okay? I didn’t break you, did I?” The teasing tone of Austin’s words were contradicted by a hint of seriousness in his eyes.

“No,” Matty shook his head, wet locks of blond hair clinging to his forehead. He brushed his fingers against his lips where Austin’s had been a few seconds ago. He could still feel the tingling sensation, the light pressure of Austin’s lips against his own. They’d just emerged from the blue cocoon of the ocean and the bright sun felt like an intruder, forcing him back to the real world. “No, you didn’t break me... You may have momentarily short-circuited my brain and turned it into mush. But you didn’t break me.” A shy smile erupted at the corner of Matty’s mouth before it spread to the rest of his face.

Austin chuckled, reaching out and brushing at Matty’s left shoulder.

“Do you always say exactly what’s on your mind?” There was a fondness to his voice—a tenderness that Matty was

beginning to realize was the norm among decent people who cared about others. It was the same kind of fondness he heard in Will's voice whenever he called him *kid* or praised him for another great job at the docks. The kind of warmth in Millie's voice when she gave him his first *morning, sweet boy* and his last *sleep tight, Matty* at night. It was the kind of tender interaction you could easily get used to—especially if you'd been denied it for most of your life, especially by those who should've handed it out in bucketsful without a second thought.

“No...” Matty mumbled. “I hardly ever say what's on my mind...” he trailed off, squinting at Austin. He had to tilt his head slightly to really look at the much taller guy. Biting his lower lip, Matty continued. “Or at least, I didn't use to.”

“I like it,” Austin grinned. “It's endearing.” Austin gazed back at the beach and then once again at Matty's shoulder. “You're gonna turn into a baby lobster unless we head back soon.”

Matty turned his head and looked at the pinkish glow which was spreading across his shoulders. “Shit, I totally forgot sunscreen!” He looked at Austin who just shrugged in return.

“Yeah, you'll be fine. I'm sure Millie has some balm lying around somewhere like the mother hen she is.” Austin winked before he grabbed Matty's left hand, tangling their fingers together, and started leading him through the water, towards the shore.

The sensation of Austin's large, rough fingers clasped around his own was unlike anything he'd felt before. Sure, he and Ethan had sometimes held hands when they were younger, running through the cornfields, bellies full of apple pie, broad grins on their dirty faces. But this. This feeling of being linked to another person like this. Matty liked that. And the fact that it was Austin, made him like it even more. His skin tingled deliciously where Austin's thumb continued to rub the back of his hand. Small soothing circles that set Matty's entire body alight with giddiness and anticipation.

As they reached the shore, Austin pulled out another large beach towel from his backpack and started drying off Matty. Carefully, he patted Matty's rosy skin on the shoulders with the soft fabric, then his peecs and his stomach. He didn't go any further than that.

"Turn around," Austin murmured, his voice sounding deeper than usual, making Matty's stomach flip not once but twice.

Turning around, he gazed back at the ocean. Again, Austin rubbed carefully at his back with the towel, before dropping it to the sandy ground beneath their feet. Suddenly, Austin's fingertips brushed against his right shoulder blade, tracing the outline of the protruding bone. Featherlight, his touch was like a cool breeze against Matty's overheated skin. Coming to a stop just at the top of Matty's spine, Austin's entire hand rested reverently against the back of Matty's neck.

*I could snap ya like a twig, you know that, you little shit. No one but that whore of a mother would miss ya. No one, so don't fucking tempt me, boy.* Squeezing his eyes shut, breathing through his nose, Matty reminded himself that this was Austin. Austin's hand. Not his father's. Thousands of miles lay between him and that man at this very moment. And more importantly, not all hands were made to hurt. Some, most even, were made to comfort and protect.

Leaning into Austin's hold, Matty felt the air leave his lungs, his mind going blank as the all-consuming presence of Austin behind him calmed him. Heat emanated from Austin's body and engulfed him like a huge wave of warmth and safety. Yes, even though he had his back turned, he felt entirely safe. No doubt in his mind that Austin would never hurt him in any way. He didn't know why he knew this with such certainty. He just did.

Tracing the tips of his calloused fingers along Matty's spine, Austin leaned in and brushed a light kiss against his right shoulder blade. The imprint of Austin's lips burned into his skin, a tingling sensation spreading out into every corner of his body. Into every bone and vein until it settled in his core like a small bonfire.

“You’re so beautiful, Matty.” Another soft kiss. “And you smell so good, too.” Kiss. “I think about you all the time.” Kiss. “Shit, I can’t stop my mind from thinking about you all the time.” Kiss.

Waking from his stupor, Matty turned around, his gaze colliding with Austin’s broad chest. *Beautiful*. Suddenly, he felt uncertainty which quickly transformed into a feeling of self-doubt and defeat. *Who the fuck do ya think you are? You’re nothing more than a piece of shit under my boot, you fucking crybaby.*

The familiar feeling of spinning out of control and being torn apart by an invisible force once again invaded Matty’s body and mind. Was it always going to be like this? Every kind word being obliterated into dust by his father’s words. Was the bad always going to erase everything good in the end? Then a faint, determined voice started growing and the tightness in his chest began to slowly lift. Ethan. *Fuck’em, Matty! Fuck’em! You’re the coolest fucking boy in the world, so just fuck’em!*

He lifted his chin and his eyes connected with a pair of gentle, gray eyes. The color of the sky seconds before it started raining. Or the color of Peterson’s summer kittens back in Texas. The color of his favorite sweatshirt smelling of Millie’s lavender laundry detergent. Exhaling, Ethan’s words settled in his chest.

“I think you’re very beautiful too, Austin,” he whispered, the wind pulling at his words as soon as they’d left his mouth. But he didn’t have to wonder if Austin had heard him, because the look of pure, unfiltered joy in Austin’s eyes was all the confirmation he needed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### Ethan – Now

“**DID YOU LIKE** that?” Avery brushed a stray lock of hair out of Ethan’s eyes. “Being in charge.”

“Yes.” Ethan blushed at the recollection of what had happened between the two of them a few hours ago. They’d fallen asleep after having sex and now they were lying next to each other in the lumpy motel bed. Noise from the street outside was coming through the slightly ajar window. There was a bar next to the motel and a little while ago there’d been some drunken shouting just outside in the parking lot.

“Okay, don’t drown me in detail, Ethan.” Avery knocked at his left elbow, a sleepy smile covering his still puffy lips.

“What do you want me to say?” Ethan looked questioningly at Avery. It was strange talking about what had happened between them. His cheeks flushed at the memory of the words which had slipped from his lips while he’d fucked Avery’s mouth.

“I don’t know. I don’t *want* you to say anything. I was just curious.” Avery bent down and kissed Ethan’s shoulder, humming quietly.

“Did *you* like it?” Ethan swallowed behind the lump building in his throat. It’d definitely seemed like Avery had liked everything he’d done to him.

“Yes, very much,” Avery smiled, a sated look in his indigo eyes, while he continued to shower kisses on Ethan’s upper body. Ethan loved that Avery was so affectionate. He’d never had that with any of his previous hookups. It was more a matter of getting off. No post-orgasmic cuddling or conversation.

“I’ve always known that I prefer being submissive in a sexual relationship.” A slight blush bled through Avery’s tanned skin. “When you ordered me around and told me what to do... That was so fucking sexy. Such a turn-on.”

“Yeah?” Ethan sat up against the headboard, looking down at Avery. “It wasn’t too much?”

“No, not even close. I mean, I’m not into demeaning shit, but I prefer a partner who’s dominant and a little rough—physically as well as verbally.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that,” Ethan chuckled. “It was pretty hot the way you just let me boss you around.”

“It was. You were pretty good at bossing me around. But then again, I kind of took you for a dominant lover all along.” Avery grinned while pinching Ethan’s left nipple, making him hiss.

“Why?” Ethan asked, his voice tainted with an edge of disbelief.

“It’s just an aura you give off. That and the fact that you’re bigger than me. And so fucking controlled. You just gave off that hot as fuck bossy vibe. It’s always the quiet, serious type, you know.” Avery licked his lips, his gaze moving to Ethan’s growing erection.

They were both still naked and Avery looked, if possible, even more beautiful in the dim evening light spilling through the thin, nicotine-stained curtains. His skin had taken on an almost translucent glow, the dips and curves of his body looking like a multicolored landscape.

“But I’m younger than you,” Ethan blurted, a confused frown between his brows.

“So?”

“Isn’t the older guy usually the dominant one? The *daddy*?” It looked like someone had painted Ethan’s face with a pink watercolor. First tinting his cheeks, then his throat until the color spilled further down his chest. Embarrassment but also desire coursed through his body.

“No, not necessarily. I mean, just because you have dominant tendencies and prefer to be in charge sexually, doesn’t automatically make you a daddy. And dominance has nothing to do with age. That’s misconstrued. Besides, I don’t feel older when we’re together. Sure, when I’m back in Boston, I have to blend in. You know, be the *professor*. I don’t feel that way when I’m on the road. Or when I was doing the excavation. I feel more like me, you know? Or at least, a more authentic version of myself. Does that sound strange?”

“No,” Ethan breathed. “Not strange at all.”

“It’s like I’m a different person, yet the same. Inside, I’m the same. The real me. Not some projection of my parents’ image of me. Of how I should be. I don’t consider myself older when we’re together, talking like this. I consider us equals. And I feel the freedom to be myself when I’m with you, like this.” Avery’s fingers had reached the dark hair surrounding Ethan’s now fully erect cock. “You have such a beautiful cock,” he purred, burying his fingertips in the thick hair. “I really loved gagging on it. Best feeling in the world. Nothing beats gagging on a gloriously ginormous cock.” He winked at Ethan before bending down, swallowing said cock all the way to the back of his throat in one swift movement.

“Shit!” Ethan blurted, his right hand finding the back of Avery’s head immediately, his left claspings at the sheets. “Shit, Avery,” he repeated while his entire length was engulfed in the soft, wet heat of Avery’s talented mouth.

Moaning around him, Avery began stroking his own equally hard cock. Ethan tightened the grip on Avery’s unruly, blond strands of hair, while pumping his hips, fucking into his mouth. He winced as Avery swallowed around the sensitive head. Ethan was already feeling the building desire. It took almost no time at all for Avery to bring him to the pinnacle of his ecstasy. Forcefully, he pulled Avery’s mouth away from his pulsing cock.

He looked absolutely breathtaking, cherry red lips covered in glistening saliva, pupils blown wide, a cock-drunk expression on his face. Forcing his head back, Ethan looked into Avery’s eyes nearly drowning in the darkest blue he’d

ever seen. He almost didn't recognize his own voice when he spoke. But it *was* his voice, no doubt about it. Perhaps it was the first time he'd ever really used his true voice. It was demanding and coaxing.

“Next time I'm gonna fuck you. I'm gonna use your pink, little hole for hours, Avery. I'll stretch it around my fat cock until you feel like you're being torn apart—and then I'll stretch it just a little bit more. I'm gonna bring you to the edge so many times that you're gonna beg me to let you come. Your cock will be weeping just as much as your eyes before I'm done with you. That'll be your punishment for taking my cock in your slutty, little mouth without asking for my permission first.”

Looking directly into Ethan's eyes, his breath hitched, and a small whimper spilled from Avery's saliva-covered lips. Then the tip of his tongue peeked out and slowly licked a wayward drop of precum off his bottom lip.

“I was hoping you would, handsome. Punish my hole.” Avery's sultry voice came out seductively. “It's been hurting, begging for your cock ever since I first saw you. I think it could smell you, Ethan. Smell its rightful owner.”

“Fuck,” Ethan growled, his cock growing almost painfully hard, liquid need spilling from the tip as it strained in Avery's direction. Bending down, Avery threw a casual glance at Ethan, demonstratively stroking his own length.

“Now, can I get back to sucking your cock? Pretty please?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### Matty – Then

“**HAVE YOU ALWAYS** preferred boys over girls?” Matty leaned against the old dinghy on the deserted stretch of beach north of the harbor. They’d hung out basically every day after work over the summer, he and Austin, spending every moment of free time together. Will jokingly called them Siamese twins while Austin’s dad Ray seemed to wrinkle his brows often when they headed off together before the last container was even cleaned. As far as Will and Millie were concerned, Matty and Austin were friends, but Matty suspected it was just a matter of time before they started wondering, too.

“I guess so. At least for as long as I can remember.” Austin rested his head on Matty’s right thigh, eyes closed, his long, black lashes resting against his sun-kissed skin. Matty had never seen lashes this long on a guy before. “I mean, I always just seemed to gravitate more towards boys, paying attention to stuff that I guess others wouldn’t.”

“Like what?” Matty’s fingers brushed through Austin’s hair, not entirely sure what he meant.

“I mean, like their physical appearance. Their bodies. Their build. And not in a *wow, he’s bigger than me, stronger than me* kinda way. More like *wow, those lips look soft, those freckles are cute... you know?*” Austin opened his eyes, gray irises looking up at Matty, piercing right through him.

“Yeah, I think so. At least, that’s how Ethan used to explain it, too.”

“Yeah? You talked about stuff like that?” Austin’s brows rose in surprise.

“Yeah. We talked about everything. Like best friends do, I guess. We never had any secrets between us.” Matty swallowed. *I’ll always have your back, Matty, no matter what.*

*But if you don't tell me shit that's going on, I can't help you. Then I can't protect you, man.*

“That’s cool,” Austin nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. “Having a best friend like that. Really cool. Do you miss him?”

“Yeah. Every day.” Matty’s voice grew wistful, the space in his heart that was reserved for Ethan, vacant and hidden from the world. He wondered if Ethan thought about him too. If he’d gotten the postcard. If he would try to find him one day. Ethan had turned seventeen in April and in two years, he would graduate high school and he’d be free to go.

“Did you ever... you know, was there ever anything more between the two of you? I mean, aside from friendship.” Austin looked at him, gray eyes carrying a hint of something Matty hadn’t seen before. Uncertainty, perhaps?

“No, never,” Matty smiled. “It was never like that between us.” He shook his head in amazement. “Fuck, it wasn’t until that day at the docks that I ever thought of a boy like that. You know, in a sexual way...” He blushed at the thought of that day which had changed his entire view of himself in a matter of seconds.

“You think of me in a sexual way, huh?” Austin teased, stroking Matty’s hair gently.

“Shut up!” Matty blurted, his blush increasing. A comfortable silence settled between them before Austin cleared his throat.

“Can I ask you something, Matty?” Austin sat up and looked him in the eyes, his expression suddenly serious.

“Sure...” Matty trailed off, glancing down at the white sand, as he buried his fingers into its warm silkiness.

“Why did you leave home? I mean, you were just a kid.”

“I couldn’t stay any longer.” Matty’s mouth went dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, his stomach clenching and unclenching.

“Yeah... Does it have anything to do with the scars on the back of your thighs?” Austin sucked on his bottom lip, his Adam’s apple protruding as he swallowed.

“Uh huh,” Matty’s voice was nothing but a whisper, tears burning at the corners of his eyes. *Are ya gonna cry now, you fucking pussy? Because I can give you something to really cry about...*

Reaching out, Austin pulled him against his broad chest in the gentlest of movements. Squeezing Matty’s slender frame, Austin mumbled against his neck, his voice muffled. “Yeah, I kinda figured, sweetheart.”

Simultaneously, a tear broke from each of Matty’s eyes, and he buried a whimper against Austin’s fragrant, blue cotton t-shirt.

“Who?” Austin pressed the solitary word against Matty’s skin.

“My father.”

“Jesus Christ...” Austin shook his head. “Motherfucker.”

“It’s okay, it’s over—” the last part of his sentence was swallowed up by Austin’s deep, shaky voice.

“No! It might be over, but it was never fucking okay.”

The anger and agony in Austin’s voice was palpable. It hung in the air like a testimony that someone else knew now. Someone aside from Ethan. Someone in Grant’s Harbor knew the reason behind Matty showing up a little over a year ago.

“What did he hit you with?” Austin whispered.

“Anything within reach. A belt mostly... if he couldn’t find anything, his fists. Or his boots...”

“Fuck! That piece of shit...” The usually calm Austin now gave off the same kind of turmoil as the ocean seconds before a storm hit and all hell broke loose.

Matty exhaled, his gaze searching for Austin’s, a silent plea in his blue eyes. *Please don’t think less of me. Please don’t see me as a victim. Please don’t pity me.* Slowly, the

anger evaporated from Austin's features and was replaced by a tenderness. A protectiveness.

"I'm glad you ran away, Matty. I'm glad you came here. I fucking hate that this happened to you, but I'm glad that you came here." Austin released his large hands from Matty's shoulders, placing them on his cheeks instead. He searched Matty's face, his gray eyes worried with just a hint of anger left. "Does that make me a bad person, sweetheart?"

Matty shook his head furiously, tears trailing down his cheeks.

"No, it doesn't." Biting his cheek, Matty shut out the rest of the world, focusing entirely on the boy in front of him. "There's nothing bad about you, Austin. There's only good."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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### Matty – Then

***“HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Matty. Happy birthday to youuuuuu.”*** Millie wiped at her eyes, nodding at Matty to blow out the candles on his chocolate birthday cake.

Eighteen candles. It was his eighteenth birthday and Will and Millie had woken him up with hugs and a brand-new pair of Carhartt cargo pants and a bright red t-shirt sporting a lobster on the front. *Party like a lobster!* That’s what it said below the lobster wearing dark sunglasses. Will hadn’t been able to contain his excitement as Matty had unwrapped the gift, Millie knocking her elbow into her husband’s ribs. The best gift was saved for later, though, when he would be alone with Austin.

“Go on, sweetheart. Blow out the candles,” Millie squeezed his shoulder fondly, nodding at the massive cake.

“Yeah,” Will’s voice boomed through the small kitchen while he ruffled Matty’s blond curls. “Wanna see how many girlfriends you have, son.”

*Boyfriends*, Matty corrected silently in his head. He hadn’t told Millie and Will yet. Austin had told his dad and Mr. O’Neil was okay with it, Austin had said. “*You boys just keep it PG under my roof,*” he’d stressed, and Austin had agreed. Even though the age of consent was sixteen in Maine, they’d decided to wait. Plenty other things you could do with your gorgeous boyfriend that didn’t involve actual sex. So yeah, he hadn’t told Millie and Will yet. But he was going to. Now that he was eighteen and an adult, he was going to. He wasn’t nervous about telling them. He knew that they both adored Austin. Matty just needed to find the right words.

*Jesus. He had a boyfriend.* It still blew his mind from time to time. Matty had always thought that he liked girls. And he did. He did like girls. A lot. He'd never been interested in guys before that infamous day at the docks. Not like Ethan. His chest tightened as he thought about his best friend. Where was Ethan right now? Was Ethan thinking of him? He'd always imagined that they'd celebrate his eighteenth birthday together.

Matty closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and blew out the candles. All but one. Millie and Will clapped in unison as he thought of his plans with his boyfriend later. He felt his cheeks heat up at the thought of finally being able to do all the things with Austin that he'd longed for. It wasn't like they hadn't done other things. In fact, they'd done a lot in Austin's queen-sized bed in his apartment above his dad's garage. Basically, everything which ended in *job*. They knew that they were stretching the definition of PG a bit too far at times, but for fuck's sake, they were both young, horny guys and they were crazy about each other. They were. He was fucking mad with lust for Austin.

It had taken Matty completely by surprise. He'd never thought of dudes as hot or beautiful even. Then fifteen months ago, during that blistering July heatwave, everything had suddenly changed from one moment to the next.

And then a few days later, Austin had asked him to go swimming and they'd kissed underwater and again behind the bait shop. A week later they'd made out on Austin's dad's couch while he was in Biddeford. As hot July afternoons had turned into warm August nights, Austin had asked Matty if he wanted to be his boyfriend. He'd never wanted anything more, he realized as he'd thrown himself at Austin making him stumble back on his bed giggling while Matty had covered him in what had felt like a thousand kisses.

Yeah, he thought to himself as Millie placed a generous piece of chocolate cake in front of him. That'd been the best day ever. Except for every day after that with Austin as his boyfriend. Only one thing missing. He wanted to share it with Ethan. He wanted to tell his best friend that he, too, was into

boys. That now he knew what Ethan had been talking about all those years ago when they'd shared a lukewarm Mountain Dew under the bleachers. That he knew exactly what it felt like and tasted like to kiss a boy. Whether it was different from kissing a girl was still undecided. Because he'd only ever kissed one girl and couldn't recall how it had felt no matter how hard he tried.

Carving out a piece of cake with his fork, Matty wondered what Ethan was up to right now. Did he, too, have a boyfriend? There were so many questions piling up inside of him that he wanted to ask Ethan. He'd thought about calling him numerous times over the past two years, but each time he'd chickened out. What if they found him? The thought alone of being found by the police here in Grant's Harbor made him sick to his stomach. He couldn't risk it. Instead, he waited. Every day he waited for Ethan to suddenly turn up outta nowhere, a broad grin on his face and say, "*hey, man.*" Yeah, maybe next year. Maybe. Hopefully.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### Ethan – Now

**“FUCK,” ETHAN GASPED,** sucking in breaths of warm, stale air, sweat dripping down his forehead while a chill spread from his neck down his spine.

“Eth, you okay?” a sleep-muffled voice sounded next to him.

Avery. He was with Avery. In the motel room. A sweat-drenched sheet wrapped around him. Noises were coming in from the slightly ajar window. Cars, faint voices, a dog barking somewhere. *Shit.* It had felt so real. More real than anything he’d dreamt in years. Brushing at his damp forehead, he felt Avery’s smooth fingers trailing along his back soothingly.

“Yeah,” Ethan mumbled, still shaken by the image of Matty lying in an open coffin. Dead. His boyish features lifeless and dull. His blond hair lying against the white silk lining of the coffin like a halo. Chills overtook his body as Ethan tried to repress the disturbing image of his best friend—his Matty—lying dead in a black cherry coffin in a cold funeral parlor somewhere. *It’s not real. It was just a bad dream. It’s not real.* “Yeah,” he repeated. “I’m okay.”

“Let me get you some water,” Avery breathed against his left shoulder blade before he rose from the messy bed.

“Thanks,” Ethan murmured, his gaze lingering on Avery’s lean figure as he moved towards the bathroom. He was a work of art. Every curve and every lean muscle. Every birthmark and protruding vein. He was beautiful and with every second that Ethan’s eyes rested on his lover, the eeriness of the dream seemed to evaporate more and more, disappearing into the dark corners of the dingy motel room.



“Here,” Avery held out a glass of water, his index finger and thumb smeared with black charcoal as usual. It had become a daily ritual on the road. Every afternoon they’d pull over at some secluded spot and Avery would draw in his sketchbook, while Ethan dozed under a tree to the repetitive, scratchy sound of Avery’s charcoal meeting the rough surface of the paper. *Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.* It had become one of his favorite sounds by now. Along with Avery’s melodic chuckles. Or his sex-induced moans just seconds before he came with Ethan’s name on his lips.

“Tell me something nice...” Ethan murmured, drinking in the familiar scent of Avery’s forehead.

“Like what?” Even though the room lay in darkness, Ethan could hear the smile in Avery’s voice.

“Like... Tell me about your drawings. About the Comanches.”

“The Comanches? Okay...” Avery nodded. “What do you want to know?” He took the empty glass from Ethan’s clammy hand and placed it on the nightstand. Slowly laying back against the headboard, he pulled Ethan along with him, wrapping his arms firmly around his chest, the calming *thump, thump, thump* of his heart persuading Ethan’s pulse to slow.

“Anything,” Ethan replied quietly, his back resting comfortably against Avery’s chest. “Everything.”

“Everything?” Avery chuckled against the top of his head.

“Yeah,” Ethan grinned.

“Okay,” Avery sighed, his strong arms squeezing Ethan even tighter against him. “So, basically, the Comanches lived in the Big Bend region how they would have still lived today if it weren’t for the colonists and the pioneers. They farmed, hunted, moved around, and fought against other tribes like the Mescalero Apaches and the Chisos—”

“I’ve heard about the Apaches,” Ethan interrupted.

“Yeah, most people have, although there are well over five hundred Indigenous American tribes recognized today. Back in the 1700’s and 1800’s the Comanches even made advances

into Mexico along the Great Comanche Trail where they fought against the Apaches and the Spanish.” Avery paused briefly, pressing a soft kiss against Ethan’s left shoulder. “Do you really want to know this?” he whispered, his warm breath leaving goosebumps all over Ethan’s neck.

“Yeah,” Ethan nodded. “I wanna know what it is you love, Avery. What it is you draw in that book of yours.”

“Okay... So, it wasn’t easy for the Spanish to fight off the Comanches. They were skilled horsemen. I mean, we of course all know what happened later, but for at least 10,000 years Native American tribes like the Comanches inhabited the Big Bend region. They documented their life in this amazing rock-art tradition which was passed on from one generation to another. Their Gods. The animals they hunted, the enemies they fought. It’s all there. Life and death. Mostly in black and red. Earth tones, too. They used minerals and animal fats to draw with. Sometimes, they would carve, too. Just imagine, the time and effort that went into telling their story. Even thousands of years later, they reach out through the stones from the past, telling us about their life. Whispering to us through the stone walls. They whisper to us what ancient tribes have always whispered. The same tales of birth, life, and death. Blood and tears. Love. They whisper what we continue to ignore in our modern pursuit and greed after more and more.”

Avery paused, pressing another soft kiss against Ethan’s left shoulder blade, his lips continuing to hover against his skin. Ethan had started to doze off to the soothing sound of Avery’s deep voice, sleep pulling at him, while he struggled to hear every single word spilling from Avery’s lips. As if every word held a truth about his own life. His own path. Maybe it did. Maybe if he listened closely enough, he’d see his own future mapped out in front of him.

“What do they whisper? Tell me, Avery,” Ethan exhaled deeply, once again closing his eyes, shutting out the darkness surrounding him.

Avery swallowed audibly before he continued, a slight tremor to his voice.

*“I was here once. Long before you were ever born. I inhabited these great plains before you. They were never mine to keep but for a brief moment in time, I borrowed them. I explored these caves, their darkness reminding me that life is fleeting. Here I was born. I lived off the land. I loved. I fought. I bled. I never took more than I needed. Just enough to survive. Just enough to feed my family. These are the animals that gave their lives so that I could feed my children. These are the rivers where I stilled my thirst and washed away the sweat and the dust. These are the stars under which I slept. This is my story to you. This is my testimony that I was here. To you, it is only my handprint on a stone wall but to me it was my life...”*

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### Matty – Then

**“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SWEETHEART,”** Austin’s voice vibrated against Matty’s goosebumps covered thigh as he made a trail of butterfly-light kisses towards Matty’s left hip.

“Mm, how many times are you gonna wish me a happy birthday?” Matty whispered, squirming beneath Austin’s warm breath. He’d always been ticklish and when Austin added his tongue, he couldn’t hold back the giggle.

“Until it’s no longer your birthday, Matty,” Austin mumbled, his deep voice muffled by Matty’s skin. Slowly, almost painfully unhurriedly, Austin licked towards Matty’s straining balls while the fingers of his left hand trailed cautiously along Matty’s crease.

Sucking in a deep breath, Matty’s hips involuntarily lifted from the mattress. It had been like this from the very beginning. From the first kiss. Every time Austin touched him, it was like Matty’s body was set on fire. Like a million fire ants marching along his overly stimulated skin. It was a sensation unlike any other. Prickling. Tickling. Like rolling naked in a forest bed covered in pine needles, he imagined.

No one had ever touched Matty like this. So carefully and tenderly. So attentive, guided by his every sound and every move. Like Austin had gotten an instruction manual a long time ago. *The Beginner’s Field Guide to Driving Matty Carter Insane*. Or maybe Austin just knew instinctively. Just like Matty had known that afternoon on the docks. That he wanted Austin more than anything he’d ever wanted before. Well, except for *Stella*, but that’d been a boyish dream. A vision of a future away from Eden. This was a different kind of want. It was instant, overwhelming.

Sure, Mrs. Bishop had always been affectionate with him. Always including him in the hugs and kisses that she showered Ethan and his younger siblings with. And yes, he also recalled his mother stroking his cheek and singing to him in a frail voice when he was little. But she always had a sad, faraway look in her eyes and her voice carried a hint of melancholy, which settled like a heavy stone in Matty's stomach. No, it was different with Austin.

Austin released a deep, almost primal moan as he prodded the tip of his index finger against Matty's tight entrance. His finger felt slick as it carefully circled around his hole. Simultaneously, Austin licked along Matty's impossibly hard cock until he swiped his tongue excruciatingly slow along the slit, lapping at the precum.

Austin was a fucking pro at giving head. Matty had nearly blacked out from the sensations exploding in his mind the first time Austin had blown him. He carefully began pumping into Austin's wet, delicious mouth while his boyfriend hummed around him, saliva pooling at the sides of his mouth. Austin hadn't taken him deep yet. Cheeks hollowed he was sucking at the cockhead like it was a cherry popsicle or a summer ripe strawberry. A filthy moan escaped his bruised lips, stretched around Matty's hardness.

Matty had once in a fit of inexplicable, childish jealousy asked his boyfriend why he was so mind-blowingly great at giving head, but Austin had just smiled at him innocently, his gray eyes blinking adorably at Matty. *Natural-born cocksucker*; Austin had mumbled around Matty's dripping mushroom head before he'd taken him all the way to the back of his throat. Just like he did right now. That had been the end of that discussion.

Swallowing skillfully around Matty's cock, Austin's slick index finger carefully entered Matty's tightness. It was the strangest sensation. The all-consuming feeling of pleasure from being engulfed in the wet heat of Austin's mouth and then the faint undertone of the sting when his blunt finger met the restriction of Matty's entrance. It was a full-frontal attack on all his senses. It wasn't unpleasant but he couldn't help but

wonder how it would be possible for Austin to replace his finger with his cock. Matty still remembered the soreness of his jaw muscles the first couple of times he'd sucked Austin's generous length.

Releasing Matty's cock from his mouth, a string of saliva connecting them, Austin peppered wet kisses along Matty's stomach.

"Jesus, sweetheart," Austin's raspy voice thrummed against him. "You don't even fucking know, do you? What you do to me." He nibbled at Matty's downy stomach, sweat covering his forehead.

Matty knew that Austin was crazy about him. He told him all the time. And yet, it still humbled Matty to his very core whenever he heard the words spill from Austin's lips. Tears were pressing behind his closed eyelids and Matty fisted the sheets beneath him, trying to keep them at bay. He felt a second finger brushing against his hole.

"Push back, sweetheart," Austin breathed against him, his hard length grinding against Matty's left thigh, smearing it with delicious stickiness.

Bearing down, Matty felt another slick finger slide inside him, and his inner muscles clenched in anticipation. Even though it scared him a little, Matty couldn't wait to be filled completely by Austin. To surrender entirely to the man he loved. To feel the fullness, the carnal connection. Matty wasn't scared that it was going to hurt. He knew that Austin would never intentionally hurt him. No, Matty was afraid of his own reaction. Would he know what to do? Would he be able to make it good for Austin? His boyfriend wasn't a virgin and even though Austin had told him countless times that there was nothing and no one who compared to Matty, he still felt a little performance anxiety.

Biting his left nipple, Austin drew Matty back to the present moment. He loved when Austin played with his nipples. It sent an electric current buzzing through his entire body. Moaning, he fucked himself on Austin's fingers wantonly.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” Austin coaxed. “You’re doing so good.”

“Austin...” Matty whined. He felt like he was in free fall when Austin’s fingers brushed against a sensitive spot deep inside him.

“Yeah, sweetheart, tell me what you need.”

“I... I... I need more, Austin,” it felt like he could come just like this if he wasn’t careful. He was so hard now that it almost hurt, and the initial sting from Austin’s fingers invading him had subsided and an all-consuming feeling of pleasure had taken over. The word *more* went on repeat in his head, his heart beating along with it. *More. More. More.*

Plunging his tongue into Matty’s mouth, a third finger invaded his needy hole, and he felt an unprecedented stretch.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, hips lifting from the mattress. “Austin...”

“I’m here, Matty. I’ve got you.” Austin grinded determinedly against his thigh. “Shit, sweetheart, it’s like your hole is trying to suck me all the way inside you. You’re so soft and warm, Matty. I can’t wait for it to be my cock that’s inside you. You’re almost ready for me, sweetheart.”

He wanted that too. So much. He needed that. Matty longed to be someone’s. No, that wasn’t true. He longed to be Austin’s. To be owned by him entirely. For Austin to mark him so the entire world would know that Matty was untouchable to anyone but him. He’d always hated the power his father held over him. He’d always assumed that he would never want to give over that power to anyone else when he finally escaped. But now, Matty wanted to give it over to Austin freely because he knew that his boyfriend would never abuse it or take it for granted.

“I’m ready now, Austin,” he whimpered against Austin’s sweaty forehead, his boyfriend’s jet-black hair glistening with the proof of his restraint.

“You sure, sweetheart?” Austin’s voice shook with withheld need.

“Yes,” Matty breathed as he continued to fuck himself desperately on Austin’s fingers. “I’m sure.”

Carefully withdrawing his fingers from Matty’s tightness, Austin reached for the lube under his pillow and smeared a generous handful along his cock, hissing at the sensation. Looking up at Matty, his steel-gray eyes were filled with tenderness and amazement. Matty trusted Austin completely and had a while back stated that he wanted nothing between them when they had sex for the first time. Austin being Austin, had insisted that he got tested at a clinic in Biddeford—there was no way that he would risk hurting Matty in any way, he’d said.

“You’re so beautiful, Matty,” Austin smiled as he continued to stroke himself. “Grab the back of your thighs for me, sweetheart,” he instructed and Matty immediately grabbed his legs and spread himself wide open.

Shifting, Austin moved between Matty’s thighs, ghosting a wet, hot kiss against his stomach. Drops of sweat were clinging to his temples, a frown of concentration and focus between his black brows.

“Tell me if you don’t like it, okay sweetheart?” Austin spoke, his voice shaking slightly. “Whenever you need to, we can stop, okay Matty?”

Matty nodded, swallowing back equal parts nervousness and exhilaration. Strange how Austin seemed to cater to his every need, worried about hurting him. The word *stop* had never carried any weight in his father’s house. Not when it was screamed, cried or whispered. Strange how a kick to the stomach could make you lose the ability to speak. But it could. Pushing away the wretched sound of his father’s boot connecting with his ribs, Matty focused on the present moment and the sound of Austin’s gentle voice.

“Whatever you want, okay Matty? It doesn’t have to be today or tomorrow. We have all the time you need.”

“I know,” Matty choked out before he continued, brushing his fingers along Austin’s chin. “But I want this. With you. So



much. And I know you'll take care of me, Austin, because you always do."

Austin nodded. Feeling the blunt head of Austin's cock against his hole, Matty closed his eyes and melted into the soft pillow. It smelled of lavender and Austin. The salty ocean and the cinnamon scented bodywash he used. It was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. The stretch and the burn. The tightening sensation in Matty's own cock as all blood seemed to migrate towards his abdomen. He felt lightheaded and disconnected from his surroundings as Austin carefully entered him. A sudden need to pull Austin all the way inside consumed him, and he tilted his pelvis, inviting his boyfriend even deeper inside him.

"Fuck, sweetheart," Austin growled as he buried himself inside Matty. His voice was filled with pained restraint. Sliding his arms around Matty's back, Austin stilled against him, his warm breath coming out in short, uneven pants. It wasn't painful exactly, but it wasn't pleasurable either. It was something in between which Matty had no word for. Searching his mind, he clenched around Austin's broad length which resulted in a wince and a *fuck* from his boyfriend. Chuckling, Matty kissed Austin's damp shoulder.

Looking down into Matty's eyes, an awestruck expression on his face, Austin was the most beautiful Matty had ever seen him.

"You good?" Austin forced out.

"Yeah, I'm good," Matty smiled. "You can move now, Austin."

"You sure, sweetheart?"

"I'm sure."

"I don't think it's gonna be a marathon this time but if you're not too sore afterwards, we can go again," Austin shrugged apologetically.

"That's okay, Austin. I don't need it to be a marathon. I just need it to be you."

And it was. Quick. And sweet. And a little awkward. And everything in between and so much more. It was Austin's heaviness on top of him and his hardness inside him. It was the deep softness of his voice and his words of reassurance all around him. It was everything that Matty had never thought he'd get in life. Someone treating his body with delicate carefulness and awe. Like his body was a treasure that needed to be guarded and worshipped even. And when Austin's cock repeatedly hit that spot deep inside him, Matty could no longer contain the emotions sweeping through his body. Looking up into the cream-colored ceiling through a veil of tears, Matty buried his fingers in Austin's damp hair while his body relaxed into the sweet oblivion of his imminent orgasm.

And Austin's prediction had been right. It didn't take long before he spilled inside Matty with a loud groan. And even though Matty didn't reach his own climax at the exact same time as they always did in the movies, it was still the best fucking moment in his entire eighteen-year-old life. Because it was everything and it was Austin.

And they did go again a little later after Austin had shown him a glimpse of heaven with his mouth. And even though Matty was a little sore and the sheets were a whole lot sticky, it was still fucking awesome.

And then it was suddenly five minutes to midnight and Austin drew him against his warm, sweaty chest. And just as Matty was drifting off to sleep, sated and spent, Austin pulled him even closer, mumbling *my Matty, my beautiful Matty* into his hair. And in that moment Matty realized something. Something he'd never thought was possible.

That he not only loved Ethan because he'd love Ethan for as long as he lived. But that he also loved Will and Millie. And now he loved Austin, too. And the best thing about this realization was that Matty's fucking asshole of a father had been wrong. He'd been so fucking wrong. Because Matty knew that they loved him, too. And that he deserved it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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### Ethan – Now

“**YOU SURE THIS** is a good idea?” Ethan looked hesitantly at the entrance to the bar where a wooden stool had just come crashing to the sidewalk in front of them.

“Sure,” Avery grinned. “It’ll be fun. You, me, a couple of beers. Soaking in the local atmosphere.”

“Avery...” Ethan savored the excited look on Avery’s face as he stood bouncing on his feet, his blond locks pulled back in a ponytail. An image of his hand twisted tightly around the very same ponytail flashed through Ethan’s mind. *Are you choking yet, Avery? That’s it. Choke on it. You look so pretty when you choke on my cock.* Shaking his head, he looked at the bright green neon sign above the entrance. *Debbie’s. Fuck.* He needed to get a grip. He’d come no more than an hour ago and he was getting hard again. Avery was turning him in to a walking, talking nymphomaniac.

“It says in the window that it’s *fun & chill*. And we can still make the happy hour,” Avery nodded at the small, faded sign in the window.

“That could mean anything,” Ethan shook his head. “*Fun* is a very broad definition, Avery. So’s *chill*. It probably means something very different in Clarksville, Tennessee, than it does in Boston.” They were on their way to The Land Between the Lakes, making an overnight stop in Clarksville, just north of Nashville where they’d spent an entire day touring the old record studios and visiting the Grand Ole Opry amongst other places.

The door burst open again and a couple stumbled out along with the sound of loud old-school rock music. The guy had his tongue so far down his lady friend’s throat that Ethan was impressed at her gag reflex. Her skirt had ridden up the back

of her thighs revealing a tattoo on her right butt cheek. *Clarence*. Ethan wondered if Clarence was the guy currently doing a tonsil examination on the woman. Or maybe a childhood pet. Clarence would be a great name for a dog, he figured.

“See? Fun,” Avery repeated as he nodded at the enamored couple. “C’mon, man,” Avery grinned as he headed for the entrance, and Ethan trailed behind him, bracing himself.

The bar was packed tight, music blasting from a jukebox in a corner. Two overly tattooed bartenders were running back and forth behind the bar, handing over beers and shots like nobody’s business. The patrons crowded around the bar appeared to have been taking advantage of the happy hour and were at various stages between blissfully wasted and heavily intoxicated. The dance floor was one big, moving ocean of bodies. Short skirts, tight jeans, cropped tops and cowboy boots. Most appeared to have reached their weekly intake of alcohol several hours ago and were now just swaying mindlessly to the music. Ethan stared at his phone. It wasn’t even 10 p.m. yet. Yeah, this place was a real dive and Avery looked like a fish outta water in his oversized, green shirt, tight, black jeans, and messy ponytail.

“Beer?” Avery grinned at him, eyes fixed hypnotically on the dance floor. His blue eyes had turned indigo in the dim light from the phosphorescent lamps in the ceiling.

“Sure, why not?” Ethan smiled back, sucked in by the seductive undercurrent of Avery’s deep voice. He wasn’t allowed to drink legally, but he somehow doubted that anyone in this hellhole of a bar would care if he had a beer or two.

After a second round of beers, Avery jumped from the bar stool, clasping his hands, winking at Ethan.

“Let’s go, country boy,” Avery smirked as he began moving through the sea of people towards the jukebox. Ethan scooted down the stool and followed him, admiring his slim waist and hips as they swayed sexily to the music. Coming to a stop in front of the jukebox, Avery pulled a handful of coins from his front pocket.

Ethan looked at the screen. He was surprised at the variety of musical genres since old-school rock and country music had been blaring non-stop from the speakers since they'd entered the bar. Avery's black-stained index finger moved along the different genres and stopped at *indie/alternative*. His blond brows scrunched in an adorable frown, his lips moving as he went through the song choices. Suddenly his face lit up and it appeared he'd found something to his liking. Probably some sad nineties brit pop song about sex, cigarettes, and suicide. Dropping in a few coins, Avery pressed the button and nodded towards the dance floor.

It didn't take long for Ethan to forget about his surroundings. The next couple of songs were familiar country hits and he and Avery were immediately swallowed up by a sea of moving bodies. Avery, who had the broadest grin on his face, immediately caught the attention of a group of giggling, intoxicated women. Shrugging his shoulders at Ethan, he began dancing with the group of skimpily dressed girls, while they tried to outdo each other at screaming along to the lyrics about cheating boyfriends, second chances and sunsets.

Ethan found himself just as spellbound as the group of women by the glorious being dancing in front of him. Oblivious to his audience, Avery swayed his hips to the music, a strand of blond hair escaping from his ponytail. A girl yelled something at him over the music and Avery laughed loudly, his head tipped back with abandon, revealing his corded neck muscles behind his smooth skin.

In that moment, Ethan realized something. He was the happiest he'd been since Matty had run away. Not only was he totally consumed with his attraction to Avery and his desire for him. No, Avery had become a friend. Someone he confided in. Someone who listened to him. Took him seriously. And someone he had unrestricted fun with. A tightness in Ethan's chest reminded him that they would soon reach Boston and would then have to go their separate ways. And he realized that he didn't want that. The thought of not seeing Avery every day, of not waking up next to him, scared him shitless.

In the background, the music shifted, and a deep, melancholic voice stood in sharp contrast to the upbeat guitar music. Suddenly, he felt Avery's hands clasp around his, pulling him with him. *Of course*. This was Avery's song. It couldn't have been anyone else's. The ironic discrepancy between the sadness of the voice and the lightness of the music. Avery pulled him against him, wrapping his arms around Ethan's shoulders. His sugary breath against Ethan's ear, his voice spilling from his lips. *Take me out tonight. Because I want to see people and I want to see life.*

Tightening his arms around Avery's slim waist, he forgot everything around him. There was only the sweetness of Avery's breath against his chin and the intoxicating smell of his hair. All the noises faded into the background, Ethan's chest expanding with joy and an unrestricted sense of freedom. If only life could always be like this. Holding someone like this. And not only someone. Avery.

Opening his eyes, he was met by an abyss of blue and it dawned on Ethan that he hadn't seen the usual hint of sadness in Avery's eyes for several days now. Avery smiled at him, a soft curl at the corner of his mouth. And as the rhythm shifted, he continued to mouth the words of the song. *There is a light and it never goes out. There is a light and it never goes out. There is a light and it never goes out.*

Ethan didn't know how long they danced for. As Morrissey's soulful voice was replaced by another classic rock tune, the moment was gone and they continued to dance with the group of women, until their feet hurt, their ears rang, and their throats were raspy from singing.

Bursting through the exit of the bar several hours later, they were met by heavy torrents of rain, the curb a river by now. Still intoxicated, Avery laughed at him, cheeks red from the dancing. Pulling Ethan along with him, he ran into a deserted alley next to the bar. Away from the view of the street and the brightness from the streetlamps, Avery pushed him against the wall next to a dumpster and what was most likely the back entrance of the bar.

“Avery...” he mumbled against wet lips, the rain sticking to their shirts and clinging to their hair.

“Ethan,” Avery mimicked, a challenging flicker in his eyes, before he leaned in and sucked on Ethan’s neck.

“Shit, Avery, what are you doing?” Ethan hissed, the suction of Avery’s lips pulling his skin tight.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Avery moaned as he started unbuckling Ethan’s pants determinedly.

“Fuck, baby, what if someone comes? Let’s go back.”

“Can’t,” Avery gritted out. “Need you now. Like this. In the rain.” Pushing Ethan’s pants down, his briefs along with them, he started unzipping his own jeans, fighting to get the drenched fabric down his thighs. He stopped mid-thigh, his hard cock slapping against his wet shirt and Ethan couldn’t stop himself from pulling Avery against him, plunging his tongue into his mouth.

And then Avery suddenly spun them around, arms stretched out in front of him, hands splayed against the brick wall. Pushing his firm ass out seductively, he teasingly swayed it from side to side, the lean muscles of his thighs flexing with the movement.

“C’mon, Eth, I need you,” he whimpered as the rain trailed down his lips and chin.

“Shit, you’re fucking crazy, Avery,” Ethan groaned as he settled his hands around Avery’s hips, stilling the frantic movement.

“I know. What are you gonna do about it?” Avery pushed his ass against Ethan’s hard length, rubbing back and forth suggestively.

“You should come with a fucking warning,” Ethan hissed as he slammed his hand against Avery’s right butt cheek, not once but twice.

“Am I too wild for you, country boy?” Avery moaned, Ethan’s handprint spreading like a pink flower across his pale

ass, drops of rain dripping from Ethan's hair onto his otherwise unblemished skin.

Dropping to his knees on the dirty ground in the dark alley, Ethan spread Avery's ass cheeks roughly. Avery wiggled his hips while a desperate groan escaped him, making Ethan smile. He loved the power he held over his lover. *His lover.* The word lingered on his tongue before it was swallowed up by his own appreciative moan. Avery was his lover. Ethan brushed the tip of his nose against Avery's soft crease, inhaling his muskiness along with a hint of soap and sweat. Burying his nose against the tightness of Avery's hole, his right hand coasted across his right hip and settled across Avery's abdomen.

"Please," Avery begged as he shifted on his feet, pressing his ass closer to Ethan's face. "Please, Ethan. I need you."

Sliding his hand across Avery's rippling skin, his fingertips met Avery's hardness and he wrapped his hand firmly around him and started stroking his cock at a leisurely pace.

"Fuck..." Avery cried out, as he rolled his forehead back and forth against the brick wall. "I can't... I need..."

"I'll get you there." His voice came out muffled against Avery's pink hole before he swiped his tongue slowly against it, feeling it pucker beneath his lips. "I'll get you there, baby." Licking across the taint, he moaned against Avery's tangy sweetness as he continued to stroke the slippery silkiness of his cock.

"I'm ready now, Eth," Avery whined. Ethan preened at the desperation of the other man's voice. The pure, unashamed neediness.

"You're ready when I fucking tell you you're ready and not a second before," he gritted against Avery's alluring hole before he plunged his tongue into the narrow passage.

"Fuck!" Avery screamed, his wet shirt sticking to his back as the rain continued to pour down on them. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chanted, while Ethan continued to spear him on his tongue, meeting the rhythm of Avery's hips with his mouth.



“You taste so fucking delicious,” he mumbled against the drenched skin, saliva mixing with the drops of rain. “You taste like ravenous neediness, don’t you?”

Avery nodded, his right cheek resting against the brick wall, his hair soaked, drops of water dripping from his lashes.

“You taste like my little slut, don’t you, Avery?”

“Yes...” his voice shook as he nodded furiously. “Yes, I do.”

“Say it,” Ethan spoke as his left hand connected with Avery’s left ass cheek, a loud smack resounding through the deserted alley, interrupting the rain momentarily. “Say it!”

A hiss escaped Avery’s lips.

“I taste like...” he shifted on his feet. “Ethan, please.” Another smack tore through the rain like thunder. “I taste like your little slut,” Avery whispered.

“You do, don’t you?” Ethan replied as he rose to his feet. “Now, let’s see if you can come like one, too, baby.”

Spitting on his fingers, Ethan spread some around Avery’s hole. He was still loose from their afternoon fuck fest, where Avery had straddled Ethan’s lap and fucked himself repeatedly on Ethan’s hand, his hungry hole easily swallowing four of Ethan’s fingers. Avery sobbed while his hole clenched impatiently.

“Just fuck me already!” Avery blurted. “I’m fucking dying here, Eth.”

Ethan couldn’t help laughing. The desperation of Avery’s voice spurring him on, appealing to his dominant side.

“What do you say, Avery? What do you say to deserve my cum dripping down your crack?” He slapped his hardness against Avery’s pink hole, eliciting a gasp from him.

“Fuck you!”

“Nu uh...”

“Eth, c’mon!”

“Aww, you forgot, baby? That’s just too bad. Your starving, little hole all nice and ready for me and you forgot.” Ethan bit his lower lip, holding back a grin.

“Please! Just get me off already, pretty fucking please!”

“There you go,” Ethan coaxed, as he slowly fed Avery his thumb, while he wrapped his other hand firmly around Avery’s weeping cock. “Shit, baby you feel so good like this. All needy and pathetic, swallowing my fingers like a good little slut.” He plunged another finger into Avery’s sloppy hole.

Avery shook beneath him, water cascading across his rippling back muscles, his forehead leaning against the brick wall.

“Harder, Eth. I need it really hard this time. Please.”

Leaning his torso against Avery’s wet back, Ethan squeezed Avery’s length even tighter and started pounding his fingers into his tight heat, pulling a string of expletives from Avery’s lips. From the back of his mind, the words from the song coursed through him, a monotonous soundtrack to the repetitive thrusts of his hips against Avery’s plump ass.

*But then a strange fear gripped me and I just couldn’t ask. He felt tears pressing behind his lids as he bit down on Avery’s left earlobe. Driving in your car I never, never want to go home. Exhaling deeply, he felt his balls tightening, as his cock continued to grind against Avery who was mewling nonsensical words against the wall. There is a light and it never goes out.*

“Take me there, Eth,” Avery whispered. “Please.”

Withdrawing his fingers forcefully from Avery’s hole, he instead wrapped his hand around his neck. Avery’s skin quivered beneath his touch, and he squeezed tighter as he continued to slide his cock between Avery’s slippery ass cheeks. Avery’s globes tightened around him and as he squeezed his throat even tighter, he felt the familiar tremble of Avery’s body beneath him as he came, pulling Ethan with him.

While they both slowly came down from their orgasm, rainwater dripping from their sensitive bodies, the words

continued to flow through every vein and every bone of Ethan's blissed out body. *There is a light and it never goes out. There is a light and it never goes out.* He must have said it out loud because Avery laughed as he wiggled his ass.

"Morrissey fan?"

"Shut up."

They laughed most of the short walk to the motel, running in the rain, holding hands. After a quick, hot shower, they finally threw themselves down on to yet another lumpy motel bed. Tomorrow they'd be sleeping in the tent again, under the trees and the stars. He couldn't fucking wait to walk through the forest, Avery smiling at him as they explored yet another X on the map. One day closer to hopefully finding Matty. He felt torn about getting to Maine as soon as he could and drawing out these last few days on the road before they reached Boston. Before they went their separate ways.

Pushing back the thoughts, he pulled Avery even closer against him, his chest against Avery's back, his heavy leg wrapped around his slim hip. Sighing deeply, Avery tangled his fingers through Ethan's and pulled his hand against his lips. Kissing the knuckles softly, his warm body resting against Ethan's, he whispered sleepily into the darkness.

"You're the light, Ethan. You're the light."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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### Ethan – Now

“**I WANT TO** say hi to your mom,” Avery reached out his hand, grabbing for Ethan’s phone.

“Nooooo,” Ethan grinned, shaking his head furiously.

“Why not? Give me the phone, handsome,” Avery was making a *gimme* gesture with his right hand, while he smiled teasingly. Then he whispered so that only Ethan could hear him. “I want to say hi to my future mother-in-law.”

“As if!” Ethan snorted as he pushed Avery away, causing him to almost tumble out of the motel bed.

“Honey, what’s going on? Put that young man of yours on the phone. The one you’ve been texting me about.”

If there was one thing you couldn’t accuse his mom of, it was being subtle. Her green eyes sparkled as she looked at her firstborn. Yeah, she was a troublemaker alright.

“Jesus, Mom!” Ethan blurted, his cheeks reddening as he looked at Avery, a smug grin painted across his bratty mouth. The very same luscious mouth that had been wrapped so skillfully around Ethan’s cock last night. The image coursed through his mind like an X-Rated movie, and he had to adjust himself briefly under the blanket.

“Now, what did I tell you about taking the good Lord’s name in vain? Just because I’m not there to pull your ear, doesn’t mean you can act out, you hear?”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Ethan mumbled in front of him.

“Now, put your *friend* on the phone.”

Ethan noticed the Texan twang in his mom’s voice as she drew out the word *friend* and leaned across the kitchen table, reaching for her coffee cup. God, he missed her. Shaking his

head in resignation, he handed the phone to Avery, raising his left eyebrow in a warning gesture while he mouthed *behave*. A broad grin on his face, golden locks still ruffled from sleep, Avery mouthed back *always* while he winked at Ethan and accepted the phone. The motherfucker actually winked at him. He was gonna get him back later.

“Hi, Mrs. Bishop. Nice to meet you.” Avery waved at the screen, his face lighting up with the most gorgeous smile.

“Hello there, young man. Nice to meet you too.” Ethan didn’t know if he was imagining it, but it looked like his mom was blushing. Fidgeting with the coral necklace he’d gotten her for her thirty-eighth birthday, she smiled shyly. He’d saved for months for that necklace because his mom had seen it in the window of a jewelry store in Waco on a visit. For the rest of his life, Ethan would never forget the look in his mom’s eyes when she’d opened the small, velvety gift box. You couldn’t put a price on that look of pure, unfiltered joy.

“I can see why my son is smitten,” she cooed, Ethan silently cringing as Avery chuckled, eyes beaming.

“Well, ma’am, let’s just say that it’s a good thing that I didn’t meet you first. Then your son wouldn’t have stood a chance,” Avery smirked at Ethan, who sat fuming next to him. While Ethan heard his mother’s schoolgirl giggle in the background, he mouthed at Avery *you’re gonna pay for this*, but the cheeky sonofabitch just mouthed back *I’m counting on it*.

“Ethan, honey,” his mom mock scolded. “Why have you been keeping this sweet, young man away from me?”

“Yes, Ethan *honey*,” Avery repeated while smiling innocently at Ethan. “Why have you? Your mom is an absolute treasure.”

He was gonna spank him. That’s what he wanted to do. He wanted to smack his hand against Avery’s peach-colored ass cheeks until they were a strawberry red. A ripe strawberry red. His hand tingled with anticipation as he pictured Avery across his lap, ass cheeks glowing deliciously from the spanking. As if Avery could read his thoughts, a rosy blush covered his

cheeks while he chewed on his lower lip suggestively, and Ethan caught a glimpse of the tip of his pink tongue. *Fuck.*

Again, his mom giggled before she began shooting questions at Avery. Where was he from? What did he do for a living? What were his parents' names? Avery answered every question thoroughly and politely and Ethan couldn't help but feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. Eagerly gesturing with the hand that didn't hold the phone, Avery seemed to suck all light out of the small, sad motel room as he sat there chatting with Ethan's mom, glowing from the inside.

The past few nights had been mind-blowing. Ethan knew that he had this dominant side to him. That it was his kink to be in charge. He got off on it when his sexual partner was submissive, and Avery had accepted that role so easily. So gratefully even. As if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be ordered around and used during sex. The way he'd asked for Ethan's permission to come, after Ethan had spilled his orgasm inside Avery's mouth. He'd felt almost in awe at the uninhibited surrender Avery had shown.

Afterwards, they'd lain in bed kissing and touching for what had felt like hours until they'd drifted off together. Ethan had woken up in the early morning hours and Avery had still been asleep, his warm body clinging to Ethan's like a spider monkey. Yeah, he could get used to that. And that was *not* a good idea. In fact, it was a very bad idea considering that Avery lived in Boston and had an entirely different future planned out. One that hardly involved a nineteen-year-old farm boy from West Texas.

"I don't know, Mrs. Bishop. We haven't spoken about that yet, right Ethan?" Avery's questioning voice pulled him out of his drifting thoughts.

"Sorry? I didn't get that," Ethan murmured.

"I was asking—and please, just call me Belinda, sweetie—if you were planning to stay with Avery in Boston for a while before heading off to Maine?" His mom looked at him fondly.

"Uhm, I don't know, Mom," Ethan replied wondering when during their conversation that Avery had become

*sweetie*. “We haven’t talked about that yet. It’ll be at least a few days before we get there.” He looked at Avery who in return leaned in and rested his messy head of hair on Ethan’s shoulder. As if it was the most natural thing in the world to show affection in front of Ethan’s mom. His hair smelled of citrus and sleep. And Avery. Ethan felt his dick jerk behind his cotton briefs and cleared his throat.

“I think we might spend a few days there together. I want to take Ethan to The Ancient Americas. Show him my neighborhood, so to speak. I’ll have you know that I make a mean tour guide, Belinda.”

Avery pressed a quick kiss against Ethan’s naked shoulder before he got up from the bed.

“I’m going to let you two finish up here while I go hunting for some coffee. It was very nice to meet you, Belinda. Have a nice day.” Avery began ruffling through his backpack and pulled out a wrinkled, yet clean t-shirt.

“It was very nice to meet you too, sweetie. You take care now,” his mom cooed.

“Uhm, yeah... Maybe, I don’t know, Mom,” Ethan mumbled while his mom continued to beam at him. “I don’t know. Maybe. I’ll let you know in any case.” He felt confused and suddenly a heaviness settled in his stomach. He wanted to go to Boston with Avery. He wanted to go to The Ancient Americas, whatever it was. But he also knew that he’d be like a fish outta water and that made him slightly uncomfortable. It would be an unwelcomed reminder that Avery came from an entirely different world. A world that he didn’t belong in. That this road trip and the time spent with Avery was something temporary and the closer they came to Boston, the more the hourglass was slowly running out.

“You do that, honey. I’ll talk to you later. Your dad’s coming home tonight so I better head out to the store.”

“Okay, Mom. Love you. Say hi to Dad for me—and the pests.” He smiled sadly, a pinch in his chest at the thought of a family dinner without him.

“I will, sweet pea. Love you, too. Be safe now.” She blew a kiss at the screen before she ended the conversation.

“I will,” Ethan whispered in front of him as he looked around at the empty motel room.

Avery had slipped out. The room looked even dingier now, grim even, as if Avery really had sucked up all the light and taken it with him when he'd left the room. Well, better get ready. They were headed North today. The Land Between the Lakes. It'd been Matty's next stop on the list. *Did you even end up going, Matty?* And where was he now? *God, I really do hope that you are in Maine, buddy, because I'm coming. Soon, Matty. Soon.*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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### Matty – Then

“**WE COULD BUY** it together, you know.” Austin trailed kisses along Matty’s spine, whispering against his damp skin.

“What do you mean?” A puzzled frown appeared between Matty’s eyebrows.

Austin looked up from what had become his favorite pastime lately, covering Matty in kisses. It wasn’t like Matty complained or anything. He loved how affectionate Austin always was with him. It was addicting. His boyfriend was addicting.

“You’re cute when you do that, sweetheart,” Austin smiled while placing the tip of his index finger against the frown. “I’m talking about a boat. You want one, right? And I want one. And we want each other. So why don’t we get it together?”

“You wanna buy it together?” Matty stared into Austin’s gorgeous gray eyes in disbelief, stunned by Austin’s easy logic. “You really think that’s a good idea?” he mumbled.

“I think it’s a fucking great idea! Epic, even. Don’t you?” Austin sat up, leaning against the pinewood headboard of his bed, the wrinkled sheet covering his tanned body from the waist down. Brushing his right hand through his jet-black hair, his bicep flexed deliciously, making Matty involuntarily lick his lips. That was the effect which Austin had on him. Ever since that day at the harbor. He’d stopped questioning it a long time ago, comfortable with the realization that he was bisexual.

Austin had revealed to him after a few dates that he’d always known that he was gay and Matty had told him about Ethan. Just like Ethan’s folks, Austin’s dad had always accepted him. They’d lived alone in a small fisherman’s

cottage ever since Austin could remember. It'd always just been the two of them as Austin's mom died of cancer when he was only three.

"And what if we break up? What do we do then?" Matty felt sick to his stomach just thinking about him and Austin no longer being together. But they were so young. And he still had a hard time believing most days that this was his life now. That this was truly it. No catastrophe waiting to happen around the corner. No one yelling at him for obscure reasons or dislocating his shoulder because he forgot to take out the trash.

"I'm not gonna break up with you," Austin countered, a slight edge to his voice. That was the other thing that Matty had to get used to. That people could get annoyed, angry even, and it wouldn't necessarily mean that it was the end of the world as he knew it. People got mad and people got over it, and Matty's body was no longer covered in bruises afterwards. Sometimes he could almost convince himself his life back in his father's house had all just been a bad dream.

"Are you gonna break up with me?" Austin's soft voice pulled him out of his wayward thoughts. Uncertainty was building in his gray eyes.

Matty immediately straddled his boyfriend's lap and pulled him against his chest.

"Of course not," he whispered against Austin's shoulder, corded with layers of muscles. He smelled like the ocean and tasted like it too. Salty. Clean. And even better yet, Austin was beginning to feel like home. Like a real home. "I'd never break up with you, babe. But you might get tired of me..."

Pushing away from Matty's chest, Austin placed his large hands around his waist. He could almost reach all the way around Matty's slim middle. They were so different, the two of them. And yet, they were the same. Austin sniffed, his eyes moist, worry reflected in the dark gray.

"I'll never get tired of you, Matty. Why would you even say that? You're my favorite person in the world." He leaned his forehead against Matty's. "Don't you know that? You're mine, Matty."

“I’m sorry,” Matty whispered against his boyfriend’s lips. He’d lost count by now of the number of times he’d kissed them. In the beginning, when they first started dating, he counted their kisses at night, lying in bed, tracing the curve of his Cupid’s bow with his fingers. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” Trying to get off Austin’s lap, he swallowed around the traitorous lump building in his throat. “I always ruin things. Always have.”

Pinning Matty against him, unwilling to let him go, Austin brushed a lone blond lock away from Matty’s forehead.

“What are you talking about, sweetheart? You haven’t ruined a single thing. What we have, Matty...” Austin waved his tanned hand between the two of them before continuing. “It’s so strong. Like a boat built from the toughest wood. Sure, it takes a few hits sometimes during a really bad storm, but it won’t ever break. Because it was built to weather even the fiercest waves. It was built to last. And so are we, sweetheart.”

Matty buried his face in Austin’s neck. He was real sappy sometimes, his boyfriend, saying stuff like that, but Matty didn’t care one bit. He figured he had the undisputed right to claim every loving word coming from Austin’s lips. They would probably never make up for all the spiteful slurs his father had thrown at him, but somehow, they evened things out a little.

“You really think so?” he whispered, his voice muffled against the black hair curling along Austin’s neck. Austin had let grow out some because Matty insisted he looked so much hotter that way and he loved running his fingers through the thick strands.

“I do,” Austin nodded, brushing his hand along Matty’s back. “I know he did a number on you, sweetheart. That asshole who had the nerve to call himself your father. Making you believe that you were nothing. That you were less than the dust under his boots. But he was wrong. So wrong.”

Matty could only nod as he clung to Austin, fat tears starting to draw lines down his cheeks.

“I dream about it sometimes, you know. That I run into that motherfucker. And he doesn’t know who I am. He’s just going about his business, not a care in the world.” Austin sucked in a quick breath, eyes darkening as he continued to caress Matty’s back. “So, I follow him. I follow him around for hours sometimes, just waiting. Just patiently waiting for that one opportunity to get him alone. Cornered. With no way out. And when I do, I beat the shit out of him. And I don’t stop. Not even when he begs. Because he does. Believe me, he does. *This is for Matty*, I tell him, while he looks at me, fucking clueless. *This is for my Matty, you fucking useless piece of shit.*”

Matty’s chest tightened at the vivid picture that Austin was painting. He’d never heard Austin speak like this before. The pure, uncompromising anger bursting from the very same mouth that usually just spoke words of kindness.

Sitting up straight, Matty leaned in and kissed the tip of Austin’s straight nose. He was so beautiful, his boyfriend. Then he kissed his cheekbones, his chin and finally his lips.

“I dream sometimes too,” Matty mumbled against a birthmark at the right corner of Austin’s mouth.

“Yeah?” Austin smiled, kissing him back.

“Yes.”

“What do you dream about, Matty?” Austin’s anger had evaporated from his face and dissolved into thin air, now replaced by nothing but affection.

“It’s a secret,” Matty whispered teasingly.

“Oh yeah...?”

“Yeah.”

In one swift movement, Austin lifted him and placed Matty on his back on his messed-up bed. Placing his arms on both sides of Matty’s head, Austin ground his hips against Matty’s abdomen while he purred,

“Tell me about it, sweetheart. Tell me about all your dreams. Maybe they just happen to be mine too.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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### Ethan – Now

“**TELL ME ABOUT** your siblings. What are their names?” Avery sat leaning against the trunk of a tree, his eyes closed against the sun.

“Uhm, there’s Ryder. He’s seventeen. He’s real good at football. Tight end. Everyone says he’s headed for a scholarship...” Ethan trailed off, the usual hint of jealousy jabbing at his chest whenever he thought of his two-year-younger brother and the fact that he was bound for bigger and better things than West Texas. And then came the guilt, of course. Because he loved Ryder. They’d always been the closest out of the four of them.

“There are two more, right?” Avery asked, eyes still closed.

“Yeah. The twins. River and Reeve. They’re thirteen but act like freaking toddlers most of the time. I’m surprised they haven’t killed each other yet with all the crazy shit they’re constantly up to.” He couldn’t help chuckling at the thought of his twin brothers. He missed them even though he would never admit it. “Reeve has a learning disability. Didn’t get enough oxygen when he was born. River is his partner-in-crime, though. I swear to God, one of these days they’re gonna set the house on fire or some shit like that.” He shook his head, still chuckling.

“Ryder, River, and Reeve... How come your name doesn’t start with an R?” Avery opened his eyes and gazed questioningly at Ethan.

“Okay, so here’s the thing about Belinda Bishop,” Ethan smiled fondly. “She’s crazy about nineties movies. Her favorite is *Reality Bites* with Ethan Hawke. She gets all googly-eyed whenever they show a rerun. She has this

massive crush on him. She can go on for hours about him, listening to her 90s music, stealing a smoke on the back porch when she thinks no one's watching... So, she named her firstborn—and most good-looking child—Ethan, of course.”

“That’s very sweet,” Avery smiled. “She’s a really complex woman, your mother.”

“Right?” Ethan laughed. “Real complex.”

“So, what about your brothers’ names, then?”

“Yeah, so when Ryder was born, she was still stuck on the same movie, so she named him after Winona Ryder and since she couldn’t give him a girl’s name... Well, I mean, you have a girl’s name so that’s probably a thing with you city folks.” Ethan couldn’t help teasing Avery.

“It’s *not* a girl’s name. It unisex,” Avery protested, before continuing. “And the twins?”

“Well, Mom had moved on by then. *My Own Private Idaho*.”

“Of course... River *Fucking* Phoenix and Keanu *Stoneface* Reeves.” Avery sounded awestruck. “That’s a stroke of genius, Eth. Your mom is like the coolest mastermind, ever. God...” he moaned appreciatively. “Phoenix and Keanu are so fucking hot in that movie.”

Ethan chuckled, his heart swelling with... well, with something as he took in Avery all flushed and cute.

“What about you? Why are you called Avery?”

“I’m not really sure,” Avery murmured. “I remember asking my mother once when I was younger and she mentioned something about A being the first letter of the alphabet, you know.” Avery grinned, the sound a slightly bitter edge to it as he tipped his face to the sky. “Did you see that?” Avery suddenly rose and pointed at the canopies above their tent, his entire face changing as it lit up with amazement. The large trees had offered them the much-needed shade when they’d woken up this morning. There was nothing worse than waking to the sensation of being boiled alive in your own sweat. *And there was nothing better than waking up next to*

*Avery.* Shit, where had that come from? It was their second day in the national park in Kentucky, and Ethan never wanted to leave.

Waking up to Avery covering his chest in sloppy kisses and mumbling sweet nothings against his sticky skin had already made this day memorable. Matty would've kicked his ass if he were here. Surrounded by miles and miles of spectacular nature, and Ethan couldn't pull his gaze away from Avery for more than a few seconds at a time.

"What?" Ethan looked in the direction that Avery was pointing.

"The bird. With the red tail feathers?" Astonishment was painted across Avery's face, his bright blue eyes reflecting the vastness of the morning sky.

"No, I was looking at something else," Ethan smirked as he demonstratively moved his gaze to Avery's firm ass. A few handprints had still been visible on the pale, flawless skin when they'd woken this morning.

Avery flushed and smiled adorably, the dimple popping in his left cheek.

"Oh, you were now? Didn't you get enough of my ripe *derrière* last night?" Avery grabbed his right butt cheek while he wiggled his ass teasingly.

"Derry-what?"

"Derrière. It's French for buttocks," Avery winked.

"I'll never get enough of you, baby," Ethan blurted without even thinking twice about it. *Shit!* He needed to stop with this line of thought. They were reaching Boston in a few days which meant the end of the line for Avery and a *it-was-nice-knowing-you-and-blowing-you* stop for Ethan. It was still undecided between them if Ethan would stay a few days with Avery once they reached Boston. They hadn't spoken about it after Ethan's mom had mentioned it over the phone two days ago. He didn't want Avery to feel obligated to drag a teen-age country boy around fancy museums in the city. To introduce

Ethan to his circle of academic friends. Avery probably had better things to do.

“Oh yeah?” Avery replied, pulling him from his runaway thoughts. “Then maybe tonight you’ll put your dick where your mouth’s already been?” The bastard winked tauntingly while his pink tongue peeked out between his sexy lips.

It felt like Ethan’s entire body was set on fire at the recollection of their heated encounter last night. After the spanking, he’d rimmed Avery. Edged him to the point where the other guy was almost crying. Ethan had been relentless, though, ignoring Avery’s pleading words and curses until he was a mumbling, whimpering puddle of sweat, tears and precum on the sleeping bag. It wasn’t until Avery was chanting, *please please please* like a broken The Smiths record that Ethan had taken pity on him and blown him. Yeah, Morrissey would’ve been fucking jealous at the unparalleled pleading edge to Avery’s voice.

It’d been the best fucking sex of his life. It was like that with Avery. Just when Ethan thought that it couldn’t get any better or hotter, Avery blew him apart with his sweetness and his complete surrender. It humbled Ethan beyond anything he’d ever experienced before, the utter trust that Avery placed in his hands when he was the most vulnerable. It was in these moments, when Ethan held the control over Avery, when he decided when Avery was allowed to come that Ethan felt freer than ever before. It was a paradox really. Because in being in control, Ethan felt like he was in free fall. That he could finally let go. It was the biggest aphrodisiac to him. To be able to reach a point where control tipped over into the unknown. And he hadn’t even fucked Avery yet.

He looked at Avery’s expectant eyes and he decided to push away all thoughts of *what if* and *what’s next*. Instead, he welcomed the distant voices whispering *why not* and *who cares*.

“I’d really like that if you want to, Avery.”

“I do. Want that. I’d love for you to do that, Ethan.” Avery moved closer, heat darkening his blue eyes. “But I guess this



means we'll have to make a pit stop unless you came prepared?"

"Uhm... I kinda did..." Ethan mumbled, scrunching his freckled nose, cheeks bright pink with embarrassment.

"Oh, you did, did you?" Avery teased, pulling at Ethan's t-shirt, drawing him closer. "You're such a dirty, needy boy, aren't you? Running around sticking your cock in every hole available?" As if to underline his words, Avery pushed his hips flush against Ethan's.

"Fuck you, man. If anyone here's the needy one, it's you, baby. The way you moaned last night, begging to be put out of your misery. Besides, my mom wouldn't let me leave the state if I wasn't packing supplies," Ethan grinned.

"Fuck, I love your mom." Avery's hands moved to Ethan's ass pinning him against him. Then he raised his voice and yelled from the top of his lungs, oblivious of the families going about their morning routine around them.

"I fucking love you, Belinda Bishop!" And then winking at Ethan, he whispered, "and you better keep your energy up today, handsome, because I'm a fucking greedy bottom if there ever was one and one plowing by your beautiful cock is not gonna be nearly enough."

Then he patted Ethan's cheek like they'd just discussed today's hike or what they were having for breakfast. Like he hadn't just completely tipped Ethan's entire world on its axis. *Shit! Shit, shit, shit!* He was getting in way too deep.

"Can I pick the music? You know I'm way better than you at picking the music," Avery smirked at him.

"Sorry, what?" Ethan had been miles away—hours ahead, really.

"I'm the designated DJ today," Avery grinned as he started stuffing his backpack into the trunk of the car.

"You're always the fucking DJ," Ethan sighed, a rebellious smile tugging at his mouth.

“Because I have so much better taste in music than you do,” he slammed the trunk shut and brushed his hair away from his forehead, bringing back the image from last night as Ethan had pulled his hair tight while he’d fucked Avery’s mouth.

“If you call those sentimental, whiney nineties songs music, then yeah...” Avery had a weakness for lyrics that had to do with loneliness and pain. It wasn’t that Ethan disliked the melancholic songs with the sad vocals. He did. Just not as much as Avery did.

“It’s fucking epic music, man. Jarvis, Richard, Morrissey... Jeff. That’s authentic music, Eth. True hurt. Real loneliness.” Avery suddenly looked miles away as he sucked on his bottom lip with his teeth. Then his expression shifted. “Besides, you just love it when I sing along.” He smiled, still a trace of wistfulness in his blue eyes.

“Fuck off!” Ethan teased. “You don’t call that ruckus singing, do you? It sounds like a cat being dragged by the tail.”

“Aww, you love it. Admit it. You love my deep, velvety, sexy-ass voice.” Avery pouted as he walked towards Ethan, who stood at the front of the car, hips swaying seductively. “It gets you all hot and bothered, doesn’t it, handsome?”

“It gets me bothered, alright,” Ethan mumbled. He secretly loved listening to Avery’s sultry voice as he sang about regret, drugs, and wasted dreams. But he would never in a million years admit to it. That would just make Avery intolerable.

“What?” Avery whined, a mock-hurt look in his eyes, as he reached for the hem of Ethan’s t-shirt. “You don’t like my voice, handsome?”

He looked like a small child who had just been told that he wasn’t getting any dessert later. Ethan couldn’t help grinning as he rested his hands on Avery’s slender hips.

“It’s not that I don’t like it—it’s just not a singing voice, Avery.”

“It’s not?” Avery tucked on his lower lip. Ethan knew exactly what game he was playing right now; to Avery foreplay started as soon as he woke in the morning, making Ethan just about to burst when he could finally punish that provocative, bratty mouth at night. “But didn’t I sing good for you last night, Eth? Didn’t you like it then?” Avery’s brows furrowed as he slid his sun-kissed arms around Ethan’s neck and leaned in against his ear.

Ethan was painfully aware that they were far from alone in the parking lot. Families were getting ready to head out for the day and some were looking in their direction. Avery teasingly nibbled on Ethan’s earlobe as he continued.

“Don’t you even like it just a teeny, tiny little bit when I sing to you, Eth?” His voice was deep now, dripping with pent-up lust and neediness. “I thought you loved it. Especially the final verse.”

Shuffling his feet on the pine needle covered ground, Ethan hardened behind his zipper, sweat building at the back of his neck.

“Avery...”

“What about the last part?” Avery moaned, nearly humping Ethan’s thigh. “Didn’t you like that either?”

“The last part?” Ethan swallowed, saliva pooling in his mouth.

“Yeah.”

“Uhhh...”

“You forgot?”

“Avery...”

“*Harder, deeper, faster,*” Avery sing-song-moaned seductively, unclenching his hands from Ethan’s sweaty neck, winking tauntingly, before he headed towards the passenger side of the car. “C’mon, let’s go!” He grinned adorably. “Time for breakfast, handsome!”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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### Matty – Now

“**THERE YOU ARE** kid,” Will smiled at him as soon as Matty hurried into the hallway of the small cottage. It was extremely windy today and none of the boats had been able to head out. Matty shook off the excess water from his coveralls and removed his wet boots before entering the kitchen. The familiar smell of coffee, apple pie and laundry detergent hit his nostrils and his pulse instantly lowered again. It still smelled like home even though Matty hadn’t lived here for the past four months.

“Hey Will...” Matty sat down in front of the man who’d changed his life almost three years ago. Who’d taken him in no questions asked without so much as wanting anything in return. Sure, Matty still worked on Will’s boat two days a week. The rest of the week, he went out with Austin on their own boat.

*My own boat. Stella.* Austin had agreed that it was a *stellar* name for a boat after Matty had caved. They’d bought the boat together. Will had lent Matty the money he couldn’t come up with himself. They’d gotten a sweet deal anyway since Mr. Potter was retiring and his two sons, who both lived in the city, one in Boston and one in Salt Lake, had no interest in taking over the boat and the family business.

Even though he no longer lived in the small cottage, Matty felt more at home with Will and Millie than he’d ever done in his childhood home in Eden. It had come to symbolize a place of safety and kindness to him. A place where he didn’t have to fear his father’s wrath or witness his mother’s quiet resignation. A place where he could simply be. He figured that’s why it had felt natural to him to stop by today. Matty let out a resigned, drawn-out sigh.

“What’s up, son? You don’t usually come by on Tuesdays.” Will reached for the coffee pot and poured Matty a steaming hot cup of coffee before refilling his own mug.

“What? Can’t I come by and see you on Tuesdays now?” Matty snapped, and as soon as he’d spoken the words, he realized that his anger and frustration was misplaced. But he also knew that Will always listened when things got hard or if Matty didn’t know who else to talk to. He’d never imagined that a fifty-five-year-old lobsterman from Grant’s Harbor, Maine would become his best friend in the world. Well, second best friend.

*You’re my best friend in the whole wide world, Matty.* Ethan’s words echoed in his head. *You’re still my best friend too, Ethan.* He pushed the thoughts away and looked at Will, who returned his gaze patiently.

“Sorry,” Matty murmured into his coffee cup.

“No harm done, kid,” Will grinned, a world of affection reflected in his kind eyes. “Now, tell me what’s got your panties in a wad. Trouble in paradise already?”

Matty couldn’t help chuckling, almost forgetting that he was supposed to be mad. Leave it to Will to put a smile on his face within five minutes.

“Yeah... Something like that,” he shrugged, looking out of the kitchen window, gray clouds hanging low above the dunes.

“Yeah, Millie used to drive me crazy too when we first moved in together. All her girly stuff all over the place. Well, I guess you two young ones don’t have that kinda trouble. Anyway, it takes some getting used to, that’s for sure. You know, making room for someone else in your life suddenly. You’ll get there, the two of you. Austin’s a good man.” Will nodded as he reached for his coffee.

“I know he’s a good man, Will, but he drives me up the fucking wall sometimes!” He looked back at Will just in time to see the older man cringing.

“Language!” Will raised a gray eyebrow, a mock-stern look on his kind, weather-beaten face.

“Sorry, sir,” Matty mumbled, fidgeting with the lavender-colored tablecloth, which was Millie’s favorite. She liked the yellow one with the daisies, too, but not as much as the lavender which had been a birthday present from her late mother, Dorothy.

“No harm, no foul,” Will replied, closing *The Anchor*, the biweekly local paper. He was one of the few people that Matty knew who still read a real newspaper. “What’s he gone and done now?” Will continued fondly, winking at Matty while he crossed his beefy arms across his chest.

“He asked Ray for a loan,” Matty mumbled, eyes downcast. “Even though I told him that the apartment is just fine for now. What do we need a house for, Will? It’s just the two of us and Cassie anyway...”

Will brushed at his rough-looking beard, a contemplative look on his face.

“Is it that old place up next to Marley’s shop? The fixer-upper? The one you mentioned a while back?” A ghost of a smile was forming at the corner of Will’s mouth.

“Yeah... I just mentioned that I’d like a house like that one day. Something that we could fix up together, you know. Little by little. The two of us. A garden for Cassie. I didn’t expect him to go behind my back and ask his dad for a freaking loan! I mean, who does that?” Matty looked to Will questioningly as if he knew the answer.

“Austin, that’s who,” Will chuckled, taking another sip of his coffee, releasing a contented sigh.

“Yes! Exactly! But he shouldn’t go around making decisions like that without involving me. We’re a team. We’re supposed to decide these things together. He said it was a surprise...” An agitated flush had appeared on Matty’s cheeks, and his unruly, blond hair had taken on a life of its own, probably from a combination of the ruthless wind outside and from repeatedly pulling at it.

Will reached out and clasped Matty’s hand in his much larger one, squeezing it reassuringly.

“No, he shouldn’t. But he obviously did, son. But I bet his intentions were good. They usually are.”

“I know they are. That’s why I love him. But don’t you see, Will? He makes me feel like a little kid without any say when he goes and does stuff like that?” Matty was biting his bottom lip furiously, still manhandling Millie’s tablecloth. “And I’m not a kid,” he whispered.

“I know you’re not. And Austin knows so, too...” Will trailed off as he stood from his chair and went to stand in front of the kitchen window. Drumming his fingers against the wooden countertop, he cleared his throat while staring out at the constantly shifting sky.

“Let me tell you something, son. It’s not something that Austin talks about, but I guess you need to hear it.” Will brushed at some invisible breadcrumbs on the wooden surface before he turned around facing Matty and continued. Matty apparently looked worried because Will rushed out.

“It’s nothing bad, son. Nothing like that. You see, I’ve known Austin his entire life. Ever since he was a snotty-nosed toddler hanging around at the docks, chatting to anyone who’d listen and to those who’d already heard his stories a million times before. Craving the attention. It’s not that Ray didn’t give him any, but it’s not the same as having your mom, is it now?”

Matty could only nod even though he didn’t know. Not until he’d met Millie. She was the closest thing to a mother that he’d ever had aside from Mrs. Bishop.

“I know that Austin told you that his mom died of cancer when he was three. But that ain’t entirely true.” Will brushed at his stubble, eyeing Matty carefully, watching his reaction.

“Wh—? What?” Matty whispered, a stunned look on his face, his mouth slightly agape. “What do you mean, Will?” A look of disbelief and then hurt appeared in his sky-blue eyes, making them darken slightly.

“Now, hold your horses and hear me out, son, before you get all sorts of ideas in your head about that man of yours.”

Will raised a bushy, gray eyebrow in mock warning. “She left when Austin was three. She left with another man—some building contractor she met. Walked right out on her husband and young child without as much as a word and went back to the city with this guy. Never came back. Not one word in all those years. Just like Austin never happened. Like he didn’t exist.”

“But... but he...” Matty couldn’t find the words. His chest tightened and he felt sick to his stomach at the thought of the three-year-old Austin being left behind by his mother for another man. He’d seen pictures of Austin as a young child, jet-black locks falling into his stunning, gray eyes. Knees bruised, perhaps from stumbling on the docks or taking a fall from his bike. One picture of a perhaps four-year-old Austin in a Spiderman pajamas. Who in their right mind would ever leave that little boy behind?

“Now, Austin knows this. But he doesn’t like to talk about it. And that’s okay. If he wants to tell people that his mom’s dead, then that’s his decision to make. She might as well be with the way she just took off. Who wants to talk about the fact that your own mother didn’t want ya? No, Austin has his reasons and that’s his choice.” Will’s voice was solemn, each word carefully spoken as if he wanted to make sure that nothing was left out or unclear.

Matty nodded even though he still felt a little betrayed that Austin hadn’t told him this. Then again, Matty hadn’t exactly told Austin all the details surrounding his sudden departure from Eden, but that was because he wanted to protect Austin. Matty didn’t want to have to turn Austin into a liar in case the police came looking for him one day.

Will’s voice sounded like it came through a cloud of cotton, all muffled and subdued, gently pulling Matty back to the present moment.

“Even when he was smiling or laughing as a kid and as a teen, it would never really reach his eyes, you know. There’d always be this seriousness about him, like a dark cloud looming in the background. Like he didn’t allow himself to be happy and carefree. He couldn’t get rid of it.”



Will brushed his hand across his face and went and stood next to Matty, placing his large hand on his slender shoulder. Even though Matty had put on quite some muscles from working on the boat, he was small and slender compared to this gentle giant of a man.

“Not until he met you, kid. Never seen him happier. It’s like something lifted, you know. Especially after you agreed to move in with him.” Will moved his large hand to Matty’s hair and ruffled it affectionately.

Matty looked at Will’s kind, wrinkled face and choked up, tears burning behind his eyelids. Austin’s words resounded in his head. *If you’ll be mine, Matty, I’ll never need anything else. Say you’ll be mine.* Sure, Matty was only eighteen, but he already knew that there was nothing he wanted more than to share a home with Austin, and his response had spilled from his lips without giving it a second thought. *I’m already yours, Austin. I’ll only ever be yours.* He’d wanted to speak the three little words so badly, but something had held him back. Instead, he had just nodded, eyes blurry from unshed tears.

Suddenly, Will laughed heartily as he patted Matty’s shoulder.

“I almost thought he was gonna faint right in front of me, the day he came to ask for my permission to ask you to move in with him. He was nearly green in the face and sweating like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Didn’t even have the heart to tease him, I was so afraid that he’d have a heart attack right then and there. When I told him that he had my blessing, Austin looked like he’d won the freaking lottery. Can’t even imagine the day he’ll be coming around asking for my permission to marry you, kid. Not often you see someone having that kinda effect on another person.” Will wiped at his eyes, shaking his head.

Matty let the words settle in his heart and almost didn’t recognize his own voice when he spoke.

“He asked you for permission?” His mouth was dry, and it felt like his heart was just about to jump out of his chest.

“Sure did. Well, I am sorta your old man after all, aren’t I?” Will grinned, as he went to pour Matty another cup of coffee.

Matty chuckled. It was perhaps a ridiculous notion to some, but to Matty it felt like the greatest declaration of love that an old, rough lobsterman from Maine would refer to himself as *his old man*.

“So, you see, everything that boy does, is because he loves ya. Because he knows what it’s like to lose someone you love. Not because they *had* to leave you, but because they *chose* to do so. And Austin just wants to keep ya. If I’m not mistaken, he made that decision a long time ago when you blew into Grant’s Harbor like a breath of fresh air. And he’s not the only one who feels that way, I might add. We all just wanna keep ya here, son. Where you belong.”

Swallowing audibly, Matty failed to fight back the tears building in his eyes.

“I know, Will. But he’s not gonna lose me,” Matty mumbled, looking into his coffee cup, brushing at his eyes. “He doesn’t need to buy me a house. I don’t need anything from him except for him to love me,” he sniffed, wiping at his nose.

Will nodded, exhaling deeply.

“Well, son, did it ever occur to you that maybe *he* needs it. Maybe Austin needs to build the kinda life with you that he never got to have growing up. And if that involves him doing things at another pace sometimes, then Matty... isn’t that a small price to pay in return for having someone like Austin in your corner?”

Suddenly everything closed in at the thought of Austin thinking that maybe he’d lost Matty after their fight this morning. The thought that Austin was hurting right now, and that it would only take one word from him to make Austin not hurt any longer. Standing up abruptly, Matty nearly knocked over the chair. Grabbing his cell phone from his chest pocket in his coveralls, he waved at the half-empty coffee cup.

“Thanks for the coffee, Will... And you know, for... for everything,” he blurted. “I gotta go. I gotta go find Austin,” he continued while he was already putting his boots back on and halfway out the door, tapping at his phone.

“No worries, son. You go on now,” Will grinned and yelled him. “See you boys for lunch Sunday!”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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### Avery – Now

“**ARE YOU SURE** you’re only nineteen? Do I need to ask for your driver’s license?” Avery brushed his hand against Ethan’s sweaty chest.

“Why?” Ethan’s breath hit his right shoulder, sending glorious aftershocks through his entire body.

“Because *that* didn’t feel like a nineteen-year-old fucking a guy for the first time. I bet that when we take down the tent tomorrow, we’ll find a big indentation in the ground.”

It’d been fucking ruthless the way Ethan had plowed him into the ground, and Avery had loved every minute of it. It had been nothing short of spectacular.

“Fuck you, man,” Ethan chuckled, biting at Avery’s shoulder, then gently kissing the sting away. “Seriously, though. Was it okay?” Ethan was adorable when he looked at him that way, an insecure frown between his auburn brows.

Avery turned around and searched Ethan’s questioning gaze. He was a conundrum, this young man out of Eden, Texas. So insecure at times, and then in bed Ethan was like a chameleon morphing into this dominant, sexual creature who took exactly what he wanted.

“I kind of assumed that me having to bury my moans and shouts of pleasure in the sleeping bag gave it away, but in case there were any doubts whatsoever; what you just subjected me to was epic sex, my young friend.” Avery kissed the tip of Ethan’s nose before he trailed his lips down to Ethan’s pouty mouth.

“Yeah? It was good?” Ethan smiled tentatively.

“Yes, handsome, it was really fucking good. You may have to carry me to the car tomorrow, though.”

“Okay. That’s a price worth paying,” Ethan chuckled before kissing Avery again, this time prying his lips open with his teasing tongue. The frailty of the kiss, nothing more than a whisper against Avery’s lips, stood in sharp contrast to the primal version of Ethan he’d encountered mere minutes ago.

They had been teasing each other back and forth all day; first when they’d had breakfast at a roadside diner not too far away from the national park and later while they’d hiked hours and hours through the dense forest. It had felt so natural and effortless. Avery had long ceased to wonder why he felt more connected to a nineteen-year-old West Texan than he did to most of the people his own age that he interacted with in Boston.

Come to think of it, Avery had never truly felt an authentic connection with anyone after his sister had died. All the way through adolescence and his twenties, Avery had experienced this deep-rooted disconnect from his surroundings. In school, at home, with friends. And later at university. It wasn’t that he wasn’t social. Or that he didn’t enjoy being with other people his own age. No, he’d always been one whom his peers had sought out. A quiet boy, but still popular. Still, Avery had always felt that something was missing. At times, he’d been wondering if there was something wrong with him. That he lacked an important part within which inhibited him from bonding with others. From connecting on a deeper, more intimate level.

But then Avery recalled what it had been like when Mattie was still alive. Whenever people spoke about the abstract concept of soulmates or whenever Avery read about it, it was always this romanticized notion of someone out there made just for you. And after Mattie died, he’d stopped believing in it. His little sister had been his soulmate. His person. The one thing which made sense in his life and when she’d vanished from it, everything became blurry and pointless. Deprived of all color.

Drifting through his youth, Avery had chosen the obvious path. That which was expected of a son of an MIT professor and a scholar in French literature. A future in academia.

Anything else had been unfathomable. Unacceptable. The son of two intellectual proteges, Avery's path in life had been mapped out for him long before he was even born.

And then he'd met Ethan. Immediately Avery had felt drawn to him. The mere presence of the other man lighted Avery up from within. Or at least it felt that way. He couldn't get enough of Ethan. He wanted to be close to him all the time. Even if he could merge his body with the younger man, he had a feeling that it still wouldn't be enough.

The way Ethan had owned his body the other night in the motel. Like it was simply his to take and mold and use. It had been a revelation of sorts. The way he so naturally and uninhibited had submitted to Ethan's touch. The way he'd sucked up every dirty word bursting from Ethan's lips like they were the very essence he needed to survive. The way he'd yielded. It reminded him of the documentaries he used to watch as a child on National Geographic. The lioness instinctively succumbing to the forceful power of the much larger male lion.

And then tonight, Ethan had fucked him unapologetically like it was the sole purpose of his existence. Like Avery was a foreign country he needed to explore and inhabit. He couldn't help but smile at the purple fingerprints that would surely cover both of his hips come morning. Ethan had held him in a steel grip while he'd slammed into Avery continuously, hissing filthy words into his ear. *Is it big enough for you, my little cock slut? Is it, bitch? Is it hard enough for you? Or do I need to make you scream?*

Avery had in fact screamed, come to think of it, and it was a good thing that Ethan had pushed his face into the cool flooring of their tent and muffled his cries. Otherwise, they would've woken up the entire camp site with their animalistic sounds of pleasure.

He loved when Ethan threw dirty slurs at him during the height of his ecstasy. To Avery there was nothing demeaning about being called *slut* or *bitch*. No, he fucking inhaled those words like they were the air he needed to breathe. He owned them. They made him feel powerful because once those words

started tumbling from Ethan's lips, they were a sign that he was giving over his control to Avery. *A fucking power bottom if there ever was one*, Avery remembered the words of one of his past lovers. And it hadn't been meant as a compliment. In fact, Avery didn't recall ever having been seen and met like this in any of his previous sexual encounters and the irony that it was a nineteen-year-old who finally gave him exactly what he craved, blew his mind.

Avery had come without even touching his leaking cock once, the insistent pounding of Ethan's cockhead against his prostate had been more than enough to bring him to the edge. Ethan had continued to violate his clenching hole, chasing his own orgasm. If it weren't for Ethan's solid grip on his hips, he would have melted into the sleeping bag, into the sticky evidence of his own pleasure.

He'd literally been shaking after Ethan had made him come. His hard cock still lodged firmly inside Avery, Ethan's strong and heavy body had covered him like a soft, warm blanket while his young lover had panted against the back of his neck. Avery had hardly noticed the stickiness seeping into his skin beneath him or the sounds of the forest by night all around him. There'd only been Ethan and nothing else. His smell and his heat. The moistness of Ethan's soft breath as it hit his cheek. The nonsensical fragments spilling from Ethan's mouth. *So good. Sweet hole. Feel you. And then finally. All mine.*

Avery had cried then, because suddenly everything made sense. It was everything all at once. What he'd been missing all along. This deep-seated connection with someone. No, not just *someone*. Not just *anyone*. Ethan. In this quiet aftermath, Avery had found the one thing that had escaped him ever since Mattie died. The one thing that hadn't been within his reach since he was eleven years old. Himself. Ethan owning him body and mind, had brought Avery back to himself and that scared him to death because in a few days, they would reach Boston and then what?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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### Matty – Now

“AUSTIN? BABE, YOU home?” Matty had been running all the way from Will’s house. The rain had soaked him all the way through. It was really coming down now, but he hadn’t noticed until he was running up the stairs to their apartment, drops of water hitting the wooden steps. Cassie was barking in the bedroom where they kept her when they weren’t home. Which meant that Austin wasn’t home. *Shit*. He’d really fucked up this time. Matty felt a tightening in his chest, and it suddenly became difficult to breathe.

Rubbing at his left pec muscle, he went to let out the puppy and she immediately started spinning around in circles trying to get his attention. They’d just gotten her a month ago. Matty had always wanted a dog growing up and then one afternoon Austin had asked him if he wanted to go for a drive. They’d ended up in a small town thirty minutes up the coast. When Austin had parked in front of the large red cedar coated house, Matty had frowned at him, one big question mark on his face. One hour later they’d left the house with a small fox red bundle of fur clasped firmly against his chest. *Cassie*. Matty didn’t know the first thing about dog breeds, but she was a Nova Scotia Retriever apparently.

“*A real water dog,*” Austin had grinned, “*just like my own little desert rat,*” he’d continued, ruffling Matty’s unruly hair. “*Now I have a blond and a ginger,*” Austin had teased, his cheeks flushed pink from pent-up excitement. It didn’t matter much to Matty what kinda dog Cassie was since he thought she was just about the cutest thing he’d ever seen in his entire life. And she was his. That had been one of the best days ever.

Yeah, those were the kind of impulsive things that Austin did *behind his back*. Like the house. And the boat. And the... Fuck! He was such an idiot. Matty pulled at his drenched,



curly hair and shrugged at the oblivious puppy, who just jumped up and down, ignorant of Matty's inner turmoil.

"Hey, baby girl," Matty cooed as he rubbed her behind the ears, pressing his cold nose against her warm, light-brown nose. Her bushy tail was wagging all over the place while she whined with enthusiasm and devotion. "Where's Austin, baby? He's not home yet, huh?" He looked around the bedroom, but it was exactly the way Matty had left it this morning when Austin had told him about the house, and he'd stormed out. *What a stupid, immature thing to do*, he cursed himself. Running away from a fight. Who did that? A fucking kid, that's who!

"Where's your leash, pretty girl? Wanna go for a walk, huh? See if we can find Austin? See if he still wants me even though I'm the biggest idiot alive?"

"He does," a timid voice sounded behind Matty. "And you're only the second largest idiot in the world..." Matty turned, his heart trying to claw its way out of his chest. Austin looked so full of regret and so fucking sad as he stood there in the door opening, his broad shoulders in a resigned slump.

"You're here," Matty breathed, relief streaming through his chest. "I thought you'd left. We were gonna go look for you." He searched for Austin's gray eyes, but he was still looking at the floor.

"Yeah, I was downstairs. Dad says hi." He nibbled furiously at his bottom lip and Matty knew that in a few seconds it would be pink and puffy. And ridiculously delectable.

"Austin, will you look at me, please," Matty took a step towards his boyfriend while Cassie shifted her big chestnut eyes between the two of them. Matty reached out and linked his fingers through Austin's while he pulled him towards him at the same time.

"I'm sorry," Austin whispered, eyes red-rimmed. "I shouldn't have done that. It was too much. I know, I'm too much." He looked down at their interlaced fingers while still worrying his lip vigorously.

“Shh, babe, it’s okay.”

Austin looked up as soon as the endearment slipped from Matty’s lips, a spark of hope bursting from his stunning, gray eyes.

“I overreacted. No, I did,” Matty shook his head at Austin, who was about to say something. “I had a full-blown idiotic overreaction and I’m so, so sorry.” He pulled Austin all the way against his chest and wrapped his boyfriend in his arms. He kissed Austin’s chin and had to tilt his head slightly to do so. Matty was much smaller than this large, yet vulnerable man who’d come to mean everything to him. But Matty liked it that way. He liked that he could disappear entirely in Austin’s embrace and hide from the world if he wanted too.

He’d felt that way ever since the first time Austin had wrapped him in his massive arms and kissed his hair. Safe. Cared for. Loved. It wasn’t because Austin had taken over Ethan’s place in his heart. He couldn’t. No one could ever do that. That place was reserved entirely for him. No, it was a different feeling that flowed through Matty’s chest whenever he thought of his boyfriend. The *I-cannot-breathe-properly-until-you’re-next-to-me* kinda feeling. Or the *I-could-just-climb-inside-your-gorgeous-body-and-live-there-forever*.

“You’re not mad?” Austin hiccupped and Matty felt it vibrate from Austin’s broad chest and all the way through his own where it finally reached his heart. A heart which, in this very moment, was so filled to the brim with everything that was Austin. “I thought maybe you weren’t coming back. That it was too much this time...”

“I was mad but now I’m mostly furious with myself.” Matty untangled himself from Austin’s arms and looked at him.

“Why?”

“Why, he asks?” Matty chuckled but it came out halfheartedly. “Because I’m a fucking idiot. I do this every time you try to do something nice for me. Then I freak out because I get scared and then I do something stupid to ruin everything.” Tears of self-loathing began to press behind

Matty's eyes, and he bit the inside of his cheek to make them stay put. Austin reached out his hand and pushed a lock of Matty's wet hair out of his eyes.

"You didn't ruin anything. There's no way you could ever ruin this thing between us. And if you're an idiot, then I'm one too..." Austin paused before continuing. "I guess it takes some practice to live together, huh? You know, I sometimes forget that we're two now and that I can't just go and make decisions that involve the both of us."

"Huh," Matty hummed. "That sounds really smart and grown-up." He smiled at Austin who in return exhaled with relief.

"Yeah, well I got some sound advice from someone who's real smart and grown-up."

"Yeah? Who?"

"My dad," Austin grinned sheepishly.

Matty tipped his head back, a loud laugh escaping him.

"Yeah, I forgot that my man's such a daddy's boy." Matty pushed teasingly at Austin's left shoulder.

"Oh, you should talk, man. You're the poster boy for fucking mamma's boys. If there was a magazine called *Mamma's Boys of Maine, the Hot Lobsterman Edition*, you'd be on the fucking front page, sweetheart." Austin pushed him back, his broad smile reaching all the way up to his gray eyes making them look almost electric blue.

"OMG, you're such a smart-ass, aren't you? It's only because you added *hot* to the title that I'm not kicking your ass right now. I'm nowhere close to being a mamma's boy." Matty began tickling Austin while Cassie thought they were fighting for real and started barking, her little paws skating across the laminate floor.

Austin started laughing loudly, cheeks flushed from Matty's manhandling him.

"You so are. Millie fusses over you like you were made outta fucking glass. The smallest cut or a half-sneeze and she's

there immediately, dialing freaking 9-1-1.”

“You’re gonna get it now!” Matty gave Austin his meanest look which wasn’t really mean at all, while secretly glowing from what Austin had implied. That Millie treated him like her son. “You’d better start running, babe, because when I catch you, you’re gonna get it.”

As he tried to make a break for the bedroom, Austin squealed whilst pointing at the confused puppy.

“What about Cassie? Weren’t you gonna walk her?”

“She can wait,” Matty growled as he made a 180 and leaped after Austin who disappeared through the open bedroom door. “I have urgent matters to attend to.”

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“Why did you get scared, sweetheart?” Austin whispered against Matty’s still damp hair. He was tangling their fingers together, a frown between his brows.

“Huh?” Matty answered drowsily, completely spent from Austin’s attempt at fucking him through the mattress. Sometimes Matty wondered if Austin was trying to break some sort of record with the way he would plow Matty’s hole relentlessly, the headboard banging against the plaster wall. It was the most focused Matty ever saw his otherwise impulsive and easily distractible boyfriend, when he was ramming his gorgeous cock continuously in and out of Matty’s ass, a deep, concentrated frown on his forehead.

“You said you got scared earlier. When I told you about the house.”

“Oh yeah.” Matty buried his face between Austin’s broad pec muscles, licking at his salty skin.

“Na ah, sweetheart. Talk to me.” Austin pushed at him gently. He always saw right through him when Matty tried to avoid talking about stuff.

“It’s just... It suddenly became so clear, you know? The more I have, the more I stand to lose.” He ghosted the tips of his fingers along Austin’s soft chest hair. “You’ve given me so much, babe. A full life. The kinda life I never in a million years thought I’d have.” Matty swallowed as he looked into the eyes of the man he’d loved since he was sixteen. The man he couldn’t imagine ever not loving.

“Isn’t it a good thing then that you’ll never have to find out?” Austin whispered, pulling Matty even closer. “Because you won’t. You can’t lose me, sweetheart. Not ever. Don’t you see, it was written in the stars a long time ago before we were even born.”

“What?” Matty swallowed, knowing very well what was coming next, because Austin had told him so many times before, last on the day he’d asked Matty to move in with him. But Matty liked to hear them again, nonetheless.

“That I was made for you just like you were made for me, too.”

“You’re such a fucking sap, aren’t you?” Matty teased even though he felt like jumping up and down in their bed screaming from the top of his lungs. *Austin O’Neil fucking loves me!*

“Maybe...” Austin scrunched his nose, looking absolutely breathtaking. “Wanna go another round?” He pulled at the comforter, revealing Matty’s already hard cock.

“What about the dog?” Matty groaned. “We can’t let her wait any longer.”

“Just give me a sec,” Austin blurted, already half-way out of the bed, looking around for his discarded clothes.

“Babe, where’re you going?”

“I’m just gonna drop her at Dad’s,” Austin grinned boyishly while pulling on his gray sweats. “He might as well practice for when he has grandkids one day,” he yelled over his shoulder as he bent to pick up Cassie.

“Grandkids!?” Matty yelled after him, but Austin had already slammed the front door behind him, his pounding

footsteps resounding on the wooden stairs.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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### Ethan – Now

“SO, I GUESS you weren’t kidding, huh? Your folks really are loaded?” Ethan glanced at the impressive three-story brownstone rising in front of them in the quiet street. Located in the Old Town in Boston, it lay between the Boston Common and the Museum of Fine Arts. If you didn’t know that you were smack in the middle of a buzzing city, you never would’ve guessed. Large trees lined the sidewalk and nannies were strolling along with toddlers. A woman in high stilettos was carrying a rat-like dog in her oversized purse while a sleek looking businessman was having a smoke outside a coffee shop while checking out the woman shamelessly.

Avery had already warned him that they were going to the museum at some point during the week that Ethan was staying with him in the city. Ethan was okay with Avery being his tour guide. It was a fair exchange that Avery was in charge during the day since Ethan was the *cruise director* by night as Avery had put it so fittingly. Yes, it had become this unspoken agreement between them.

He glanced at Avery whose face had taken on a slightly strained expression. He knew from what Avery had told him that he wasn’t close to his parents. Never had been. They didn’t share the same affection and bond that Ethan was so lucky to have with his folks. Ethan was starting to realize now more than ever that he’d kinda won the main prize in the parent lottery with the two people who’d brought him and his siblings into this world. He could’ve done a lot worse, but he already knew that from growing up with Matty. He just never figured that there were so many kinds of neglect, and that indifference was one of them, too.

Even though Ethan had never been to Boston before, it didn’t take a genius to know that you only lived in this part of

the city if you belonged to the upper-middle class. Looking at Avery, he found it difficult to see how he fit into this kind of world. Unpretentious, down-to-earth Avery. The way Avery spoke to Ethan's mom when they chatted away on the phone. The way he could make one feel jealous of a fucking milkshake when he tongue-fucked the straw. Yeah, this didn't seem like a place where the sensitive Avery would thrive.

"No," Avery shrugged as he started up the steps to the first floor with a massive, black-painted door as entrance. The town house exterior was built from dark brownish-red bricks and the windowsills and shutters were painted in the same black color as the door. Imposing. The house looked imposing. The homely feel of his childhood home with the wrap-around-porch with the wooden swing that his dad had built himself and the flowerpots with his mother's petunias stood in sharp contrast to this monstrosity of a building.

"And they aren't home?" Ethan looked questioningly at Avery who was rummaging around his backpack, nose scrunched in a cute frown, until he retrieved a set of keys.

"No. I mostly stay away when they're in town, to be honest." Avery unlocked the heavy, black door and opened it to a grand hallway with wide stairs leading to the next floors. An iron railing ran along the cream-colored, carpet covered stairs, a delicate flower pattern along the railing. Avery entered a code into the alarm system next to the entrance before he blew out a relieved exhale, winking at Ethan.

"They're in the Hamptons all summer with their elitist, waspy friends. God forbid one should spend the summer in the city among the common people or the tourists." As he spoke, Avery came closer until he stood right in front of Ethan. Searching his eyes, Avery shrugged before he leaned his head against Ethan's shoulder. Standing like this Ethan immediately felt the familiar surge of protectiveness course through his chest. Wrapping his arms around Avery's slender, athletic frame, he carefully kissed his soft, messy hair.

"It is what it is, right? You hungry?" Avery mumbled against his shoulder, before burying his nose against Ethan's exposed collarbone, tangling his fingers through the worn



neckline of his t-shirt. During their short time together, Ethan was often left with the impression that Avery almost wanted to disappear inside him. To hide inside him, away from the world.

“Sure. Do we need to go to the store?”

“No, Martha usually keeps the fridge stocked just in case. We should be able to throw something together.” Avery reluctantly released himself from their embrace and linked his fingers through Ethan’s. “C’mon. I’ll show you the kitchen, then the rest of the house,” he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and Ethan shook his head.

“Who’s Martha?” Ethan trailed after Avery into the large kitchen. Even though it had a vintage look to it, Ethan had no doubt that it was expensive and that every single cabinet and appliance had been carefully handpicked by someone who wanted to project class and appreciation of aesthetics.

He’d once seen a film which took place in Paris and the kitchen in the Boston town house gave off a similar vibe. *Bohemian*. It looked sophisticated and artfully thrown together—the polished brass pots and pans hanging from the ceiling above the shabby-chic worn kitchen island. The ceramic pots with lavender sitting on the windowsills. A framed artsy poster on the wall depicting two naked women in the process of blowing some fat guy. Ethan squinted as he read the title on the poster. *Fellatio*.

“Baby, what does *fellatio* mean?” Ethan spoke over his shoulder as he took in the over-dimensional cock almost bursting through the glass before he looked to his own crotch. Hmm.

“What?” Avery chuckled before he realized what Ethan was looking at. “Oh. Yeah, my mother got that from her French *student* as a parting gift. And by *student*, I mean *flavor of the month*. And by *flavor of the month*, I mean *I’ll-fuck-you-in-my-marital-bed-six-ways-from-Sunday-while-my-husband-is-grading-term-papers-in-his-office-downstairs*.” The bitterness in Avery’s voice was palpable even though he tried to give off an air of indifference. “Welcome to the LaPorte

household. Liars, cheaters, and pretenders.” He raised his arms in a *ta-da* mock gesture, while winking at Ethan.

“Avery...” Ethan suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“And to answer your question. *Fellatio* means the sexual activity of sucking or moving the tongue across the penis to give pleasure and excitement... Or something like that,” he murmured in front of him.

“Or something like that?” Ethan raised a smug brow at Avery as a laugh spilled from his lips. “Jesus, Avery, I bet if I Google *fellatio* right the fuck now that is the exact definition I’ll find.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what you get for sending your child to one of the priciest and most prestigious private schools in the US. A whole lot of definitions,” Avery shrugged, faking nonchalant indifference.

“Yeah... I bet. So, who’s Martha?” Ethan changed the topic.

“Martha is our housekeeper. She’s been with my parents since they bought the house thirty-two years ago.” Avery opened the fridge and inspected the content, while he continued, his voice containing a resentful edge to it. “Or rather my grandfather bought it. You want a cheese sandwich, an omelet or both?” He looked at Ethan, blue eyes bright with mischief before he gave the answer himself. “Both.”

Ethan chuckled and pinched Avery’s left nipple through the worn fabric of his sage green t-shirt.

“Ouch...” Avery winced as he placed a carton of eggs on the kitchen table.

“You’d better behave...” Ethan smirked as he moved to stand behind Avery, placing his hands on the surface of the table on either side of him, rubbing his hips against Avery’s firm ass.

“Or else...” Avery asked as he reached for a bowl in the cabinet above the sink. A moan escaped his inviting lips as Ethan grabbed the front of his neck with his right hand, while he simultaneously nibbled at Avery’s left earlobe.

“Or else I might not let you come later...” Ethan whispered, licking at the soft skin behind Avery’s ear. “And I know how much my little slut loves to come. Especially when he’s bouncing on my cock. Dontcha?”

“Uh huh...” Avery moaned as he wiggled his ass against Ethan’s left thigh. “I do. I love when you fuck me hard with your beautiful cock, handsome.” The *handsome* was spoken with a whine, almost stressing the neediness of Avery’s movements against Ethan’s hips and thigh.

“And who decides if you’re gonna get fucked, Avery?” Ethan hissed as he pinned his left hip in a grip of steel, his other hand still wrapped firmly around Avery’s slender throat. “Who decides if you’re a good enough little slut and get to have my cock?”

“Ethan, please...” Avery moaned as he clung to the edge of the kitchen table, cheeks flushed scarlet.

“Answer the fucking question, Avery.” He loved how Avery got off on this little game of his. How he would writhe and moan until he almost lost it with want.

“You,” he gasped as Ethan intensified the pressure of his hand around his neck. “You decide.” His voice sounded breathy from the moderate obstruction to his airways, his eyelashes fluttering.

“That’s right, baby.” Ethan continued to tighten and release the pressure of his fingers around Avery’s graceful neck. “Now, let’s eat and then you can show me the rest of the house and if you behave, I’m gonna feed you my cock later. Wanna see what *fellatio* looks like in real life, baby.”

• • •

“What happens to the food if no one comes by during the summer?”

“Martha throws it out, I guess?”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah... just like that, handsome.”

They were sitting against the headboard of Avery’s bed, talking between bites of sandwiches and mushroom filled omelets. Ethan was moaning in appreciation around every bite of deliciousness and Avery beamed, cheeks flushed with tiredness from the long drive—and perhaps from being back in his parents’ house, too.

“My parents are not very nice people, you see. Of course, they are nowhere near the likes of Matty’s father. We’re not talking abusive assholes here. No, I’ve always been fed the right kind of food and worn the best clothes money could buy. I’ve attended the finest schools in the country. Expensive holidays in Europe. Physically and intellectually, I’ve lacked nothing.” Avery placed his plate with the half-finished sandwich on the comforter and bit at his lower lip absentmindedly.

“Come here,” Ethan whispered as he pulled Avery against his chest, kissing his temple. Avery sighed into his broad chest before continuing.

“It’s the indifference, you see. It does something to a child, to a person, when the people who are supposed to love you don’t see you. You know, see you for who you truly are. I’ve never had that from my parents.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’ve always felt acknowledged by my folks. When I came out, they told me that they’d known all along and that they loved me regardless. That nothing could ever persuade them not to love me.” Ethan brushed at Avery’s hair as he contemplated what he was going to say next. It was there, right at the tip of his tongue.

“Yeah... When I came out in college, my mother started listing all the gay, French poets. I swear to God, I almost saw her drooling at the possibility of her own flesh and blood becoming a hyped, gay archeologist-slash-anthropologist.” Avery sighed, his eyes fixed on the linen curtain blowing in the breeze from the open window. “I guess I’ve always felt that my mother’s love was dependent upon how I could fit into

a certain mold. And not so much on the fact that I'm her child and that she should love me regardless."

Avery's sadness was palpable as it lingered in the space between them and Ethan felt his chest expanding from the image of Avery as a child, seeking his parents' attention and recognition. A sudden urge to act as a counterbalance to the indifference of Avery's parents overtook him.

"I see you, Avery. I see you for everything that you are. And I like everything that I see." A muffled sob escaped Avery's lips as he exhaled deeply into Ethan's strong embrace.

"You do?" His voice came out on a whisper, painted with uncertainty and longing.

"I do. And if you want to, I'd love for you to tell me more about Mattie. Your Mattie." Ethan's gaze drifted to the framed photograph on the wooden desk of a smiling Avery beaming with pride holding the hand of a cute toddler, who looked at him like he'd hung the fucking moon. Frozen in time the photo depicted innocence and unrestricted happiness.

"Yeah?" Avery looked up at him, blue eyes covered in unshed tears.

"Yeah." He leaned in and brushed his lips against Avery's who in return spoke against his lips, a slight tremor seeping through his soft voice.

"Okay, I'd like that."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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### Austin – Now

“**SWEETHEART, YOU WANNA** stop by Dad’s for dinner?” If someone had told Austin a couple of years ago that this would be his life now, he would have laughed in their faces. There was no better feeling in the world than standing at your own kitchen counter looking out at your own, overgrown backyard doing the dishes and calling out *sweetheart*. Especially if that *sweetheart* was a 5’8” blue-eyed blond named Matty Carter.

Austin still couldn’t fucking believe it most days. That Matty was his. His boyfriend. His partner. His everything. Austin had noticed the then fifteen-year-old blond right away the first time Will had brought him down to the docks three years ago. Matty had been so small and frail back then. Not the full-grown man he’d turned into during the time they’d known each other, worked together, and slept beside one another. Austin had known that it was a slippery slope to fall in love with a minor but fallen he had. Hard. And they’d managed alright. They’d had a whole lotta pent-up sexual energy and blue balls, but they’d managed.

He heard Matty rummaging around the upstairs bedroom. They still hadn’t completely settled in. It’d only been a month and a half and with the time they spent at sea and in bed, they hadn’t gotten around to all the small stuff. Like hanging up framed photographs in the hallway. Austin as a high school senior. That had resulted in an “*awwww, babe, look at you,*” spilling from Matty’s delectable lips, which then again had made Austin drop to his knees and blow his gorgeous boyfriend in the middle of the hallway.

Or the time when Matty had found Austin’s worn teddy bear, Harold, at the bottom of a moving box and had given Harold the most erotic voice-over recorded in history: “*You’ve been a bad boy, Austin. Why don’t you cuddle with me*

*anymore?*” That had led to Austin chasing his brat of a boyfriend all over the house before they’d ended up in the laundry room, Austin nibbling at Matty’s ripe ass while he bent over the dryer. “*You’re such a fucking brat, aren’t you?*” Austin had hissed against his crease, while he continued to bite and suck at Matty’s soft, cream-colored ass cheeks. The sound of Austin’s sloppy kisses had provided a rhythmic soundtrack to Matty screaming “*you don’t even know the half of it, you fucking brute,*” and Austin’s growls of possessiveness before he’d fucked Matty long and hard.

Placing the last plate in the drying rack, Austin heard soft footsteps coming down the stairs.

“What was that, babe?” Matty smiled as he entered the kitchen, blond curls all over the place, blue eyes beaming brightly. Matty came to stand behind him, wrapping his sinewy arms around Austin’s midsection, resting his chin on Austin’s right shoulder.

“Dinner. Dad asked if we wanna stop by later. Will and Millie are coming too.” Austin turned his head and kissed the downy skin of Matty’s left cheek. It was covered in dust. “What’ve you been up to?” Austin smiled against the velvety skin, vivid images of how he’d railed Matty against the dresser this morning coursing through his mind.

“Hmm, yeah that sounds good. Home-cooked meal and all,” Matty murmured into Austin’s t-shirt.

“What do you mean *home-cooked meal and all*? I feed your scrawny ass every goddamn day.” Matty couldn’t cook for shit, so Austin had asked Millie to teach him the basics and he was now the designated cook in the O’Neil-Carter household.

“Yes, you do, babe,” Matty nodded against Austin’s beefy shoulder. “And you do it so well, too. And it’s a hungry little ass. So fucking greedy for its next meal.” Matty’s taunting tongue peeked out and licked at Austin’s right earlobe while moaning exaggeratedly, grinding his hips against Austin’s jean clad ass.

“I oughta bend you over the kitchen counter right this minute, but I think it’ll be more fun having your horny, bratty ass sit through dinner with our folks instead.”

A disappointed whimper escaped Matty’s mouth, his sugary breath ghosting across Austin’s stubbled chin.

“Babe, c’mon, we can go a quick round, pleeease...” Matty grinded against him. “I’ve been busting my ass off upstairs for hours and now it’s time I get a reward, dontcha think?”

Austin didn’t have to turn his head to look at Matty to know that his boyfriend was full-on pouting now.

“No can do, darling. We don’t wanna be late. We’re already making a habit of it.” Austin wiped his wet hands in the kitchen towel before pushing away from the counter.

“Aww, c’mon man, just blow me real quick,” Matty whined while shifting on his bare feet in front of Austin.

“Nope, sweetheart.” Austin pronounced the *p* with a pop before tapping the tip of his index finger on Matty’s pointed, scrunched up nose.

With a sigh Matty relented and mumbled something intelligible.

“What was that?” Austin grinned at him.

“I said...” Matty tried his meanest face on Austin, “will you at least *kiss me hard before we go?*” His sulky, sultry voice imitating Lana Del Rey’s sensual song lyrics nearly had Austin change his mind about not fucking him right then and there.

“Jesus, you just can’t help yourself, can ya?” Austin shook his head before grabbing the collar of Matty’s baby-blue t-shirt. He then slammed his mouth against Matty’s, kissing him intensely, his tongue invading his lusciously bratty mouth.

Matty writhed against him, his hips grinding needily against Austin’s thick thigh. Releasing himself from his man’s clingy embrace, Austin held Matty stretched out in front of him.



“Easy now, tiger, it’s not gonna happen. At least not right now.”

“Okay, but you gotta promise to do that thing later then... With your tongue. Or I’m gonna be a mess all evening.” Matty looked down at his bare feet, a sullen curl on his lips.

“Okay, sweetheart.” Austin kissed his forehead, smiling into Matty’s soft hairline. “Now, go get changed.” *It’ll be my fucking pleasure*, Austin thought to himself, before he followed his boyfriend’s alluring ass up the stairs.

## CHAPTER FORTY

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### Ethan – Now

“SO, HOW OLD is she here?” Ethan pointed at the top of the photo album, a cute, freckled face smiling back at him.

“I think it must have been the summer before she died, so five maybe. The photo was taken in the Hamptons. On the beach. Mattie loved the beach.” Avery lay with his head resting on Ethan’s left thigh while Ethan brushed his fingers through his silky hair.

“She’s beautiful. She has your eyes and your smile. Jesus, you look exactly the same, Avery.” It was eerie looking at the pictures of this dead sister, Avery’s blue eyes staring back at him, only they weren’t Avery’s. A feeling of dread settled briefly in Ethan’s chest at the thought of Avery being gone instead, his blue eyes staring back at him from a place frozen in time.

“She was. She was the most beautiful girl, Eth. And so sweet. Always humming away, chattering about this and that.” Avery chuckled before continuing. “We found so many shells that summer. Mattie couldn’t get enough of them. Whites, cream-colored, pinks and oranges. ‘*Look, Avy. That’s a special one.*’ Our buckets were overflowing with seashells after a day at the beach and in the morning, we would start all over again.” Avery shook his head, a single stray tear spilling from his left eye. “I’ll never forget the look on Mattie’s face at the end of that summer when we went back to the city. My mother asked her to put all the shells back on the beach. She wasn’t even allowed to keep one.”

“Fuck. Why not?” Ethan turned the page and a young Avery stood next to a snowman, holding a carrot proudly to the camera.

“I’m not sure. Never made any sense. I hid a few, though, and gave them to Mattie to hide in her room when we got back.” Avery looked wistfully at the photo album. “I still have them, you know. The shells.”

Ethan closed the album softly and placed it on the gray comforter. Carefully lifting Avery’s head from his thigh, he rose and got off the bed. Holding out his hand towards Avery, he smiled faintly.

“C’mere.”

Avery took his hand and let Ethan pull him from the bed. As they stood in front of each other, he trailed his index finger along Avery’s smooth cheek and further down his chin and neck. A hiss escaped Avery’s lips as Ethan wrapped his strong hand around his delicate neck.

“Fuck your parents,” Ethan bit out, his gaze penetrating Avery’s sorrowful eyes. “Fuck’em.”

Avery swallowed under the firm hold of his hand and he squeezed a little tighter, causing Avery’s eyelids to flutter momentarily.

“Say it,” Ethan purred, coaxing the words from Avery’s lips. “Say it, Avery.”

Staring back with just as much intensity, a world of hurt and regret in his beautiful eyes, Avery wet his bottom lip.

“Fuck... them.” Avery closed his eyes, tasting the words on his lips before he raised his voice an octave, pronouncing the words clearly. “Fuck them.”

“Fuck’em,” Ethan repeated, holding Avery in a grip of steel by the throat.

“Fuck them and their ridiculous rules,” Avery blurted, his eyes turning darker.

“Fuck’em,” Ethan repeated as he brushed his lips against Avery’s, his tongue licking at the left dimple.

“Fuck you, Mom and Dad,” Avery whispered against Ethan’s lips as the tears now flowed freely down his heated cheeks before they continued down his chin.

“Tell me what you need, Avery,” Ethan demanded. He felt Avery swallowing beneath his hand.

“I... I don't know.” He tried to evade Ethan's penetrating stare.

“Yes, you do. Tell me.”

“Ethan, please... I don't...” Avery shuffled on his bare feet, grinding into the soft carpet.

“But you *do* know, Avery. You do. So, tell me what you fucking need.”

Looking up at Ethan through hooded eyes, the air between them suddenly became electric. Sucking in a deep breath, Avery exhaled as he leaned closer to Ethan.

“I need you to fuck me.”

“Yeah, you do. That's what you *need*, Avery.”

“It is,” Avery nodded in relief and surrender.

“Never be afraid to ask me for what you need, Avery. There isn't anything that I'm not willing to give you.” Ethan leaned forward and rested his forehead against Avery's damp one. He knew it was a lie. There were a lot of things that he couldn't give the man standing in front of him, but in that moment, Ethan wanted it to be true more than anything.

“Okay.”

“You want me to fuck you, Avery? Huh? You want me to make it all go away?”

Avery nodded in silent agreement.

“Say the words, Avery. Say them loud and clear.”

“I need you to fuck me, Ethan. I need you to make it all go away. Please.”

Ethan nodded as he turned towards the door, pulling Avery with him.

“Show me their bedroom. Your parents',” Ethan spoke determinedly over his shoulder.

“Their bedroom... Why?”

“Because that’s where I’m gonna fuck you, Avery. That’s where I’m gonna fuck that pretty little hole of yours. On daddy’s expensive sheets. What are they? What’s the thread count?” Ethan started pulling Avery out into the hallway. “Left or right?”

“Uhm, right,” Avery mumbled, his hand growing clammy in Ethan’s firm, warm grasp.

“Right, it is. So, what’s the thread count? Isn’t that what those rich fuckers use their money on? Expensive sheets with a certain thread count.” He was being unnecessarily crass, he knew that. But he also knew that Avery needed it. He glanced at him quickly, but he found nothing but want and recognition in his eyes.

“Yes,” Avery mumbled. “It is. Six hundred, I guess.” His voice sounded distant, muffled. “Yeah, six hundred.”

“Six hundred, huh? This it?” Ethan asked as they reached the end of the hallway and stood in front of a double door.

Avery nodded and Ethan reached for the door handle, turning it slightly. The door opened to a massive master bedroom, all white, a gigantic bed placed in the middle of the room.

“This it?” Ethan nodded at the bed, throw pillows in numerous varieties of white covering half of the comforter.

“Yes,” Avery whispered.

“So, why are we here, Avery?”

“Because you’re gonna fuck me.”

“Where?” Ethan raised his left brow questioningly.

“In my parents’ bed,” Avery swallowed audibly.

“On?”

“On my father’s six hundred thread count sheets.”

“That’s right. What else? What else do you need, Avery?”

“I…” He trailed off, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Speak up.” Ethan raised his voice an octave, forcing the words out of Avery.

“I need you to make it hurt.”

“Okay. And...?”

“I want you to choke me while you fuck me into the mattress. I *need* you to choke me.”

“Are you gonna scream, Avery? Are you gonna scream for mommy while I fuck your greedy, little hole on daddy’s sheets?”

“Yes, I’m gonna scream, but not for her,” Avery whispered, a stubborn look in his eyes.

“No, you won’t, will you? Because mommy won’t come, will she? She never fucking comes when you cry out for her, does she?” Ethan knew that he was probably reaching a limit here, but at the same time he knew that Avery needed the push.

“Never.”

“Who are you gonna scream for then, Avery? While I get your hole all nice and loose for my cock?” Ethan was starting to strip off Avery’s shirt, his smooth, tan chest raising and falling with anticipation.

“You. I’ll scream for you, Ethan.” The words came out immediately, Avery’s voice unwavering.

“You will?”

“Yes.” The word hung in the air between them, their lips barely meeting.

“And why’s that, Avery?”

Avery seemed to hesitate for just a moment until relief covered his beautiful face.

“Because you’ll always come when I call for you.”

Ethan nodded, wondering if that was true. Would he though? Would he always be there if Avery needed him? Roughly, he pulled down Avery’s jeans along with his cotton briefs in one smooth movement. Avery was rock-hard, his

long, slender cock bouncing off his flat stomach as it sprung from the confinement of his jeans, an intoxicating wave of musk invading the air. Well, for now at least, he could pretend, couldn't he? He could pretend for Avery because he needed him to.

“That's right, baby. I will. Now get your ass on the fucking bed, Avery.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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### Matty – Now

**“SO, BOYS, HOW’S** the house coming along? Sure does look nice after you got those new shutters up.” Mr. O’Neil—or Ray as he preferred to be called—had been stopping by at least once a week to lend a hand since they purchased the house a few months ago.

He and Austin were close—had been ever since Austin’s mom had left Ray hanging with a toddler almost eighteen years ago. Matty had finally asked Austin about it a few weeks before they’d moved in together, and Austin had told him the true story of his mom abandoning him. That he didn’t really remember her and that was the worst part. She was a faceless person. Sure, there were pictures from when he was a baby, but who knew what she looked like today? She could be anyone basically.

*“I can walk next to her in the street or stand behind her in the line at a gas station, and I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t fucking know,”* Austin had murmured against Matty’s shoulder, his voice muffled and vulnerable. Matty had felt his t-shirt getting wet where Austin had his face buried. Matty didn’t know what was worse—that you had a mother who didn’t want you or that you had one who didn’t fight for you. In the end, it didn’t really matter, he guessed. The outcome was the same. They’d both been motherless for most of their lives and that had changed them both. But perhaps it had also brought them together. Perhaps Matty had recognized himself in Austin and that had drawn him to him. The same kind of yearning for a togetherness and a family that made them just right for each other. In any case, something had shifted between them since Austin had told him about his mom. Like a weight being lifted from Austin’s shoulders. He would even joke about it from time to time—that he and Matty both held a membership to the “shitty-parent-club.” Matty would scold



him then, saying they were lucky that at least some grown-ups in their lives had stepped up when others had failed so miserably.

“It’s good, Dad. It’s a nice place. Matty’s been doing a real good job with the backyard. Put in a firepit and all. Looks real good.” Austin, who was apparently still a growing boy, had finished off half of his plate before the rest of them had even started. Nodding at Will and Millie who sat across from him and Matty, he continued. “You need to come by and see it soon. It’s real pretty with flower beds and all. Lavenders, Millie.” He winked at Matty before taking a sip of his beer.

Matty couldn’t help blushing at the appraisal and his voice came out throaty.

“It’s just a few sunflowers and some bushes for the insects. No big deal.” No matter how many times people would praise him or tell him *good job* it still came as a surprise every goddamn time. Matty wondered how long it would take before he got used to it.

“I can’t wait to see it. I’m sure it’s wonderful, honey.” Millie clasped her hands together and beamed at Matty as if he’d laid out an entire eighteenth-century English garden in their backyard. She always did that. Looked at him as if he’d hung the fucking moon. He’d always wondered why Will and Millie didn’t have any children of their own, but he’d never wanted to approach the topic. Maybe they couldn’t have any? He doubted that it was for lack of trying because with all the love Millie piled on him daily, it seemed logical that she would’ve wanted some of her own.

“It’s fucking awesome, that’s what it is,” Austin grinned and ruffled Matty’s hair which he’d fruitlessly tried to tame before they’d left the house.

“Austin!” Ray’s deep baritone boomed from his spot at the end of the oak dining table.

“Sorry, sir.” Looking regretfully at Millie and Will, he added solemnly. “Sorry, ma’am. Sir.”

“Nah, I’ve heard worse, young man. Did I ever tell you about that time when I was working up in Alaska when I was around your age? I don’t think I ever did...”

“And you certainly don’t have to,” Millie interrupted, a stern, unmistakable frown between her brows. Will smirked at the boys while he pretended to be afraid of his wife.

“Please don’t hit me, you evil woman. You always hit me,” he grinned, holding his arms up in front of his face in a protective gesture. Matty and Austin burst into laughter at the ridiculous notion that the tiny woman would be able to beat up the giant of a man sitting next to her. Matty had never thought that there’d come a time in his life where he’d be able to joke about an ass whooping or laugh about it over dinner. He felt Austin’s firm hand on his thigh and a quick glance in his direction.

*You okay, sweetheart?* He mouthed and Matty felt warmth spreading through his chest. *This is what family looks and feels like*, he thought to himself as he nodded before picking up his fork.

“Actually, there’s something we wanted to talk to you about.” Will spoke softly while he wiped contemplatively at his thick beard, serious, gray eyes fixed on Matty.

“Yeah?” Matty looked at Will, then at Millie, a worried look in his eyes. “What’s up, Will?”

“Well, you see, in a few years I’ll be sixty and I ain’t getting any younger. You know, last week when we were in Biddeford, we went by a lawyer’s office. You know, getting our papers in order and everything...”

Matty looked at Austin, who looked just as puzzled.

“What are you saying, Will? I don’t understand. Are you sick?” A ringing sound had started in his ears, and Matty suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

“No, no, son, it’s nothing like that.” The older man scratched at the back of his neck, looking helplessly at his wife who shook her head at her husband.

“You’re telling it all wrong,” she scolded before directing her attention at Matty. “What Will’s trying to say, hon, is that you’re like a son to us, Matty.” Millie’s voice was steadfast as she continued but the moist veil coating her eyes gave her away. “These past three years with you in our lives, as part of our family... We’ve never been happier.” She looked briefly at her husband who, too, was tearing up. Then she nodded, mostly to herself. “Will and I were never able to have any children of our own, Matty. It just wasn’t in the cards. That’s just how it goes sometimes. Some people pray for a child all their lives without getting one—others fail to appreciate the gift which the good Lord has bestowed upon them.” Reaching for her husband’s hand, she shrugged her delicate shoulders. “Will and I have had a full and happy life together. No question about that. But you were the missing puzzle piece all along, hon.”

Squeezing his wife’s hand Will took a big gulp of his drink before picking up where his wife had left off.

“So... that’s why we went to Biddeford, you see. We want to make sure that you’ll never lack for anything ever again and...” Raising a finger at Austin who was about to interrupt, Will continued “...and that doesn’t mean that you youngsters can’t provide for yourselves. You’re doing just fine. In fact, you’re doing great. It just means that in case you need it, you’ve got it. I mean...”

Matty looked confused at the older couple who’d taken him in to their home and later their hearts three years ago. Or maybe it was the other way around. Then his eyes searched Austin’s who in return looked at his dad.

“What he means,” Millie took over “is that we’re leaving everything to you, hon. You and Austin. It’s been settled and we don’t ever have to talk about it again. But now you know.” Millie rose from her seat and went to the other side of the table, wrapping her thin, yet strong arms around a stunned Matty.

Still not quite understanding what had just happened, he breathed in the lavender scent of her soft cotton dress, waiting for his heart to quiet down in his chest. Millie continued to

press soft kisses to the top of his head, while she sniffed and mumbled endearments affectionately.

Ray stood from his chair and moved towards the liquor cabinet in the corner of the dining room.

“We need something stronger, I think,” he mumbled to no one in particular. Will nodded in agreement, brushing at his eyes. A sigh of relief escaped Matty’s lips as he tangled the fingers of his right hand through Austin’s. Squeezing back, Austin cleared his throat.

“So, since no one’s dying anytime soon, could someone pass me the potatoes?” He winked at Matty, squeezing his hand. “I’m pretty much starving here.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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### Avery – Now

**“ARE YOU CRYING, Avery? Are you messing up daddy’s sheets with your disgusting snot and pathetic tears?”**

It was a strange type of calm that always settled deep inside him, reaching all the way into his bones like a tranquilizer, when Ethan fucked him. Everything except for the softness beneath him, the hardness inside him and the iron hold around his throat had ceased to exist. The entire world had gone silent except for his own moans and Ethan’s grunts and delicious words. His mind had gone blank the moment Ethan had pinned him to the mattress and started slamming his thick cock into him unapologetically. All thoughts were chased away and replaced by the stinging sensation of Ethan splitting him in half, his strong hand holding him in a fierce grip by the neck.

The fact that he had found his sexual match in a nineteen-year-old guy from West Texas was unfathomable—and terrifying. Because the more time they spent together, the more evident it became to Avery that Ethan wasn’t just his match sexually. They were good together in every way that mattered. Intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. He’d always had difficulty connecting with others and the fact that it happened to be someone nine years younger who finally managed to break through his carefully constructed shell, amazed Avery. Then again, Ethan wasn’t your average nineteen-year-old.

“Look at you,” Ethan spat out, an edge of admiration to his deep voice. “Look at your needy little hole sucking me right in. You don’t have any shame at all, do ya?”

Another moan escaped Avery’s lips. He fucking loved when Ethan praised him—even if the appraisal was wrapped in layers of demeaning words. If Ethan just continued to talk

to him in that affectionate tone, he could call Avery *slut*, *bitch*, and *cum dump* any day of the week. Being stuffed to the brim by Ethan's fat, punishing cock was the best fucking feeling in the world. How was it that the first person ever to recognize what he needed was this enigmatic farm boy from small-town USA? How was it that there always seemed to be this unspoken intuitive agreement between them that *this* was what they needed—craved—from each other. It made no sense but still it made more sense to Avery than anything had in a long time.

Fuck all the expectations and the academic bullshit of his world. Fuck his parents and their pseudo-intellectual friends. Fuck his mother and her extramarital activities with an endless row of nameless students and her husband's colleagues. Fuck his father and his cowardly retreat from the world. There was nothing left except for this ball of need deep inside him, when Ethan fucked him ruthlessly into the soft Indian cotton sheets.

In one smooth movement he was flipped on to his back and Ethan's sweaty face appeared in front of him. Cheeks flushed, freckles bursting through drops of sweat, he was nothing short of spectacular. A work of art. Grinning wickedly down at Avery, he licked at his bottom lip suggestively, a lock of damp hair spilling into his sea-green eyes.

“What's it gonna be, baby? You wanna choke on my dick or is that slutty hole of yours still hungry?” He winked cheekily at Avery, his age clearly showing through his boyish features. His muscular arms resting on each side of Avery's damp hair spilling on to a cream-colored pillow. Avery swallowed and felt a delicious burn at the back of his throat. Then he tentatively clenched his hole and winced. Yeah, he'd been wrecked pretty good.

“So, what's it gonna be, my sweet, sweet Avery?” Ethan smirked, before he leaned down and bit at Avery's left nipple, the sting spreading like a fire across his heaving chest.

“My mouth,” Avery forced out, his words fading into a needy moan. “I want you to fuck my mouth. Please.”

“Your mouth, huh? You think you’re up for it? You think you can take me?” He nodded at Avery’s mouth. “Open up. Show me. Show me that hungry throat of yours. If it deserves to choke on my cock and drown in my cum.”

Avery slowly parted his lips and stuck out his tongue, his hips lifting from the mattress of their own accord, seeking friction. His neglected cock was painfully hard, but he was nowhere near reaching his limit. He could go on for hours if Ethan needed him to. If there was anything Avery knew by heart, it was how to control himself. To delay the pleasure. Everything felt so much better if you earned it.

Slowly, Ethan moved along Avery’s slick body until his hips were right above Avery’s face, his thick thighs straddling him. He slapped his cock against Avery’s chin and cheek a few times, precum spilling on to his flushed, oversensitive skin. Sticking out his tongue, Avery caught a few stray drops and licked his lips hungrily.

“You remember?” Ethan asked, while he stroked himself lazily, the smell of sweat and male musk hanging heavily in the air between them. Avery scrunched his nose in question, his mind momentarily blank, before it dawned on him what Ethan meant.

“Tap your thigh if I want you to stop.” His blue stare didn’t leave Ethan’s and he couldn’t resist rolling his eyes.

In one swift movement, Ethan’s right hand had him by the throat in an uncompromisingly firm grip. His green eyes gleamed predatorily.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, baby. I’m not gonna allow you to choke on my cock unless you respect the ground rules.” Raising one eyebrow at Avery, he squeezed even tighter, making it hard for Avery to swallow. “Do you? Do you know the rules, Avery? Are you gonna follow them?”

He nodded eagerly and a softness appeared in Ethan’s eyes. Briefly they were just Ethan and Avery again, until the wicked gleam reappeared.

“Good. Now open wide. Show me that pink tongue of yours. Show me how good you are at taking my cock.”

Avery once again parted his lips and opened wide, sticking out his tongue while Ethan began feeding him his thick hardness. As soon as the fat head hit the back of his throat, the calm returned, like a deep, cool ocean wave pulling him under. Breathing through his nostrils, Avery let go. His body wasn't his anymore. It now belonged to Ethan. Only Ethan. Tears started spilling from his eyes in a steady stream to the repetitive rhythm of Ethan's hips moving back and forth above him. Every time the cockhead hit the back of Avery's throat, he dove even further into the deep blue of the ocean. The stillness surrounded him and as if through a layer of cotton, he recognized Ethan's deep voice.

“Fuck, baby. If only you could see yourself now.” Sweat dripped from Ethan's chest onto his face with each thrust of his hips. “You look so fucking beautiful, Avery, stuffed full of my cock.” Ethan's praise elicited a deep grunt from him. “One day, I'm gonna film you so you can see yourself through my eyes. So fucking stunning, baby, your lips stretched wide around my cock. Taking all of me, my sweet, little Avery.”

Avery's lids fluttered closed, and he feasted on the words spilling non-stop from his young lover's mouth. *Beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful.* In that moment, lying beneath Ethan, choking on his cock, tears trailing into his hair, he felt beautiful. A mixture of saliva and precum smeared across his chin and halfway down his neck, the evidence of his and Ethan's combined arousal. All layers were peeled away, and it was only his true self which remained. Naked and exposed. In unguarded submission. Yet, more at peace than ever. It was in this complete surrender to his lover that Avery felt freer than ever. And that fucking scared him because in a week, Ethan would be gone. And so would this feeling he'd been chasing all his life.



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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### Matty – Now

“**SOME DEPUTY FROM** Texas’s been asking around about some Matthew Craig person. Wilson, I think his name was. You know this fella, Matty? Your names Carter, ain’t it?” Mr. Olsson looked at him questioningly and Matty swallowed before nodding.

“What did he want?” Matty had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly what the deputy wanted. Well, it’d been good while it lasted, hadn’t it? When he first came to Grant’s Harbor, Matty hadn’t expected that he’d be able to run from his past so easily, let alone stay hidden in this little far-off corner of the world. He’d been able to make a full life for himself for three years—with the help of Will and Millie. And now Austin.

*Shit!* The thought of leaving Austin was one thing but having to tell him the truth—that was something else entirely. Because the truth was devastating and would threaten the life they’d built together. The life they were still building.

“He didn’t say. Just that he had some urgent family matter to inform you... sorry, this Matthew Craig about. I told him, I don’t know anyone by that name around here. I think he went down to the docks to ask around. He seemed to be adamant about this Craig person being in Grant’s Harbor.” Mr. Olsson trailed off as he took in Matty’s pale complexion and panicked eyes. “Son, what’s going on? You look like you’ve seen the ghost of a ghost.” Mr. Olsson reached out his right hand and squeezed Matty’s shoulder in quiet reassurance. He’d always liked Mr. Olsson. Matty would miss him when he left.

“Yeah, better face the music,” Matty murmured to no one in particular, while he smiled weakly at the old bait shop owner. “Thanks Mr. Olsson,” he continued as he held up the bag of dried fish treats for Cassie.

They hadn't been part of the stock that Mr. Olsson carried at the shop but after he and Austin had gotten Cassie, he'd started selling a small selection of dog treats. *Cassie*. Well, at the very least he wouldn't leave Austin all to himself. At least he had Ray and Cassie.

"No worries, son," the older man smiled as he released Matty from his comforting hold. "You say hi to that young man of yours."

"Sure will, sir. Thanks again."

Matty had always wondered what it felt like when the prisoner on death row took that short, final walk towards the execution chamber. He'd never witnessed one in real life of course, but in the movies there was always some sad, melodramatic soundtrack playing in the background while the usually innocent victim of a conspiracy walked with slow, heavy steps toward his final destination. There was no sad, drawn-out violin playing in the background as Matty went down to the docks to meet his fate. There was only the cry of the seagulls and the all-consuming pounding in his chest.

Halfway he stopped at a corner and emptied his stomach contents behind a dumpster. Next to his boots lay the breakfast that Austin had made for him this morning. The very same breakfast that his man made for him every morning. If Matty had known a few hours ago that this would probably be the last time that Austin served him his first meal of the day, he would've thanked him properly instead of a hurried "*thanks, babe*" as he inhaled the egg and bacon sandwich in no more than thirty seconds. *That's life*, Matty couldn't help thinking as he inspected the tip of his boots for vomit. *Just when you think that it couldn't get any better, it all turns to shit. Fuck!* Of course, he could run right now. Get the fuck outta here. Only, he couldn't, could he? As easy as it had been to leave Eden, the thought of leaving right now, without a word, tore him apart.

He'd always known that the day would come when his past would catch up with him. He wasn't as naïve to believe that a mere change of his last name would keep him hidden away forever. But he'd hoped that it would be later—maybe

when he'd had a decade or two with Austin. That was the thing that gutted him above everything else. Not the idea of spending time in prison or having to go back to Eden. No, it was the thought of leaving Austin and never seeing him again. And Millie. And Will. At least he'd get to see Ethan again. After three years Matty hoped that his best friend would still wanna know him. Ethan would always wanna know him. That, he felt with an unwavering certainty in his heart.

He recognized Deputy Wilson right away as he stood next to Austin, who was getting *Stella* ready. The tall, burly figure with the tan uniform always appearing just a size too small. Deputy Wilson hadn't gotten any smaller since Matty last saw him. The rough fabric of his pants seemed to be bursting at the seams, stretching beyond expectation across his solid thighs. He couldn't make out the words, but he saw Austin shake his head while he shifted nervously on his feet. From afar Matty hollered at the officer.

"Deputy Wilson! Long time no see..." Matty held out his hand towards the deputy, faking a smile. His eyes caught Austin's steel-gray gaze and Matty shrugged in defeat. *Shit!* He loved this man so fucking much. How many years did you usually get for assault? First time offense? Would his mom testify against him, or would she tell the court that it was self-defense? He didn't know... How fucking sad was it that he didn't know if his own mother was gonna have his back or not.

"Matty," Deputy Wilson reached out and shook his hand, squinting in the morning sun as he took him in. "Look at you, son, all grown-up now."

"Yeah, I guess..." Matty swallowed back the bile which once again rose at the back of his throat. He felt like screaming, running, crying. This was it, wasn't it? Only it couldn't be. Because he wasn't done with this life yet. He wasn't done with this feeling of unrestricted freedom whenever he set foot on *Stella*, Austin by his side, the ruthless wind hitting his face and the smell of the salty ocean entering his nostrils. He wasn't done with Sunday lunches in Millie's kitchen, Will inhaling the Sunday paper, mumbling in front of

him or tuna casserole dinners at Mr. O'Neil's house followed by a loud game of cards.

There were endless lists of things to do around the house and endless lists of things he wanted to do. But most of all Matty wasn't done with the feeling of waking up in his own bed with a sleep-warm Austin murmuring *Matty, my beautiful Matty* into his chest. He was never gonna be fucking done with that.

"Good to see ya, son," the deputy cleared his throat, his eyes strangely clear and bright. "We've been looking for ya..."

"Yeah, I kinda figured you'd be showing up at some point..."

Austin grabbed his hand and tangled his fingers through Matty's, squeezing them gently, while Wilson eyed them curiously, a puzzled frown between his brows.

"What's going on, Officer?" His boyfriend's deep voice settled around him like a protective shield. Only it couldn't protect Matty from this next chapter of his life.

"Matty, son. Your mother's in the hospital," Wilson continued, a solemn look on his chubby face.

That was nothing out of the ordinary. The next part, however, surprised the fuck out of him.

"And your father's in jail."

A ringing sound started in his ears, and he had to dissect the words individually to comprehend what the deputy had just told him. *Your. Father's. In. Jail.* Well, damn.

"They haven't charged him yet, but I'm expecting it to be serious. Aggravated assault at the very least. Attempted murder is not unlikely, though."

"Attempted murder?" Austin blurted, looking at Wilson, a stunned look on his face. "What the hell happened?" He drew Matty against him protectively and pressed a kiss against his clammy temple.

"Matty, your father nearly strangled your mother to death. She's gonna be okay but the hospital alerted the authorities

and they're pressing charges. He ain't getting away with it this time." The deputy shuffled his feet as he adjusted his well-worn hat.

"Yeah?" Matty whispered, a bitter-sweet feeling settling in his abdomen. "What's so different about this time?"

"Listen, son... I know..." Wilson interrupted, looking to the ground.

"You know?" Matty gritted out, blue eyes blazing. "Oh, now you suddenly know, do ya? What's so different about this time that you suddenly decided to grow a pair of fucking balls, huh Wilson?"

"Matty..." Austin whispered against his hair, but Matty continued like an open faucet, words spilling from his lips in anger, hurt and pent-up fear.

"Is it because my mom nearly died this time? Is it? Should I have been closer to dying at the age of twelve when that motherfucker threw me down the basement stairs, huh? Was I not beaten bad enough for ya with that fucking belt at the age of fourteen when I couldn't sit down for a week? Wasn't my arm broken enough six months later when he slammed it in the kitchen door? Wasn't it?! You fucking answer me, Wilson, because I don't get it!" Matty was screaming at this point because it didn't make sense. In this moment nothing made sense because he was still waiting for Deputy Wilson to handcuff him and lead him away.

As if coming from miles away, he registered Austin's familiar voice like a beacon, steadying him right when his legs started to give way beneath him.

"Shhh, sweetheart. I've got you. I've got you. It's gonna be okay now. Everything's gonna be okay."

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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### Ethan – Now

**“FEELING BETTER?”** ETHAN brushed his lips against Avery’s sweaty temple which was still damp and salty from his tears.

“Hmm hmm,” Avery mumbled as he buried himself deeper against Ethan’s armpit, inhaling slowly. “Much better. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, baby. It was my pleasure entirely,” Ethan grinned knowingly as he brushed a dirty-blond strand away from Avery’s forehead. “You sore?”

Avery shifted next to him and shook his head. “No, not sore. Just deliciously debauched.” He reached for Ethan’s hand and pulled it towards his plump ass, wiggling it suggestively against Ethan’s fingers. “But I do feel terribly empty, Eth.”

“Yeah?” Ethan smirked, enjoying where this was going. “Didn’t I fuck you good enough?” he asked as his fingers dove between Avery’s still slick ass cheeks and carefully brushed them across his crease.

A whimper spilled from Avery’s lips as he pushed his ass against Ethan’s fingers. “It’ll never be enough. You know that. You could impale me on that delicious dick of yours 24/7 and it still wouldn’t be close to enough.”

*Fuck.* This man. This sweet, sexy enigma of a man. The way Avery bared himself to him so easily, so willingly. It humbled Ethan and at the same time it fucking scared him to death. Because he was starting to want that too. He needed it. Like he needed the air in his lungs and the food in his belly. Ethan too, wanted to be connected to Avery 24/7. And not just physically because if Ethan was being honest with himself, the bond he shared with Avery had long ceased being a merely sexual one. Or one of companionship on the road. He was falling for Avery, and he knew that he shouldn’t. Because he

had responsibilities. Like finding Matty. And making sure that he was okay. And returning home. And starting his life, working at the Peterson farm, helping his family out like he'd done most of his life. So, falling for Avery was as inconvenient as it got. But still a fact, nonetheless. So yeah, fuck.

Avery bit at his nipple and he was pulled back to the present and the softness of Avery's skin and the warmth seeping from his body into Ethan's.

"Eth?" Avery's voice came out questioningly, an edge of worry to it. "What is it?"

"It's nothing. Just spacing out for a sec."

Avery buried his nose in Ethan's armpit and inhaled slowly.

"Are you sniffing me?" Ethan grinned, Avery's warm breath tickling his sensitive skin.

Avery chuckled, while he licked at the hairy armpit. "Maybe."

Ethan slapped Avery's left butt cheek and a hiss left his mouth.

"You're a little animal, you know that? You're like this needy little spider monkey, clinging to me."

"Oh, I know," Avery sighed. "But if you gave me what I needed, I wouldn't have to be so fucking *clingy* as you call it."

"Oh yeah?" Ethan laughed. He loved this version of Avery. The desperate edge to his voice. The unrest in his body. "What is it that you need from me that I ain't already giving you, huh?"

Avery sighed even more deeply as if he was giving up on Ethan. Oh, Ethan knew exactly what Avery was referring to, but he enjoyed this squirming, bratty version of his lover almost as much as he loved the submissive Avery. Or the flamboyant Avery. Or the...

"I need your fucking fingers in my hole, that's what I need, Ethan. But you already know that. You know I can't fall asleep

all empty and...”

Ethan could hear the accusatory edge to Avery’s voice. The hint of desperation.

“Well, why didn’t you just say so, baby? You know I want nothing more than to be your living, breathing plug for the night.” He grinned into Avery’s damp hairline while his fingers brushed against his entrance before he slipped two fingers inside his deliciously well-used hole.

“I did say so,” Avery sighed in relief, and Ethan could tell by the sound of his voice that he was already starting to drift off.

“Yeah, you did, baby. You did.” Ethan swallowed and felt tears pressing behind his closed lids. How the fuck was he ever going to let go of this beautiful man? How in his right mind would he ever be able to walk away from this? Because he needed Avery just as much as the other way around. Just because he wasn’t as verbal about it as Avery, didn’t mean that he needed him any less.

Avery shifted next to him, a cute snore leaving his mouth. *Yeah, well at least they had this week left together in Boston. He was gonna soak everything up, every little moment and every smile. Every kiss and every stolen touch. And then, he was gonna tuck it away somewhere safe deep inside. Some place hidden from the world. A place only he could reach whenever he needed it. It was no way near enough. It was never gonna be enough. But it had to be. It just had to.*



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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### Austin – Now

“**WHAT CAN I** get you, Officer? Coffee? Iced tea? A beer?” Millie looked at the deputy and started busying herself at the kitchen counter.

“Coffee is fine, thank you, ma’am,” Wilson replied as he took off his hat and placed it on the empty chair next to him.

As soon as Austin had managed to calm Matty down a bit, he’d called Will and his dad and asked if they could all meet up at the Hart’s. Will had been at the docks within ten minutes, insisting he’d pick them up in his old truck, and the deputy had followed them in his metallic Chevy Tahoe. Even before they’d all sat down in the small kitchen, which was now feeling cramped, Ray had barged through the door and looked alarmed at his son. As soon as Ray had seen Matty literally clinging to Austin, he’d asked Will if he had anything stronger than coffee. Ray had grown quite attached to Matty, even more so after Matty and his only child had bought a house together four months ago. Austin had told his dad that Matty didn’t have the best childhood nor an easy time growing up in West Texas, but Ray had never asked for any specific details. He’d just nodded in silent agreement and told Austin that the boys could tell him when they were good and ready.

The kitchen was silent aside from Millie getting a drink for everyone and the occasional sob or hiccup from Matty followed by a reassuring *shhh* from Austin. To the outside, it might have looked strange, a full-grown man sitting in the lap of another man, his head buried against his broad chest while wrapped in a steel embrace. But to Austin, it felt like the only place where he could keep Matty safe. If they were fused together, his own heart beating against Matty’s, steadying him. Calming him.

That was why Austin had asked Matty to move in with him in the first place. Well, at least one of the many reasons. He wanted to take care of Matty and make sure that he was safe. That he would always be safe. To some, they might seem too young to settle down, but hell, some people still married straight outta high school back in Texas and some in Maine too, so to Austin it hadn't felt strange at all when the idea started building in his head. No, not strange at all. It had been as if all the pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. The final, missing piece. The one that had been missing ever since he was three years old. Because now Austin finally had someone who belonged to him. Someone who would always belong to him. Someone who wouldn't leave. And not just anyone. He belonged to Matty and that was the best thing ever. They might not be married yet, but Austin hoped that that was the way they were headed eventually.

"Is he okay?" Ray sat down in the chair facing his son and placed his right hand on Austin's shoulder.

Austin nodded even though he wasn't entirely sure himself that Matty was okay. It didn't appear that the deputy from Eden was here to take Matty away from him—not that Austin would've let him—but there were still so many unanswered questions. What was the state of Matty's mother? Would he want to go back to Texas now that his father was likely to face a long prison sentence? Would he want to go back for good? The idea of Matty leaving Grant's Harbor and the life they'd built together made Austin sick to his stomach. It made him want to take Matty right now and run away with him.

It was Will who ended up breaking the sickening silence in the small kitchen.

"So, Officer. Why are you here? You could've just alerted the local law enforcement. No need to drive all the way from West Texas to Maine." Austin hadn't seen Will's face so serious since the entire crew of the *Mathilda* had perished at sea during the January storm in 2018. With a deep frown lining his forehead, his piercing eyes didn't leave the deputy for one second.

“I thought that maybe it’d be better for Matty if it was a friendly face from back home delivering the news.” Wilson shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable at the heavy hostility in the air.

Matty winced, probably at the word *home*, and Austin automatically gathered him even tighter in his arms. Eden wasn’t Matty’s home. It had been a fucking hellhole from what Matty had told him. It had been a place of abuse and demeaning behavior. Sure, it was also the place where Ethan lived and even though Matty hadn’t seen Ethan in more than three years, Austin knew that Matty missed his best friend more than anything. That he still held on to the hope that one day Ethan would come find him in Maine. But aside from that, there was nothing left for Matty in Eden except for a shitload of bad memories and fading scars.

“I thought maybe I’d killed him.” Matty’s voice sounded frail as it was absorbed by the soft cushion of Austin’s chest. Slowly he sat up, repeating the words. “I thought I’d killed him.”

Austin took in his boyfriend, confusion coursing through him. However, Wilson seemed to know exactly what Matty was referring to.

“Nah, he left the hospital two days later. Didn’t say a word about what’d happened... Just told me to stop looking for ya...” Wilson scratched at the back of his neck, the stiff collar of his uniform neatly buttoned. His brown hair was graying at the temples, skin around his equally brown eyes crinkled from decades under the unforgiving Texas sun. He sat there glancing at the floor, his Stetson clasped between his rough fingers, looking full of regret. Sorry, almost.

“How did you find me, Wilson? I mean, I don’t go by the name Craig here...” *Craig*. Not Carter. It was the first time that Austin heard the name Craig and his stomach clenched briefly at all the things he still didn’t know about Matty. Things he might never know.

Clearing his throat, Wilson looked at Matty, shrugging his shoulders.

“It wasn’t that hard. I’m a policeman, you know?”

Matty frowned, his face one huge question mark. Austin had a feeling that the deputy was holding something back. He couldn’t have found Matty that quickly no matter how good of a cop he was. It just wasn’t possible unless you were in an episode of *CSI*.

“Then how come my father didn’t find me back then?”

“Because he wasn’t looking...” Wilson mumbled, his eyes avoiding Matty’s gaze.

“What do you mean?” Matty whispered, his voice suspicious.

“We’d started running an APB while your father was in the hospital but as soon as he was discharged, he called the whole thing off.”

“He called the search off? Why?” Matty looked like he also thought that there was more to the story.

Wilson brushed at his forehead, looking around the small kitchen at the group of strangers staring back at him.

“He... He said that there was no reason to go look for ya.”

“Okay... But... I was only fifteen back then...”

“Yeah... Look, son, I don’t know why he called it off. He never said so. He never spoke one word of it again. Acted as if it’d never happened.”

“Yeah. You mean he never spoke of me again, right?” Matty shrank in Austin’s lap, his voice frail. Hurt.

“Matty...”

“Like *I* never happened?”

“I’m sorry, kid.” Wilson looked uncomfortable, shifting in his seat, spinning his Stetson relentlessly in his hands.

Matty shrugged, a solitary tear trailing down his left cheek.

“It doesn’t matter. So, how did you find me now?” he continued.

The deputy sighed deeply, his broad chest stretching the rough material of his shirt to the maximum.

“The postcard. Mrs. Bishop told me about it.”

Matty nodded, smiling weakly.

“Yeah, I guess Ethan would have told his folks. They were always close like that... Yeah... they were always good people, the Bishops,” Matty whispered.

“Look, son. I know that what happened at your house wasn’t okay. Well, it was wrong in so many ways. And I fucked up, okay? I’ll be the first one to admit that. We all fucked up back then, some more than others. Hell, if we’d all just stepped up, we could’ve perhaps put a stop to it.” Wilson’s voice was full of regret and his hands shook.

“Yeah, well...” Matty shrugged. “It doesn’t really change anything, does it?”

“I guess not, son. But I still want you to know that I’ll never forgive myself for not putting a stop to it or to at least have tried. That’s why I came here to tell you the news myself. I wanted to apologize to you face to face for all the ways we failed you.”

The kitchen grew eerily quiet after that. As if there was nothing left to say. Austin kissed Matty’s hair softly, a silent reassurance that he was not letting anyone take him away. As if it hadn’t entirely settled in Austin yet that Wilson hadn’t come to drag his boyfriend away. Suddenly, he felt a presence next to them and Millie clasped Matty’s hands in hers.

“Matty, hon, why didn’t you tell us? All this time, you carried this around all by yourself.” The older woman’s voice showed no sign of accusation, only concern and regret.

“I... I just didn’t want you to get into trouble... You know, having to lie for me if someone came looking for me.”

“Aww, honey, you know we don’t care about that. We only care about *you*. That you’re happy. Safe.”

Matty nodded as Wilson stood from his chair, a look of uncertainty in his eyes.

“Well, I best be going now. If you want to, I can give you an update about your mother, Matty, when I’m back home.”

“Yeah, sure, that’d be nice. Thanks.” Matty hesitated briefly. “Will I have to go back for the trial?”

“Maybe. That will be up to the district attorney. But it won’t be anytime soon.” Wilson nodded as he headed for the door. Once reaching it, he turned around, his eyes finding Matty’s across the small room. “In any case, it’s safe for you to come home now, son.”

*Home.* The word triggered an unprecedented feeling of protectiveness in Austin. And perhaps a little possessiveness as well if he was being completely honest with himself. Staring daggers at the well-meaning deputy who had come across the country to deliver this unpopular news, Austin cleared his throat as he pulled Matty impossibly close against him.

“Matty’s already home, Officer. That place was never his home.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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### Ethan – Now

**“AND THIS,”** AVERY pointed at the entrance to a large gallery, “is my hood.” He beamed at Ethan, exhilaration painted across his vibrant face.

It was contagious—this overwhelming passion in Avery’s delicate features—and Ethan couldn’t help grin stupidly. *Art of the Americas*, a sign said next to the entrance. They were at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and it was the first time that Ethan had ever been to an art museum. He’d been with his parents to several Civil War museums over the years—Dan Bishop was very interested in Civil War history even though he’d never been in the service or owned a gun in his life—so it wasn’t unusual that he dragged his wife and sons along with him on a family outing. The last one they’d been to, was the Texas Civil War Museum in Fort Worth. Ethan’s twin brothers had nearly been thrown out because they’d tried to reenact their own version of a battle or some shit like that using props from an exhibition. But an art museum... Nah...

“C’mon,” Avery held out his hand and nodded at the gallery. “Prepare to be entirely amazed and blown away by the awesomeness of Native art,” he smiled, cheeks flushed.

Looking around briefly at the busy museum, Ethan wondered if people would care that they were holding hands in public. But then again, this was the city and Avery didn’t seem to think anything of this intimate gesture. He couldn’t imagine how holding another guy’s hand in public in Eden would go down—he sure as shit had never seen two guys hold hands or show any kind of affection. Reluctantly, he reached out his hand and linked his fingers with Avery’s. It felt right. *Shit*, it felt so fucking right, didn’t it?

• • •

“So, where are we going now?” They’d been at the museum for a couple of hours, Avery being his tour guide, showing him the modern section first. Ethan had a hard time distinguishing the different displays and exhibitions from each other. Everything looked pretty much the same to him and time and time again, he found himself staring at Avery instead of the artwork. Avery’s lean shoulders and his slim waist. His slender, jean clad thighs and the sexy curve of his elbow. *Shit*. How was it that an elbow was suddenly sexy?

“*The Ancient Americas*,” Avery’s deep voice wrapped around him and from the way his eyes beamed, Avery might as well have said *The Gate to Paradise*. “I want to show you my favorite place in Boston.” His face had suddenly taken on a solemn look, a wistful tint to his blue eyes.

“I thought this was your favorite place,” Ethan frowned, scratching his neck where a single, persistent mosquito bite remained.

Avery chuckled looking at Ethan like one would look at a small child. Not overbearing but with all the patience in the world.

“Okay, so my favorite part of my favorite place,” he smiled, brushing his lips briefly against Ethan’s chin. A waft of citrus lingered in the space between them after Avery pulled back.

Avery seemed to know this part of the gallery like the inside of his own pocket. Ethan trailed along as they passed one impressive painting after another and an endless row of glass cabinets with ancient pottery, jewelry, and crafts. Ethan felt light-headed and if it wasn’t for Avery’s firm hand clasped with his own, he would’ve lost his way, time and place fading momentarily. Avery finally stopped in front of another entrance to a section called *Native North American Art Gallery*. Of course. The drawings. Avery’s numerous drawings



were always inspired by the art of the Indigenous tribes of North America.

This part of the gallery was quiet, the lighting dimmed aside from small spotlights above the paintings hanging on the walls or lighting up the glass cabinets displaying artwork. A few visitors were moving around the large room in deep concentration and a sleepy-looking security guard sat in a chair by the exit. Leading him across the room, Avery came to a stop in front of a large, rather impressive painting. The piece was overwhelming, bearing resemblance to an explosion of the brightest of colors, and it was unlike anything Ethan had ever seen before.

Awe was written all over Avery's face as if he was witnessing the second coming of Christ or the Apocalypse.

"What is this?" Ethan whispered, because he somehow had a feeling that when one stood in front of something awe-inspiring, it was a good idea to whisper. Like at his grandma's funeral when he was twelve and he'd stood in front of her open casket, his hand firmly clasped in his mom's. His mom had whispered then and Ethan had wondered why. Because his Grandma Gladys was already dead. But now he got it. Certain occasions in life just called for silence.

"It's called *Guernica to Wounded Knee*. It's my favorite painting." Avery looked at him, a ceremonious look in his eyes. "I remember the very first time that I saw this painting. It was on a high school field trip, and I remember not being able to take my eyes off it." Avery smiled at the memory. "I got away from my class that day—I never even realized that they'd moved on to other parts of the gallery until a security guard asked me if I was lost." Avery had a faraway look in his eyes. "I remember feeling like telling him '*not anymore,*' because in that moment I just knew."

"What?" Ethan murmured, taking in the impressive monstrosity in front of him. He hadn't yet decided if the painting was really awful or the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. Avery swallowed and closed his eyes briefly.

“That everything is connected. That no matter who we are or where we are born, our struggle is always the same. Our fears are the same and so are our hopes and dreams. The core of the human spirit transcends everything... time, place, language, culture... oppression, even.”

“What do you mean?” Ethan wasn’t sure that he followed Avery’s stream of thoughts. To him, the painting was a huge mess of colors, human limbs, screaming animals and just... horror.

“I mean... It doesn’t matter if you were fighting against Franco’s fascist regime in Spain in the 1930s or if you were slaughtered at the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890. Or if your children were taken from you while you were incarcerated. Or if the land that your ancestors had inhabited for thousands of years was taken over by multibillion dollar oil companies. It doesn’t matter. The human struggle is always the same. Birth. Survival. Death. It’s all we ever know for sure. Everything else is just a random collection of moments.” Avery nodded at the painting, lost in his memories. “And in that moment, I got it. I finally got it. Standing in front of Natchez’s testimony of human greed and suffering, I got it.”

Ethan looked at the explosive colors and his gaze narrowed in on a mother and a child, wounded or perhaps even dead.

“What?” Ethan whispered, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. “What did you get?”

“That life is just so random. Where we are born. And to whom. How our life will turn out and how we will leave this world. I know to most people, it seems disheartening that we don’t know anything for sure, but to me this insight felt liberating. An endless row of possibilities. An endless road paved with places, people, experiences...”

“Yeah, I know. I know what you mean,” Ethan replied, momentarily stunned out of his mind, and then overwhelmed by a sense of regret and resignation.

“You do?” Avery’s face glowed in the dim light, his golden eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Yeah. I mean, it makes sense, right? If nothing is certain, anything is possible... Or at least it should be...”

“Exactly!” Avery whisper-yelled and the security guard looked in their direction before he once again relaxed into his chair. “I remember coming home that day, telling my parents about the painting, and they looked at me like I was fucking crazy. Like I’d lost my mind. I probably had,” Avery shrugged, biting his bottom lip in deep thought.

“No, I get it,” Ethan nodded. “It’s like my map, you know? The one that Matty and I made. All the Xs. They’re these... perfect places. Or at least, that’s what Matty called them. I mean, at a glance they are just random spots on a map, but Matty and I made them ours. Every X is significant. It marks a conscious decision. A dream. A possibility.” Ethan’s voice sounded gruff, and he swallowed. “We were supposed to go to all these places together. That was the idea. It was silly, really... A childish fantasy...”

“It’s not silly, Eth,” Avery shook his head, blond locks flowing around him. “It’s beautiful.”

“You think?”

“Of course. One of those Xs lead you to me,” Avery blushed, eyes downcast.

“Yeah, I guess. In a way, Matty lead me to you,” Ethan murmured, astonished.

“How so?”

“Because it was Matty’s X. The Ouachita National Park. It was his dream.” Briefly, Ethan had to close his eyes, or else he had a feeling that he would cry. It was all too much. All of it. This moment. The painting. The map. Matty... Avery. *Avery.*

“That’s what I mean,” Avery breathed as he once again turned to the massive painting. “That’s what life is truly about, Eth. To move and be moved. To connect with others, transcending time and place. To be blown away and to experience greatness in the simplest of things. To acknowledge our own mortality but that we can escape it momentarily in

those brief moments where we connect with the past and with others.”

It suddenly dawned on Ethan that Matty had known this all along. That this was what Matty had meant all those years ago in the tree house, drawing on the map, coloring in all the perfect places.

“I’ve been chasing it ever since, you know,” Avery continued, a frailty to his voice. “That feeling of overwhelming amazement and insight I felt the first time I saw Natchez’s painting. These... I don’t know... loud places, you know?”

“Loud places?” Ethan repeated, consumed with Avery’s beauty as his face lit up talking about the painting. He saw the teenage version of Avery telling his parents about his experience. He must have been a few years younger than Ethan was now.

“Yes. Loud places,” Avery nodded. “Places that are so spectacularly beautiful that they make so much noise that it wakes up your dormant heart. My heart was fucking kick-started that day, Eth. And every day after that when I’m overwhelmed by the beauty of something. Like the wall paintings. Or the vastness of the desert... Or that day... In the changing room... The entire world was suddenly so loud, screaming at me all at once when I saw you.” Avery swallowed audibly and Ethan felt the hair at the back of his neck rise. A chill ghosted across his naked arms.

“The world was screaming so loudly that it woke up my fucking heart, Eth. You woke it up.” Avery focused back on the painting, eyelids fluttering, while he linked his left pinky with Ethan’s. “It’s been yours ever since...” he whispered.

*Yeah, me too, Avery. Me too,* Ethan thought to himself. Because it was true. He, too, had been sleepwalking through life when Avery had blasted into it like a fucking ray of sunshine. And he knew that when he left for Maine in a few days, he would miss it. The light. He would miss Avery. Because even though Avery had told him that night that he,

Ethan, was the light, he knew better. Because Avery was the fucking light.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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### Matty – Now

“**JESUS, SWEETHEART, WHAT** a day, huh?” As soon as Austin closed the door behind them, Cassie came shooting from the living room like a heat seeking missile. She knew better than to jump at them since she was no longer a puppy, but she still spun around in circles in front of them, unable to contain her excitement.

“Yeah,” Matty shrugged. “Didn’t see that coming, that’s for sure...” He’d had a blasting headache since the conversation with Wilson—thrown into this limbo of disbelief that Wilson wasn’t there to arrest him and the concern for his mom.

“Come here,” Austin drew him against his broad chest, smelling of the ocean and safety. He was safe. Matty tried to wrap his head around the fact that it was over. He could finally breathe without fear of being found. He could close the door behind him which had been ajar ever since he’d left Eden three years ago.

Austin kissed the top of his head. The same simple, yet powerful gesture had become their thing. A mere kiss on the top of Matty’s blond head of hair, while he kissed Austin’s collarbone in return. *No one’s here to take me away.* He let the words settle in his chest, a soothing balm to his heart which had been beating frantically for the past couple of hours. *No one will ever take me away.*

“You tired, sweetheart?” Austin mumbled against his hair. They’d eaten a dinner of random leftovers at Will and Millie’s place after Wilson had left, but Matty hadn’t been hungry. As if the message hadn’t reached his stomach yet that it was okay to relax now.

“Yeah... I guess so...” He released himself from Austin’s embrace and brushed a hand through his hair. “Do you think I should go back?” A glimpse of worry flashed across Austin’s face, his gray eyes darkening slightly, and Matty immediately offered him a weak smile. “I don’t mean go back for good, dork,” he grinned. “I mean, do you think I should go see my mom? See with my own eyes that she’s okay?”

Austin relaxed his shoulders and exhaled, the storm in his eyes settling again.

“I think it would be a good idea. To go see her. I mean, she’s your mom. And he won’t be there...” Austin trailed off, stroking his fingers through Cassie’s soft, red fur. She sat between them, looking from Matty to Austin and then back again, probably listening for words, she would recognize like *dinner, walk, or ball*.

“Yeah, I guess, you’re right. It’s just...”

“What, sweetheart?” Austin smiled softly. “You know, I’ll go with you, right? And you don’t need to have everything figured out now. We can go in a few days or when you’re ready. Hell, we can go tonight, if you want to.” Austin looked around their living room and laughed. “I’m sure Dad can water our plants and we can bring Cassie.”

Matty couldn’t help laughing, too as he looked at their sad excuses for house plants. Millie had brought them when they’d moved in, but neither of them exactly had green thumbs. Funny how it worked. You could wake Matty and Austin up at 3 a.m. and they could gut a fish. But the simple act of watering a plant seemed an unsurmountable task even between the two of them. Then again, they were only young men, and they were in love. There was little room left in their hearts and minds for much more other than the boat, Cassie, and when they could get naked again.

“Do you think we can go next week? I think I still need some time to wrap my head around what’s happened. That I can actually go back now. That my mom can maybe be part of my life again now that my father’s out of the equation.” Matty

glanced at his boyfriend who nodded and worried his lower lip in concern.

“Do you...” Austin looked at the hardwood floor beneath their feet, his sneakers scuffed at the tips. “Do you wanna tell her about us?” he whispered. Matty smiled, leaning his forehead against Austin’s.

“Of course, babe. Of course, I’m gonna tell her about us.” Trailing his fingers down Austin’s solid chest, he winked. “I couldn’t hide how I feel about you, even if I tried.”

“Yeah, me neither... But do you think, she’ll be okay with it?”

“Yeah, I think so. Well, she better be because I don’t think how I feel about you, about us, is gonna go away any time soon.” Matty shrugged. “Do you?” His voice showed just a slight hint of uncertainty.

“Fuck no!” Austin blurted, a confident smile plastered across his handsome face, cheeks flushed pink from the ocean wind and the events of the day.

“*Fuck no!* he says. My man, always the poet,” Matty shook his head in mock surprise. That was the thing about Austin. He never failed to make him smile, to make any worries or concern evaporate like morning dew giving way to the first rays of sunshine. It wasn’t that Austin made all the bad stuff go away—it was simply that he made the good stuff stand out by his mere presence. It was impossible to stay sad or scared when you had someone like Austin in your corner.

“Hey, you know me,” the bastard winked, “fisherman by day, poet and *lover* by night.”

“Jesus, you’re just so full of yourself, aren’t you?” Matty pushed at his shoulder teasingly.

“Yeah, maybe...” Austin tilted his head, contemplating his next move. “What about you, sweetheart? What are you full of?”

Matty laughed, his chest expanding from the mere sight of the smug look on his boyfriend’s face. “Right now? Nothin’. Pretty fucking empty...” He sighed deeply, moving towards



the kitchen island, suggestively running his index finger along the wooden surface.

“Empty, huh?” Austin breathed, his voice coming out strained as he moved towards Matty. “Well, what are we gonna do about that, Matty?”

Matty stretched his hands along the edge of the island, licking the corner of his mouth, a breathy moan escaping him. “Well, we never got around to christening this gorgeous piece of wood...” Skating his hands across the surface, Matty rested his right cheek against the polished oak, wiggling his ass irresistibly.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” Austin cursed, as he came around the island, leaning against it, taking in his boyfriend’s delectable ass, covered by a pair of tight, worn jeans. “You know, I’ll fuck you anytime anywhere when you look at me like that.”

“Promises, promises,” Matty whined, an impatient pout on his full lips.

“Hey, you brat, I always keep my promises,” Austin grinned, as he smacked Matty’s ass playfully. A broken gasp spilled from Matty’s lips as Austin soothed the sting with his palm. Leaning in, he whispered in Matty’s ear. “Get ready for me, sweetheart. I feel like watching you.”

Red hot heat immediately shot through Matty’s body, setting his face on fire. He knew Austin loved to watch him get himself ready for him. He got off on it, watching Matty moan and whimper while he opened himself up to take Austin’s cock. Pushing the bottle of olive oil towards Matty, Austin leaned against the island, crossing his arms in front of his chest patiently.

Standing straight, Matty slowly started unzipping his jeans, a glint of trouble in his lust filled eyes. Pulling down his pants and boxer briefs in one lazy movement, his hard cock sprung free and strained in Austin’s direction. Austin started removing his own t-shirt, the sight of his smooth, tanned chest always pulling a needy sound from Matty’s lips. Reaching for the bottle of oil, Matty poured a large amount onto his fingers and bent over the kitchen island as his hands reached for his ass

cheeks. Leaning his head on the wooden surface, eyes on Austin, he spread himself open with his right hand. The fingers of his left hand coasted teasingly across his hole, and he felt it clench in anticipation beneath his touch as he hummed with need.

“Jesus, Matty, you’re so fucking hot like that.” Austin hurried to remove his pants and black briefs, his large, rough hand immediately clutching his hard length. The thick mushroom head was already glistening with the evidence of his desire and Matty automatically licked his lips, longing to dip the tip of his tongue into the satiny slit and scoop up the taste of Austin. To feel his tangy flavor explode on his palate as he swallowed down Austin’s liquid lust.

“That’s it,” Austin gritted out as he continued to stroke himself languidly, his right hand squeezing his cockhead with each upturned stroke, his other hand pulling at his heavy balls. “Fuck yourself, Matty. Imagine it’s my cock fucking your hole, getting it nice and ready.” Sweat erupted on Austin’s forehead, trailing down his temples, a concentrated frown between his brows. He was fucking stunning like this, words of excited encouragement bursting from his lips while he continued to fuck his own fist.

Scissoring his fingers, Matty groaned into the wooden surface, shuffling his feet impatiently.

“Babe, I need you now. I’m ready.” His neediness filled the air, Austin mesmerized by the sight of Matty’s fingers thrusting in and out of his tight entrance.

“Yeah? You wanna stay like this...?” Austin raised his brows questioningly, while Matty slipped his fingers from his hole, the feeling of emptiness echoing through him.

“Yes. Like this. Exactly like this,” he whispered while he reached his hands across the kitchen island and grabbed on to the edge, arching his back, pushing his tight, pale ass towards Austin. “Now fuck me like you mean it.”

Grinning devilishly, Austin moved behind him and spread his thick fingers around Matty’s slim hips. Digging his thumbs into the skin of Matty’s peach-colored softness, he leaned in

and trailed his tongue against the pale scars on the back of Matty's thighs. As he always did when Austin touched the evidence of his father's abuse, he reminded himself that it was over. It was finally over. With each caress and touch, the scars and burns faded just a tiny bit more. With each kiss and lick, the past disappeared into the background and then there was only Austin and Austin's tongue and hands and breath trailing across his body.

Prodding his thumb against Matty's entrance, Austin leaned against his back, pressing him against the smooth, cool surface of the wood. Kissing along his spine, each gentle kiss was accompanied by a *beautiful, love you, my Matty*, and as always tears pressed behind Matty's closed lids. The first time he'd cried during an intimate moment with Austin, his boyfriend had thought that he'd hurt him somehow. Matty had assured him that it was quite the opposite. That with every kiss and caress, Austin was putting him back together again. Healing him. Sometimes, Austin even cried too. For the boy who'd been hurt in such unspeakable ways by hands which should have comforted him and protected him.

Slowly pushing into Matty, Austin's strong hands linked through his own as they grabbed onto the edge of the island.

"Fuck, sweetheart," Austin gritted, as he bottomed out, his warm breath ghosting across Matty's damp neck. "Shit, you feel good. You always feel so fucking good, wrapped around me."

"Austin?" Matty's voice broke as the broad cockhead hit that spot deep inside him, which no one had ever touched besides Austin. That place which no one else would ever touch. It belonged just to him.

"I've got you, sweetheart," Austin moaned as he began to pump his hips in shallow thrusts, in and out of Matty's tightness. "I'll always have you."

Matty nodded as tears slipped from the corners of his eyes. "I know," he whispered as he surrendered to the present moment. The fragrant oak beneath him, the pulsating hardness inside him and the soft cushion of Austin's chest above him.

*This is it*, he thought to himself. *This is what love feels like. Him and me, connected like this.* And as he felt Austin's arm snake around his waist, his large, calloused hand wrapping around his cock, his hardness thrusting in and out of Matty's hole, a wave washed over him, pulling him under. He sighed as Austin spilled his release inside him, coating his inner walls with the proof of his love for him. He felt his lungs empty as he pushed past the surface of the water and screamed out his own release. As always, when Austin brought him to this moment, an old part of Matty drowned. Another broken part left behind on the bottom of the ocean. Bringing him one step closer to being free from the past. He knew that he'd get there one day. It might take a while, but every day Matty felt the past fading away with the first light of dawn and the first whispered *I love you, sweetheart* spilling from his boyfriend's sleep-drunk lips.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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### Ethan – Now

“**HOLD ON JUST** a sec, man. I need to check this.” Ethan gestured at his phone which he’d just retrieved from his pocket. He felt fear grip at him as he saw several unanswered calls from his mom. He’d had the phone on silent while they’d been at the museum. They’d been headed for a coffee shop across the street. Avery had been whining about a snack for the past ten minutes, telling Ethan that he was still fatigued from the manhandling last night. Who the hell used words like *fatigued*? Avery, that’s who.

“What’s going on?” Avery’s brows met in a concerned frown and Ethan automatically felt his fingers tingle with an urge to rub against the worried line. That was apparently his thing now. Touching Avery whenever he had the chance. His mom had always been affectionate with Ethan and his siblings—and Matty too—but Ethan had never himself been the touchy-feely kinda person. Until Avery had blown into his life a few weeks ago, wreaking havoc on his libido—and perhaps also on his heart.

“It’s my mom,” Ethan replied, nibbling nervously at his bottom lip before continuing. “She’s called me four times already. Something must’ve happened.” Scrolling to his messages, he opened the last one from his mom.

**Mom: Call me back asap, hon!**

His mom never used exclamation marks. She rarely raised her voice or made a great spectacle out of things. A sense of dread settled in his stomach like a heavy stone. Not his dad. Please. That was always the primal fear in the Bishop household. That something would happen to his dad at one of the construction sites.

Ethan’s fingers shook as he pushed the callback button. Avery had moved to stand next to him and placed a warm

hand at the back of his neck and Ethan automatically leaned into his touch. It felt good having Avery there, the steadiness of his breath against his right ear. The soothing motion of Avery's fingers at the back of his neck stilling his inner turmoil momentarily.

The phone rang no more than once before he heard his mom's familiar voice on the other end. She must've been outside because there was some kinda static on the line, muffling her mellow voice.

"Mom," he nearly whispered, and he noticed the slight tremor seeping through his own voice. "Is it Dad? Is he okay?"

"Sweet pea, your dad's fine. Nothing to worry about." There was a brief pause on the line before his mom continued, this time it was her voice that was shaking. "It's Chief Craig. They've arrested him. For assault, apparently. It's bad. Matty's poor mother's in the hospital... They had to airlift her into Waco. The whole town's one big chaos of state police and news stations."

Ethan looked at Avery who searched his face, blue eyes spilling over with concern. For just a second, Ethan leaned his forehead against Avery's, settling himself, then he picked up the conversation.

"Is she okay?" He knew that it was a ridiculous question. No one was really okay if they were in the hospital. And no one rarely got out of an altercation with Matty's father without at least some broken bones. Matty could vouch for that. Ethan could, too. He'd seen all the bruises over the years. The devastating aftermath of yet another run-in with Chief Craig splayed across his best friend's frail body.

"She will be." That's all his mom said as she sighed into the phone. "She will be."

"What about Matty's father? Where's he?" It'd always felt weird to Ethan when he spoke the words *Matty* and *father* in the same sentence. That motherfucker had never been a father in the sense that Dan had been to Ethan. He'd never done anything remotely kind or considerate to earn the title. The

word always tasted bitter on Ethan's tongue whenever he spoke it about the Chief of Police in Eden.

"They took him into Waco this morning. Deputy Wilson stopped by a few hours ago. He thought you might wanna know since you were perhaps still in contact with Matty..." His mom huffed before she continued, "Strange after all these years that he still seems to think that you know exactly where Matty is."

"Yeah, well I kinda do. What did you tell him?"

"What I always tell him, sweetheart. That Matty's gone and that he wouldn't have to be if all those darn cowards down at the station hadn't turned the blind eye to what their SOB of a boss was up to for all those years." The edge to his mom's voice left no doubt that she meant every single word which had just spilled from her peach-colored lips.

"Jesus, Mom!" Ethan blurted. "Did you really say that?"

"Sure did, hon. You know your old ma'. I never was one for holding my tongue or keeping up appearances for the sake of it." The grin transferred through the phone and Ethan couldn't help shaking his head and smiling too. His mom must've been really upset because she didn't even comment on the fact that he'd taken the Lord's name in vain.

"What did Wilson say?"

"Not much, sweetie. I mean, what could he say, really? They all know that they messed up back then... Not much to do about it now, is there? But I sure hope that they throw the book at that useless son of a... that they put him away for all eternity and throw away the key..." His mom stalled and there was a heaviness to her voice which Ethan recognized from the time when his grandmother had died or when his classmate Ben had crashed his car against a tree, killing himself and his girlfriend Bobbi-Jean. "And then I couldn't help but think about poor Fiona all alone in the hospital..." his mom trailed off, her voice hesitant.

"Mom... What did you do?" Ethan had a feeling that he knew exactly what his mom had done, and if he were to be

honest with himself, he couldn't blame her.

"I told him about the postcard. Ethan, honey, I..."

"It's okay, Mom. I guess he has a right to know."

Shifting on his feet, he looked at Avery, who took the phone out of his hand just as the first tears started gathering at the corners of his eyes. Avery's voice sounded soft and calm as he picked up the conversation.

"Hello, Mrs. Bishop?" Then he chuckled before continuing. "Yes, sorry, I know. Belinda. Yes, or Mom." His eyes lit up with warmth and pride perhaps.

"We're good, thank you. Uh huh, we're still in Boston." Ethan's eyes trailed along the curve of Avery's stubbled chin as he spoke, the sunlight getting caught in the almost golden two-day old beard. Ethan closed his eyes momentarily, recalling the feeling of the prickly chin against his own sensitive inner thigh this morning as Avery had blown him. Images of waking up with Avery's tanned, naked body splayed across his own, like a koala bear clinging to a branch. Avery always ended up halfway on top of Ethan during the night almost as if he couldn't get close enough. Ethan was beginning to love the feeling of a naked Avery fused to his side, puffing wet breaths against his chest. Yeah, he was getting used to having Avery next to him and it would be strange when he no longer woke up wrapped around him.

Avery continued to stroke the hair at the back of Ethan's neck while he spoke to his mom, recounting where they'd been yesterday and what they were planning on doing the remaining time in Boston.

"Sure, Belinda. I will." Avery turned to Ethan, a smug smirk covering his plump lips. "Don't worry, I've been taking care of your boy in the big city, and I'll make sure that he gets well on his way to Maine, too." He winked at Ethan before continuing. "Yes, I'll tell him. Okay. Talk to you soon. Bye."

Handing the phone to Ethan, Avery pressed his lips against his temple, brushing them lightly against the spot.



“You okay?” he mumbled, tangling his fingers through the outgrown hair around Ethan’s ears.

“Yeah... I think so... All the more reason to find Matty now.”

“Yeah... Let me just grab something from the coffee shop and then we can go.” Avery searched Ethan’s eyes and he nodded in agreement.

One more night, Ethan thought to himself, as he watched Avery’s slender figure heading in the direction of the fancy cafe. One more night in Boston with this man and then he’d head off to Maine. He didn’t know why he felt so conflicted suddenly. He should be happy. He was happy, he reminded himself. He was gonna see Matty again.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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### Matty – Now

“**SHIT, WHY DOES** everything always feel better when you’re out here?” Matty’s eyes were closed as he tipped his head towards the blue sky, the ocean breeze tickling his nostrils. Taking a deep breath, the salty ocean air filled his lungs, until there was no more room left for worry or sadness.

“It just does...” Austin came to stand behind him, wrapping his solid arms around his waist as he mumbled against Matty’s warm neck. “No reason to spend hundreds of dollars on a spa treatment when the cure’s right here.”

“Yeah,” Matty smiled wistfully. “I always imagined that it would be like this. That I’d feel at home and at peace right away when I got to the ocean...” He took another deep inhale before continuing. “Back then it was just a silly childhood fantasy to escape, you know, but it was as if my body instinctively knew that once I got here, I’d start healing.” There was a seriousness to his voice and for some reason he felt strangely emotional. Opening his eyes, he took in the blue melting into even more shades of blue before him. Turning around, facing Austin, he dug his fingers into his boyfriend’s solid shoulders. The warmth of Austin’s body transferred to his own, settling him. *I love him.*

“I love you.” The words lingered in the crisp ocean air between them, and Austin’s features immediately softened, gray eyes spilling over with affection and need. Matty realized that it was the first time that he’d said it first. The first time that he’d spoken those three words without a *too* at the end. It felt significant and the emotions that were mirrored in Austin’s eyes told him that he felt the importance of the moment, too.

“I know, sweetheart. I know you do,” Austin breathed against his chin, before he pressed the softest of kisses against Matty’s left temple. “Are you nervous about going back?”

“Yeah... kinda. But it helps that you’re going with me.”

“Always,” Austin murmured.

They stood like that, holding each other for a while, swaying to the motion of the sea as the calm waves beat continuously against *Stella*, like a lullaby.

“Have you ever thought about finding your mom?” Matty broke the silence as he placed both hands on Austin’s cool cheeks.

Austin sighed, the sadness evident in the sound of his voice as he spoke.

“Yeah... When I was younger, I used to think about it all the time. How I’d go there—find her in the city, you know. She’d be all beautiful and shit. Same black hair as me, same gray eyes staring back at me. She’d cry and tell me that she was sorry, you know. That she loved me, still, after all this time. Thought about me every day... blah blah blah...” Austin shook his head before he rested his forehead against Matty’s. “It was all just silly daydreams, you know. A child’s need for a fairytale ending...”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Yeah, kinda. I mean, I know which city.” Austin shifted on his feet, his body tensing beneath Matty’s hold. “But it doesn’t matter, ‘cause I’m never gonna go.” There was a finality to the words that you didn’t often hear in Austin’s voice.

“Why not?” Matty knew that he was most likely pushing his boyfriend but after the events of the day before, he wanted to know. Needed to know this last thing about Austin. Just like Austin now knew the whole story about Matty.

“There’s just no point, I guess. I mean, I’m happy. Dad’s been the best parent I could ever wish for. I’ve never felt any less loved or cared for. Dad may be a man of few words, but it doesn’t necessarily take a whole lotta talk for someone to show you that they love you.” Austin sucked in a deep breath. “Besides, she’s not the mother that I want. She never was. Sure, she’s the image of the life I could’ve had if she’d

decided to stay instead of leaving. But she's not that person. For some reason, she made a choice that day that she didn't want to be a mother." Austin smiled weakly. "Well, at least, she didn't want to be *my* mother." A solitary tear trailed down Austin's stubbled chin, and Matty swiped it away with his thumb, before pressing a subtle kiss against his lips. He tasted of salt and sadness. "It doesn't matter anyway. I have everything, I need right here." Austin tightened his beefy arms around Matty's midsection, crushing him against his chest.

"Yeah?" Matty knew exactly what Austin meant because he felt the exact same way. No matter what happened once they got to Eden, nothing could any longer shake the foundation of his life. It was solid. Strong. Permanent. He had all the family he needed now—well, the only thing missing was Ethan. He couldn't wait to see him. Talk to him. Tell him about his life now. About Will. And Millie. *Stella*. About Austin and Cassie. The family that he'd searched for ever since he ran away. He'd found it in this little corner of the world, and he knew that the final piece of the puzzle would be the moment when he could share this life with Ethan. When his two worlds could melt together into one.

"Yeah. You're everything I need..." Fidgeting with the hem of Matty's t-shirt, Austin frowned, contemplating something. Then he looked straight into Matty's eyes, a broad grin on his face, eyes brilliantly bright.

"What?" Matty chuckled, suddenly feeling naked under Austin's scrutinizing stare.

"Nothin'," his boyfriend grinned secretively.

"Tell me," Matty poked his index finger at Austin's solid chest, "tell me!"

"Tell you what? I have no idea what you're talking about, sweetheart."

"Fuck you! You know what I mean. You were thinking about something. I know that look on your face. It was your *Austin-is-having-deep-thoughts* face." Matty continued to stab his finger at Austin's chest.

“I have a face like that?” Austin pretended surprise. “I thought I only had an *Austin-buried-deep-inside-his-boyfriend* face and an *Austin-devouring-a-cheeseburger* face, and they pretty much look the same.”

“Shut up, you idiot!” Matty threw his head back laughing before he mumbled against Austin’s shoulder, “And they do *not* look the same...” He felt his cheeks flushing and imagined they would be bright pink by now. “So, tell me...”

“You really wanna know? You think you can handle my profound words of wisdom?” Austin smiled, “You are aware that I have a high school diploma, right? You think you’re ready to be blown away by my grand ideas?”

“I’m ready, babe. Please, proceed to blow me away...” He loved this version of Austin. The carefree goofball, eyes beaming with trouble. Fuck, he loved every version of his boyfriend, but this was probably his favorite.

“Okay,” Austin sucked in a deep breath, a pinkish color spreading across his cheekbones. He suddenly looked serious. And nervous. “Here’s the thing. This is how it’s gonna be. I love you, too. Like in a big kinda way. There are many things that I love but that I can live without. I love cheeseburgers but I’d survive without them.”

Matty raised an eyebrow in mock surprise while Austin continued.

“I could. Love them but really don’t need them. I love the ocean and this boat. I love this town and I love our house. I’d hate for anything to happen to our home, but I could basically live anywhere.” He paused briefly, pulling Matty closer against him. “So... all of this is just stuff, you know. Walls and floors and... you know what I mean, right?”

Matty nodded. He knew exactly what Austin meant.

“But you. You’re my constant. You’re the one thing I don’t want to live without. I probably could, but it would be a sad-ass life without you. Everything would just be... beige, you know?” Austin shrugged.

“*Beige?* Life without me is *beige?*” Matty chuckled, intrigued where this was going.

“Yeah, I mean, who likes beige? It’s the saddest fucking color, right? Nothing spectacular is beige, you know. It’s not like you’d paint your house beige or buy a beige car...”

“Babe...”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m getting there, alright. Patience, sweetheart.” He shook his head, a lock of black hair spilling into his eyes and Matty’s fingers itched to push it away. “So, you’re not beige. You’re bright and brave and beautiful. You’re the best person, I know. You’re my Matty, you know. *Mine.*” Austin patted his large hand against his chest, just above his heart.

It was the strangest thing because Matty realized that they could stand on this flipping boat for the rest of the day, and Austin wouldn’t run out of kind things to say about him. About him. Matty. This amazing person, his person, would never run out of sweet words to describe him. He’d never heard one remotely negative word about him cross Austin’s lips. Austin had never spoken to him in anger or even annoyance. His boyfriend had never raised his voice at him or made him feel small and insignificant. Only ever worthy and like he mattered. To Matty that was better than all the money in the world. Faced with Austin’s unwavering faith in him, in them, Matty felt brave and could finally verbalize the dream deep within.

“So, you’re gonna marry me one day,” Matty whispered. “And we’re gonna have a family one day, too. And we’re gonna always sleep next to each other—even when we’re old and wearing matching diapers,” Matty scrunched his nose, “I mean, that’s what you’re saying right?”

A dopey smile had spread across Austin’s face while Matty spoke.

“I am. I’m gonna marry you one day and then I’m gonna do my very best to knock you up. Or get some kids with ya somehow.” Austin shrugged. “Okay?”

Matty nodded as he felt the last layer of his old self peel away under the coastal sun and be carried away by the wind to finally, *finally* be gone forever.

“Okay, Austin. Okay.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY

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## Ethan – Now

“DON’T BE A stranger, okay? Let me know when you find him.” Avery looked down the still empty street as Ethan closed the trunk of his old Honda. His mom had been worried that the used car wouldn’t make the cross-country trip in one piece, but Ethan had never doubted that his faithful old car would bring him all the way to Maine.

“I will,” he murmured, brushing at the layer of dust on the roof of the car. “I’ll text you, okay?” He gazed at Avery, whose face was expressionless, his eyes covered by a glassy sheen. “Avery, please... Will you just look at me for a sec?” Ethan swallowed, his chest tightening, his body already preparing itself for being without the man who had become so important to him in a matter of mere weeks.

Avery turned towards him, a forced smile pulled at his mouth, but it never reached his watery, blue eyes.

“I’ll miss you,” Avery whispered, swiping at a runaway tear. “I’ll miss waking up next to you and falling asleep with your arms wrapped around me...” Another tear broke free, and Avery laughed, a sad, hollow sound. “Shit, why is this so fucking hard, Eth? Is it hard for you, too, or is it just me?” His plump bottom lip wavered, and he suddenly looked much younger than his twenty-eight-years. So vulnerable, lost, almost.

“Avery...” Ethan reached for the back of his neck, just below Avery’s messy ponytail, and pulled him against his chest. “It’s not just you,” he whispered against the top of Avery’s head. It was still early in the morning and Avery still smelled of sleep and dreams. He’d just hastily thrown on yesterday’s wrinkled shirt, before he’d made Ethan some breakfast, which they’d eaten in silence in the kitchen.



Avery wrapped his slender arms around Ethan's midsection and buried his face against his collarbone, sniffing noisily.

"I know you have to go. I know you have to find Matty. But I just feel like being selfish right now and telling you to stay. Please stay." He exhaled as he clenched his fists in Ethan's white t-shirt. *Fuck*. Why was this so fucking hard? It was the last thing that had crossed Ethan's mind as he'd left Eden a few weeks ago. His sole focus had been the small Xs on the hand drawn map and the final destination on the postcard. *Grant's Harbor*. He'd never imagined that now—before he even had his first conscious thought in the morning—his body already instinctively searched for and found Avery's and wrapped itself around him. It was like this magnetic pull between them. It had been there from the very first day in the changing room. When Avery's hand had brushed briefly against Ethan's thigh and his entire future had flashed before him in a matter of seconds.

"Say something," Avery mumbled into the neck of his t-shirt, his warm breath coasting across Ethan's skin.

"Avery, please..." *Come with me. Come with me.* The words were resting on the tip of his tongue, but he knew that it would just be a temporary reprieve from avoiding the inevitable. Because then what? Eventually, Ethan would still have to go back to Eden. They would still have to go their separate ways at some point and if Avery came with him, they'd just postpone the final goodbye. So instead, he chickened out. "I'll stop by on my way home." *Home*. Suddenly, the word had a sad, depressing ring to it. "Or maybe, you can come visit me in Texas sometime..." Even to his own ears, the words sounded hollow, unrealistic. Avery would never come to Eden. And anyway, Ethan wouldn't want him to.

"Yeah... maybe..." Avery whispered as he disentangled himself from Ethan's embrace. "Maybe..." His sad eyes sought Ethan's one last time before he headed for his parents' brownstone. Halfway up the stone steps, he turned around, shoulders slumped, a defeated smile on his lips. Opening the

door to his car, Ethan threw his denim jacket on the empty passenger seat. Raising his hand in a gesture which was supposed to imitate a wave, he returned Avery's smile. Nodding to himself, Ethan pulled up the route on his phone before he started the car. Pulling out into the empty Boston street, the morning sun painted the cloudless sky in pinks and oranges. It was gonna be yet another glorious day, so why did it feel like it was the fucking end of the world? As he reached the end of the street, he stole a final glance in the rearview mirror. *Just one more glimpse of Avery*, he thought. Just one more glimpse for the road. But the stairs were empty now, just like the seat next to him and the road in front of him.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

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### Ethan – Now

“EXCUSE ME, SIR, can I ask you something?” Ethan had spotted the fisherman from afar and his heart had started pounding frantically as he’d approached him. Arriving in Grant’s Harbor twenty minutes ago, he’d figured that the docks would be as good as a place as any to ask around for Matty.

The last hour on the road, he’d been feeling sick to his stomach, pulling over a few times when he felt the bile rise in his throat. But it was just a feeling. He wasn’t sick, he knew that. Maybe he was just nervous. About seeing Matty again. About not finding him. Or the possibility that Matty had changed so much over the past three years that the unique bond between the two of them had been severed. Or that he had changed. Ethan didn’t think that he’d changed too much over the past few years, but then again, a lot had happened since he’d left Eden. *Someone had happened.*

#### **I miss you.**

Ethan had read Avery’s text this morning, and every mile that he’d put between himself and Avery since he’d left Boston vanished within a matter of seconds. Immediately, he was back in Avery’s bed, the smell of citrus and a sleep-warm body engulfing him. The silkiness of Avery’s unblemished, golden skin beneath him, his fingers disappearing in his mass of velvety hair. It was late afternoon now and Ethan still hadn’t replied.

The fisherman rose from where he’d been cleaning a stack of containers. He sheltered his eyes from the blistering sun as he took in Ethan, his bronzed face welcoming, yet hesitant.

“Sure, what do you wanna know, son?” The older guy brushed off his hands in his blue coveralls, taking in Ethan.

“I’m looking for a friend of mine. His name’s Matthew Craig.” It was strange speaking Matty’s full name. He didn’t recall ever doing it. To him, Matty was always just that. Matty. Not Matthew. Not that dreaded last name causing images of Police Chief Craig in front of his eyes.

“Matthew Craig? Naa, that don’t ring no bells. Sorry, son.”

Ethan shuffled his feet nervously as he took in the harbor, fishing boats already docking, some on their way in from a day on the ocean.

“He might go under the name Matty. Or that’s at least what I used to call him.”

The older fisherman pulled off his knitted hat and brushed a rough hand through his unruly, gray hair. There was an almost leathery look to the skin on his hands—much like Mr. Peterson’s hands and orange-brown face from working under the unforgiving Texas sun all his life.

“Matty... Matty Craig, you say? Nope, I’m sorry. We only have a Matty Carter here. No one by the name Craig, son.”

*Carter.* Not Craig, but Carter. Pretty fucking close.

“Okay, thank you anyways,” he nodded at the fisherman while he took in the white boat next to them. *Lilly.*

“No worries, son,” the older guy grinned. “He a good friend of yours, this Matty Craig?”

“Yes. The very best actually.” A sinking feeling spread in his stomach, a heaviness settling in his bones. He suddenly felt tired, worn out. He fucking missed Avery and he hadn’t eaten since lunch. Tears pressed at his eyelids, and where was your mom when you needed her? He just needed a Momma Belinda hug. Desperately.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help you, then.” The kindness in the stranger’s eyes took Ethan by surprise. He sounded genuinely sorry.

“Thank you, sir.” Ethan picked up his backpack when a large shadow fell in front of him.

“Who are you looking for, kid?” A deep voice surrounded him, the smell of the ocean entering his nostrils. Ethan dropped the backpack and rose, while he turned in the direction of the voice.

“He’s looking for his friend. Some young fella named Matty Craig, but I told him, we only have your Matty around here, Will.” The fisherman shrugged, turning back towards his task.

“How old is your friend?” The newcomer, Will, asked, wiping his hands on his thighs. He, too, wore the classic blue coveralls, covered in oil stains and the fabric worn thin at the knees and elbows. Ethan swallowed audibly as he took in this giant of a man. Bushy gray eyebrows and deep lines running through his forehead, several crow’s feet at the corners of his kind, curious eyes. It wasn’t often that Ethan met someone who was as tall as he was. Dan Bishop and his four boys always stood out in Eden, Ethan always being the tallest boy in middle school and in high school, too.

“Same age as me, sir. Nineteen. Well, nineteen come October, sir.” Was he still only just nineteen? He felt so much older—as if he’d matured during these few weeks on the road with Avery. He suddenly felt the fatigue in his bones, the weariness catching up with him. The dull *thump, thump, thump* in his heart ever since he’d left Boston.

“Nineteen? Is that so? And what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t but it’s Ethan. Ethan Bishop. I’ve come all the way from Eden, Texas looking for my friend.”

“That’s a long way, kid,” the other fisherman interrupted. “Heck of a long way.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t fathom that anyone in their right mind would drive across the country to end up in Grant’s Harbor. Well, he had obviously never been to Eden.

“It sure is. I made some stops on the way though...” Ethan trailed off.

“Why have you come looking for him here, then?” Will asked, squinting his eyes at Ethan. The question wasn’t exactly accusing but Ethan still wondered how much he should reveal to these strangers.

“He always wanted to go to the sea. He wanted a boat. *Stella*. Someone told me that I’d maybe find him here.” Jesus, he felt weird telling these two rough-looking men that he’d driven all the way to Maine all because of a promise, a map, and a blank postcard.

“*Stella*...? But isn’t that...”

“Hush, Smitty,” the fisherman, Will, boomed. “Yeah, we have a Matty around here.”

“Yeah, I know.” Ethan nodded at the guy named Smitty. “He told me. But it isn’t my Matty.” There was a defeated ring to his voice as Ethan’s shoulders slumped forward in resignation.

“What does your Matty look like, then?” Will tilted his head in question.

“Well, I haven’t seen him for three years, so I guess he’s changed a lot.” He hesitated briefly, murmuring, mostly to himself. “I know I have.” As soon as Ethan had spoken the words, he realized that they were true. He had changed. A lot.

“Three years, huh?” Will brushed at his wild beard, contemplating something.

“Yes. I couldn’t come any sooner. Left right after graduation. Drove all the way here. Past all the small towns along the coast.”

“Yeah, there are plenty, alright,” Will nodded.

“But Will...” The guy named Smitty looked at Will, a puzzled frown between his dark brows. Ignoring him, Will’s gaze penetrated Ethan’s, before he continued.

“So, what does he look like then, your Matty?”

Ethan exhaled deeply, his mind suddenly blank. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten what Matty looked like but how did you describe someone who was the best person in the world to a

stranger? How did you describe someone who'd been your everything, your ride or die since the age of six? He sighed.

"He's your average guy, I guess. Blond hair that's always messy. Sky-blue eyes that are mostly curious and kind. Eyes as blue as the vast Texas sky in mid-July. Scrawny looking kid. Well, at least he was back then. Knows a great deal about bugs, actually. Loves the little fuckers... sorry, sir. He can go on and on about them..." Ethan trailed off, his eyes suddenly burning, his fingers pulling at the hem of his t-shirt. Well, Avery's t-shirt, actually...

"Yeah, he sounds about right, doesn't he Smitty? Well, except he's not so scrawny anymore. That's life on the water for ya. Toughens up even the frailest of men, ain't that right, Smitty?" Will grinned at his friend.

"Sure is right, Will," Smitty repeated, nodding in solemn agreement. Ethan stared between the two of them, his mind buzzing.

"I'm sorry, sir... I don't think I understand..."

"Yeah, I bet you don't, kid. You see, your Matty is my Matty. Well, that ain't exactly true anymore, either. He's kinda Austin's Matty now," Will spoke, a wistful look in his pale eyes.

"You know him?" Disbelief and a small spark of hope coursed through Ethan.

"I do. I've known him since the little shit walked into town nearly three years ago and asked me for a job. Pretty persistent, I must say," Will grinned, fondness painted across his face. Ethan couldn't help grinning, too.

"Yeah, that sounds like Matty, alright."

"It does, right? He'll be back soon if you wanna wait. We were just getting a coffee, right Smitty?"

"Sure thing, Will," Smitty brushed at his sweaty forehead, before heading towards his boat.

"Take a seat, son..." Will nodded at a wide, wooden beam on the docks. "Ah, that'll be our boys. I see her now, *Stella*."

Matty's gonna shit himself when he sees you, that's for sure. Only time he isn't ranting about *Ethan this* or *Ethan that* is when he's eating or Austin has his tongue so far down his throat, he can hardly breathe. Ain't that right, Smitty?" Will nodded at Smitty who'd just emerged from his boat, a green thermos clasped in his hands.

"Right as rain, Will," Smitty chuckled, "Them two boys are like goddamn catfish, always sucking on each other's faces... Ahh yes, to be young again, right Will?" Smitty got a faraway look in his eyes while Ethan tried to wrap his mind around the strange turn the conversation had taken. Who the fuck was Austin and why was he sucking on his Matty?

"What...? Who's Austin? Wh—"

"I'll let Matty tell you himself," Will smiled. "C'mon now, son, don't just sit around with your mouth wide open..." The older fisherman nodded in the direction of a red-painted wooden boat that had just arrived at the docks. In delicate, white letters *Stella* was written across the front. A very good-looking guy with a broad grin on his face beamed at Will as he jumped from the deck and onto the docks. Jet-black hair spilled into his vibrant gray eyes, while his muscles seemed to be attempting a jailbreak from his grey t-shirt. The upper body of his coveralls were tied around his waist, patches of sweat coating his t-shirt under his armpits and around the neck. Skin tanned, dimples popping, he looked like fucking Elvis come back from the dead. He was obscenely hot, and he was...

"Babe?" A soft voice sounded from the boat as a head of sandy-blond curls and a pair of familiar blue eyes emerged from the wheelhouse. Ethan knew that face like he knew the back of his own hand. It was imprinted into his mind and his heart. No doubt that it was Matty. *His* Matty. The only question was, who the fuck was *babe*?



## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

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### Matty – Now

“YOU’RE HERE,” HE breathed into Ethan’s shoulder and a thousand memories flashed through his mind all at once. Little League practice under the Texas sun. Bicycle rides and apple pies. Busted knees and the smell of marshmallows roasting over an open fire. Even though his best friend had grown—a lot actually—the distinct smell that was Ethan and only him, engulfed Matty. Ethan chuckled as he sniffed against Matty’s forehead in return, perhaps breathing him in, too.

“I am,” Ethan’s deep, familiar voice washed over him, and Matty squeezed him even tighter, afraid that he would disappear just as quickly as he had appeared.

Standing on the boat a few minutes earlier, grinning at his boyfriend, Matty had immediately recognized the outline of his best friend before the details had filled in. The auburn locks glistening in the sun, the bright green eyes—greener than anything really—the large, muscular frame and the tall, lean posture, which Matty would’ve recognized anywhere. He’d blinked his eyes a few times in disbelief and fear that it was nothing more than a dream—after all, he’d often daydreamed over the past three years that Ethan would suddenly materialize in front of him, grinning, familiar eyes beaming with happiness. But nothing could have prepared him for this moment. For the unparalleled joy coursing through him, his heart attempting to break free from his chest, rip Ethan’s chest open and once again connect with his heart.

Matty sighed deeply into the soft fabric of Ethan’s t-shirt. Everything was just so much better than he’d imagined.

“You’re really here,” he whispered.

“I *really* am,” Ethan chuckled as he squeezed Matty once more before releasing himself from their embrace. Curious

eyes skated across Matty's body, taking him in, a pink blush to Ethan's cheeks. "You look good, man. Real good."

"Thanks, Eth," Matty whispered, still unsure if he would ever fully recover his voice again or if he would continue to whisper, in awe of this moment, for the rest of his life. "So do you," he replied lamely.

"You've grown," Ethan chuckled as he ruffled through Matty's unruly hair, stiff from the salt water and the harsh wind at sea. "Not so scrawny anymore, huh?" he teased.

"Shut up, Eth," Matty pushed at Ethan's shoulder, "I was never scrawny," he grinned.

"Wow, careful," Ethan laughed, rubbing at his left shoulder, "know your own strength." Ethan bit his bottom lip, a soft smile playing at the corner of his mouth. Nothing had changed, Matty thought, relief spreading through his body. *You are still you and I am still me. We're still the same two boys, only we're not. We're still Matty and Ethan. Brothers.* His eyes suddenly burned, and he had to swallow deeply to hold back the tears. He was *not* gonna cry. *I'm not gonna cry.* And then Matty cried anyway. Because if he wasn't gonna cry now, standing in front of his best friend, whom he hadn't seen in three years, when then?

"Hey, it's okay," Ethan murmured as he once again pulled Matty against his chest, mumbling soothing words of reassurance into his neck. "I know, man. I know. But you did it. You fucking did it, Matty. You got away. You got away." Ethan once again released him and held onto Matty's cheeks with his warm hands, green eyes pinning him to the spot. Looking directly into Matty's eyes, Ethan smiled. "I'm so fucking proud of you, Matty. So fucking proud. You're the coolest guy I know."

"Eth..." Matty blushed, feeling his heart swelling in his chest.

"No, you are," Ethan insisted, his expression serious for a moment, "You're the bravest fucking guy I know, Matty."

Matty grinned, suddenly feeling shy. Unsure of what to say, he shuffled his feet, hitting a piece of rope lying on the ground.

“So, *Stella*, huh?” Ethan nodded at the boat, amazement and pride painted across his face.

“Yeah, there she is,” Matty beamed, a sense of accomplishment filling his chest. “She’s a beauty, right?”

“Sure is. A real beauty,” Ethan shook his head, grinning. “I can’t believe you actually did it, Matty. Your own fucking boat.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s pretty crazy,” Matty mumbled, suddenly realizing the craziness of the past three years. Running away, coming to Grant’s Harbor, living with Will and Millie, meeting Austin. The boat. The house. Cassie. It was fucking crazy, but it was his life now. *Home*.

“But there’s something, I gotta know,” Ethan looked serious, solemn almost. A deep frown lined his forehead as he looked around the docks.

“Yeah?” Matty whispered, tilting his head, squinting at his best friend.

“Who the fuck is *Babe*?” Ethan blurted, a smile once again breaking free from his full lips.

“That’d be me,” a deep voice sounded a few steps away. Wrapped up in the reunion, Matty hadn’t noticed that Austin had come to stand within earshot and had overheard their conversation. “I’m *Babe*,” his boyfriend grinned cheekily, as he held out his right hand towards Ethan, “also known as Austin,” he continued while Ethan grabbed his hand, shaking it, disbelief covering his face, “Matty’s partner and boyfriend.”

Ethan’s eyes widened at the last part and Matty sucked in a deep breath, his lungs burning, as he held it. He looked between the two of them. The two people he loved the most in this world. The two men, who meant everything to him in so very different ways.

Ethan kept shaking Austin’s hand as he turned towards Matty, taking him in. His green eyes had turned a shade

darker, a maturity in his face that Matty hadn't noticed before. Then the skin around Ethan's eyes crinkled, his face softening, his bottom lip trembling. Releasing Austin's hand, Ethan brushed a hand through his outgrown hair. Then trouble coursed across his face, and they were once again twelve, lying in the cornfield behind Ethan's house, shooting the shit while they plotted their next adventure.

"Shit, dude!" Ethan grinned, shaking his head in astonishment, "and here, I always thought that I was the only man in your life." Continuing to shake his head in surprise, Ethan carried on laughing loudly.

Matty couldn't help the goofy smile invading his own face as his cheeks flushed with relief. Meeting Austin's gaze, his skin tingled as imaginary fire ants marched along his spine. Even in his wildest dreams, he couldn't have imagined this moment any better. Any more perfect. Now, that Ethan was here, he could finally, *finally* rest and just be... Well, just be *Matty*. Will and Millie's son, Austin's boyfriend and now again, what he'd always been since the age of five. A best friend. Two halves making out a perfect whole. One heart beating in two bodies.

Austin's arm wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him back to the present moment.

"So, what's next?" Ethan smiled, picking up his backpack.

"Hmm, I don't know," Matty shrugged. "Wanna meet the rest of the gang?"

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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### Ethan – Now

“**MI CASA ES** tu casa,” Matty grinned at him, eyes overspilling with pride as he gestured toward the small cottage at the end of the path. The front yard was neatly done, small flowerbeds in front of the porch, a gravel path leading towards the dark-green front door. Ethan smiled as he noticed a small pride flag suspended from a wooden beam on the porch, blowing in the wind. Matty must have caught his stare because he just shrugged.

“I guess that wouldn’t have gone down well back in good ol’ Eden,” he spoke.

“Yeah, probably not,” Ethan grinned. “Well, fuck good ol’ Eden, right?”

“Don’t say that,” Matty shook his head, blond locks spilling into his eyes. “Good people live in Eden, too. Your folks live in Eden.”

“Yeah, I know...” Ethan nodded. “I’ll just never come to terms with what that town did to ya, Matty.” Regret coursed through him as he looked at his best friend.

“I know, Eth.” Matty replied. “But it wasn’t the town, you know. It was people. People do bad things. And not all people. Just some.” Matty shrugged before continuing. “I’ll never forget what you and your family did for me, Eth. Never. You made everything better. Every fucking thing. It was never good, I know that, believe me. But at least you and your folks kept me sane.” He paused before continuing, his voice gruff, tinted with emotion. “You and your folks, you... I don’t know what it’s called. Validated, maybe? You validated that what was done to me wasn’t right. I think if it hadn’t been for you and your family, Eth, I would’ve lost it. I mean, I would’ve lost myself. I’ll never forget that, brother. Never.”

Ethan nodded, his chest expanding with Matty's words.

"I just did what anyone would've done..."

"Oh yeah? Then how come no one else stood up for me? Huh? Because it was only ever you, Eth."

Ethan shrugged as he closed the trunk and placed his backpack over his right shoulder. They'd gone in Ethan's old beat-up Honda since Austin was making a pit stop at the grocery store getting some steaks for the barbeque and had taken the truck.

"I don't know, man... I don't know..." Ethan looked around, taking in his surroundings. Fuck the past. It was exactly that. The past. Smiling at his best friend, he nodded at the house. "This is fucking cool, Matty. Your own house," Ethan ruffled Matty's chronically unruly hair, a strange mixture of happiness and envy coursing through him. Matty deserved this—this life he'd made for himself. There was no doubt about it. In the grand scheme of things, Matty had had this coming for a long time. A family who'd clearly taken him into their hearts and a boyfriend who appeared to truly love him. Yes, Matty deserved this, but it also made Ethan worry about the choices that lay ahead of himself. Would he make the right ones?

"Yeah, it's pretty cool," Matty nodded before leaning his head against Ethan's shoulder. Even though Matty had clearly grown into a man over the past three years, he was still smaller, slighter than Ethan. He still felt protective of his best friend, but it was a different kind of feeling than the one that had consumed him as a child and as a teenager. It was more a *I'll-do-anything-for-you* feeling than a *I-cannot-breathe-not-knowing-if-you're-safe* kind. Ethan could breathe more freely now, finally having seen with his own eyes that Matty was not only safe but that his best friend had made a good life for himself. He suddenly felt an overwhelming need to voice it, to let Matty know.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," Ethan murmured against Matty's soft hair. "You're the bravest person in the world, Matty."

Matty nodded against his shoulder, no words uttered between them aside from Ethan's recognition still lingering in the space between them. They stood like that for a few minutes, just taking in the moment, each in their own little world—a world that had been discontinued for three years, Ethan realized. A world that had been tipped on its axis on that fateful August evening but had now come full circle again. Ethan hadn't realized it, but he'd been drifting since Matty had disappeared. Unsure of everything. He'd never thought of it like this—with him being the one who'd always taken care of Matty—but he needed his friend in his life just as much as Matty needed him in order to function. Perhaps even more.

“Come on,” Matty nodded his head toward the red cedar cottage. “Let's go meet my girl.” His face lit up, a smile spreading from his mouth, reaching all the way into his beautiful eyes. A smile that Ethan didn't recall ever having seen before. It transformed Matty's face completely, the boyish features once again taking over.

Ethan trailed after his best friend and as soon as they entered the small hallway, a bundle of red fur came flying towards them, barking joyously. Matty caught the dog midair and wrapped her in a tight embrace, while she administered doggy kisses all over his face. Ethan smiled as he took in his best friend, who was at this point nearly tipping over from the overly enthusiastic welcome of his dog.

“Hey, baby girl. You missed me, huh?” Matty cooed while ruffling the dog's fluffy fur. He struggled to get up from the floor as the dog continued to lick at his ear and neck. Matty squirmed beneath the rough kisses, but his eyes revealed that he was soaking up every one of them. Famished for affection for most of his life, Matty deserved every single kiss. Every fucking last one of them.

Matty finally managed to get up, brushing some stray, red hair from his pants.

“Ethan, meet Cassie. The worst-behaved dog in Maine,” he smiled lovingly at the dog which took in Ethan for all of two seconds before she decided that he was not a threat and started wagging her tail uncontrollably. Ethan squatted and let her

sniff his hands, resting at his sides. He knew from the watchdogs at the Peterson farm that it was never wise to stick out your hand to a dog that didn't know you. Cassie seemed friendly enough, but it was still wiser to let the dog take you in first. After sniffing the newcomer for a few seconds, she must have found him of no interest because she bounded out through the door to the backyard that Matty had just opened.

"You want a drink?" Matty nodded in the direction of a small, cozy kitchen.

"Sure," Ethan replied while taking in his surroundings. It was a small cottage with a homely feel to it. The kitchen was open concept, a large wooden island in the middle. The kitchen opened up to a small living room with a comfy navy-blue couch and a matching recliner, with a quilt in various blues hanging over one armrest. Magazines about lobstering and a few books lay scattered across the small coffee table. Ethan bent to look at one of the books which appeared to be a textbook. *Advanced Math*. Another textbook said *North American History, From the Pioneers to the Industrialization*.

"I'm taking evening classes in Biddeford twice a week," a mellow voice sounded behind him as Matty placed a Mountain Dew on a coaster next to the books on the coffee table. "I wanna get my diploma. Austin's helping me with the homework."

Ethan nodded as he reached for the history book, reading the back of the dust jacket. "That's cool, man."

"Yeah, math is still a fucking bitch, but history is okay." Matty shook his head, grinning. "Shit, I never thought I'd say this, but I actually like going to school."

Ethan looked at his friend, warmth coursing through his chest, tinted with an edge of anger, perhaps. Yes, it was anger.

"It was a fucking disgrace how they treated you back in school. A goddamn disgrace, Matty. I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry about, Eth? You made everything better. You always do make everything better... Anyway, what's done is done, right? No need to spend your



time stuck on things that can't be changed anyway. It is what it is, right?" Matty shrugged, while he pointed towards the couch. "Take a seat, Eth."

"Yeah, I know," Ethan murmured. "I know..." He continued to look through the book. "It's cool. You going back to school."

"Yeah. And it's fun too," Matty spoke as he moved the quilt to the side before sitting back in the navy recliner. He took a long sip from his Mountain Dew before he continued. "The teacher, Mr. Masri, is from India. He's our history teacher. He's pretty cool. I don't know..." Matty paused briefly, recalling one of the other students in Mr. Masri's class. How he'd commented on the teacher's *funny accent* during a break. Sure, Mr. Masri spoke English differently, but in a way, it wasn't that different from Matty's own Texan drawl when he got excited in class about something he'd read. Yes, *read*. Mr. Masri encouraged Matty to read now. Not just history even though he preferred those books. Some of the other students would snigger at Matty's accent too, but he didn't mind. He just focused on Mr. Masri's encouraging nod and the fondness in his eyes, when Matty would struggle with a difficult word. Because he still struggled. Probably always would.

"You remember Mr. Pierce? From back home?" He looked at Ethan.

"Sure," Ethan rolled his eyes. "Fucking asshole."

"Yeah, I haven't thought about him in ages, to be honest," Matty shook his head. "I don't know. I can't help thinking how different things could've been for me in school if the teachers back home had been a bit more like Mr. Masri..."

"What do you mean?" A questioning frown appeared between Ethan's brows.

"I mean, instead of them always focusing on what I did wrong, they could've just encouraged me to be better. Try harder. Maybe it would've made a lot of things easier for me. Like Mr. Masri makes it easier. People may think that he talks kinda funny but to me it just feels... I don't know... safe? You

know what I mean? Like him being different makes it easier for me to put myself out there and not be afraid to stand out.”

“Yeah, I think I do...” Ethan trailed off, taking a hearty sip from his can. “It’s like...” He shook his head, resigned. “Nah, it doesn’t matter...”

“What? Spill it,” Matty grinned.

Ethan exhaled, the tightness, which had been lingering on-off in his chest since he’d left Boston, returning.

“It’s the same with Avery, you know? He’s so fucking smart, too, but he never makes you feel dumb or beneath him or anything...” It felt strange, talking about Avery with Matty. Speaking his name again.

“You got pretty close on the road, huh?” Matty raised a blond brow questioningly.

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, we just clicked, you know? Avery’s like that. He’s just himself. No pretense. No bullshit. He’s just... Avery, I guess.” He’d told Matty about his encounter with Avery this afternoon while they’d visited Will and Millie’s house. At first, he’d been reluctant to go into too many details about the nature of their relationship, but Matty must have sensed it anyway, because suddenly Ethan had told his friend everything. Well, almost everything. The tightness suddenly became overwhelming, and Ethan felt relief course through him as Matty continued.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Austin’s like that, too. No hidden agenda. No ulterior motives. Just an open book. If he likes ya, he tells ya. If he doesn’t...” Matty got a faraway look in his eyes, the blue glazing over momentarily.

“Shit, man, you’re so far gone, huh?” Ethan grinned.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Matty nodded, a dopey look on his face.

“It’s good. I’m happy for ya.”

Matty nodded, taking another sip of his drink, swallowing audibly.

“What about you? And Avery? Are you—”

Matty was interrupted by the sound of the front door nearly being blown off its hinges. Barging through the frame came Austin, broad smile on his face, grocery bags wrapped in his beefy, tanned arms.

“Hey, sweetheart, you know that hot sauce you like?” Austin’s voice came booming through the small house. “It was on sale, so I got you a whole case. Pretty fucking awesome, huh?”

Ethan nearly snorted his Mountain Dew, and a coughing fit took hold of him. The domesticity of the entire interaction had struck him like lightning.

“Oh yeah?” Matty beamed, eyes spilling over with fondness. “Thanks, babe.”

“Hey man,” Austin tipped his head at Ethan, who was slowly recovering from his near-death experience. “You like steak?”

“Am I from Texas?” Ethan’s voice came out wheezy.

“Good man,” Austin chuckled as he adjusted the grocery bags in his arms. “Dinner’s in one hour.” He nodded at Matty. “Sweetheart, you wanna get the grill started?”

*Sweetheart.* It was still kinda strange hearing his best friend being referred to as *sweetheart* by this giant of a Maine lobsterman. But somehow it seemed right. It seemed like it couldn’t be any other way. “*You’re the light, Eth.*” Avery’s sleepy voice slammed into him out of nowhere, images from that night in the bar coursing through him like an old movie.

“Eth?” Matty looked at him questioningly.

“Sorry, what?” He shook his head, the images of Avery dissolving into the corners of his mind.

“You okay, Eth?” Matty scrunched his nose.

“Yeah, I’m good. What’s up?”

“Wanna see the backyard? Made it myself,” Matty asked, his voice tinted with pride.

“Sure, Matty. I’d love to. Lead the way.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

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### Matty – Now

“**ARE YOU ALWAYS** out this early?” Ethan rubbed at his eyes that were no more than two slits in his still sleepy face. Freckles had exploded all over the ridge of his nose and his cheeks under the summer sun and he still looked like the young kid from back home.

“Yeah, usually,” Austin grinned, his gray eyes competing with the grayish blue of the waves for attention. He easily won that competition—Austin was, hands down, Matty’s favorite view, and he drew him in like moths to a flame with his rough, natural beauty. “Wanna watch the sunrise, right sweetheart?” He winked at Matty, and he couldn’t help blushing. They were usually up by 4 a.m. in time for watching the sun rise on the horizon and enjoying their first cup of coffee—the best cup of the day as Will always said—from Austin’s olive-green thermos.

Ethan nodded, looking out at the open sea. He was probably just as awestruck as Matty had been the first couple of times he’d been out on the boat. The vastness of the ocean and the blue of the never-ending sky. To a boy from the dry climate of West Texas, the ocean was something else, alright. Massive to the point of overwhelming. Ethan had been silent all morning, though, as if he was trying to wrap his head around everything. To take in the fact that Matty had made an entirely new life for himself in Maine. Will and Millie who were basically Matty’s parents now and then Austin. His boyfriend. His partner.

“So, how many lobsters do you catch in a day?” Ethan looked at Matty, his now longish hair ruffled from the wind that had picked up a little since they’d left the harbor.

“It depends,” Matty came and stood next to Ethan, who was leaning against the railing. “Some days are great, and we

can pull in around 1,500 pounds. Other days are shit,” Matty gazed at Austin who was pulling a damaged buoy out of the water, the worn fabric of his navy coveralls stretching across his tight ass, “and we only pull in around 200 pounds.” Matty shrugged, tugging at his lower lip with his front teeth. Ethan nodded.

“So, do you sell the lobster locally or how does it work?” Matty felt a warm feeling settle in his core. It made him proud that Ethan was this invested in his work—it was fucking hard work being a lobsterman in Maine—many of the older guys struggled with back problems, aching knees, and arthritis in their hands. So the fact that Ethan showed so much interest, made him so unbelievably happy. Then again, Ethan had always supported his dream of becoming a fisherman even though that was a crazy-ass dream to have growing up in West Texas.

“Yeah, we sell some to the local restaurant owners. Especially during the tourist season, lobster is in high demand. The rest are transported to larger cities in the area for further processing.” Matty stretched his arms above his head, before clasping his hands together. “Here we go, Eth. Turn around.”

They both turned around as the dull morning sky was suddenly transforming in front of them. Pinks and oranges emerged from the surface of the ocean and bleed into the sky like watercolors on a piece of paper. A gasp escaped Ethan, his sleepy eyes glistening, awe painted across his face.

“Fuck, man,” he turned facing Matty, a broad grin on his face. “That’s sick!” He punched Matty’s shoulder and once again Matty felt joy and excitement course through his body, settling in his chest. *Perfect*. This moment was perfect. It didn’t get any better than this. His best friend standing next to him, Austin smiling at him from the front of the boat, and the wooden deck of *Stella* beneath his feet.

“It is,” he whispered, meeting Ethan’s bright eyes. “It is truly spectacular. Ain’t nothing like it, Eth.” He felt a presence next to him and then two muscular arms wrap around him from behind. Austin’s chin settled on his right shoulder as he pressed a soft kiss against Matty’s neck.

“Nothin’ like it,” Austin mumbled against his skin and goosebumps spread all over Matty’s back, from the top of his neck to the base of his spine. “Best view in town,” his boyfriend teased before he smacked Matty’s right butt cheek. “Coffee time!”

“Jesus, you guys,” Ethan blurted. “Try to keep it PG, okay?” He winked at Matty, who in return blushed furiously, the bright pink of his cheeks travelling down his neck.

“Awww,” Austin cooed, winking at Ethan, “you wouldn’t have to run around sporting a pair of blue balls if you’d brought your man.”

“Babe... please...” Matty groaned. “Don’t talk about Ethan’s balls, please...” He buried his face in his hands, shaking his head furiously trying to erase the image of his best friend’s private parts from his mind.

Ethan mumbled something next to him, eyes downcast.

“What?” Matty asked.

“He’s not my man,” Ethan repeated, his green eyes turning a shade darker, his mouth a narrow line.

“Well, it’s your own damn fault, from what I hear,” Austin continued, pouring each of them a steaming hot mug of coffee.

“Austin...” Matty chastised.

“No, I mean it.” He looked at Ethan who seemed stunned by Austin’s forwardness. “You gotta seal the deal, man. That’s what I did with this one,” he winked at Matty, blowing him a quick kiss.

Matty couldn’t help grinning at his ridiculous boyfriend. He was such an idiot. This was his life now, he suddenly realized. One day after another, stretching out in front of him. Days spent at sea, working side by side with Austin. Sunday lunches at Will and Millie’s place, card games with Ray twice a month, long walks with Cassie at the beach, his fingers tangled with Austin’s. Yeah, this was his life. A life he’d made for himself. He could easily repeat this very day for the rest of his life, and he’d never grow tired of it.

He didn't need a ton of adventures and thrills. Those were overrated when you'd grown up in a war zone. If there was one thing that Matty hated, it was the unknown. Uncertainty. He shied away from it. It paralyzed him. It ate at him until he felt small and vulnerable. His childhood had been filled with unpredictability, never knowing what kind of mood his father would be in. Best case scenario always was that he'd simply ignore Matty. Worst case scenario? Well, that ranged from bad to worse to really fucking horrific. It could mean anything from a busted lip to a bruised rib to a fractured bone. It did something to you, never knowing when the next fist would hit you out of nowhere or when the next slur would chip away at your already damaged soul. Every day, living in his father's house, was just another day of surviving whereas his life now was his own to mold and shape.

Matty often wondered how he'd come away from the years of bullying, violence, and emotional abuse. And every time the image of Ethan flashed before him. It was all because of Ethan. He had loved Matty when no one else had. He had protected him and encouraged him. His best friend was exactly just that. The best. His unwavering belief in Matty had made Matty believe, too. That things could change. That they could be better. That he *deserved* better.

"Seal the deal?" Ethan raised a curious eyebrow at Austin. "So how did you seal the deal with this one?" He ruffled Matty's hair affectionately, a teasing glimmer in his eyes.

Austin looked smug as he adjusted his backwards ball cap, black locks trying to escape at the front. He always wore it and knew exactly what it did to Matty. It drove him mad with want. And Austin could basically get away with anything, wearing it and blinking his sexy, gray eyes at Matty.

"Flashed my abs one day on the docks and this one—" he reached out and pulled Matty against his chest, "—followed me around like a lovesick puppy for the rest of the summer," he chuckled.

Ethan burst out laughing, snorting coffee all over Matty's coveralls. Good thing they were already dirty.

“Fuck you, babe,” Matty protested. “That’s such a goddamn lie,” he slapped Austin’s shoulder teasingly. “You’re such a dork,” he mumbled enamored, struggling to hold back a smile.

“Aww,” Ethan laughed, wiping coffee from his chin. “This is fucking priceless, man. Lovesick puppy. Jesus, dude, that’s hilarious.” He brushed tears away from the corners of his eyes as he continued to howl with laughter. Matty tried to keep up the pretense that he was mad but between Ethan’s contagious laughter and Austin’s bright smile, he failed miserably.

“That’s not at all how it was, and you damn well know it...” he mumbled against Austin’s chest.

“Nah, true story.” Austin’s gaze was suddenly serious, his voice gruff sounding with emotion. “Knew I had to make Matty mine from the moment I saw him. Just knew right away.” Austin smiled wistfully, rubbing his chest right above his heart.

“Fucking hell,” Ethan murmured, his eyes suddenly spilling over with emotion.

Silence spread between them as they drank the rest of their coffee, eyes fixed on the ocean. Finally, Matty clasped his hands together, before pressing a loud kiss against Austin’s lips.

“Well, lads, no rest for the wicked! Let’s get this show on the road!”



## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

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### Matty – Now

“**SO, YOU THINK** you’re gonna go back for the trial, too? Because that could be a while, right?” Ethan leaned back on his elbows on the wooden pier while he gazed out at the ocean. It was quiet today, blue and turquoise waves glistening in the afternoon sun.

“I don’t know. Wilson promised to keep me in the loop. I mean, if the district attorney wants me to testify, I will... But according to Wilson, the police and medical reports oughta be enough for them to put him away. For a long-ass time, hopefully.” Matty sighed. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to testify if it became necessary. There wasn’t anything he wasn’t willing to do to put that fucker away—even if it meant recounting all the punches and the kicks. All the broken bones and the hungry nights. Hell, he could relive it all if the outcome ended up being his father rotting away in a dark cell at some state penitentiary in a godforsaken corner of Texas.

“Well, in any case it’ll be over, then. You won’t have to worry about that asshole anymore.” A worried frown appeared between Ethan’s brows. “Do you think you’ll ever come back for good? To Eden, I mean?” He looked at Matty, his blond hair surrounding his still boyish face, soulful eyes looking at Ethan. “Nah,” Ethan shook his head. “Don’t ever come back. You’ve got a good thing goin’ here, Matty. I’ll miss you like hell, but don’t ever come back unless it’s to visit your mom or your old friend.” Ethan scrunched his nose, eyes tinted with regret and longing.

Matty felt tears pressing behind his lids. He never used to cry before setting foot in Grant’s Harbor. Tears were just used against you at the Craig house. But these days, he cried over almost anything. He knew that it wasn’t gonna be the last time he saw Ethan. He knew that in his heart. Hell, he was probably

gonna see him again shortly, when he and Austin went to the rehabilitation center in Waco to see his mom. She was being transferred there from the hospital in two days' time.

"Of course, I'll come back to see you, Eth. You know I'll always come back to you, brother."

Ethan turned his head abruptly, his lips mouthing the word silently. *Brother.*

"You are that, you know? My brother," Ethan murmured, his voice raspy, his eyes a wet sheen to them."

"I know," Matty swallowed.

"No matter where we are in the world, no matter where we go. You'll also be in my heart," Ethan nodded, more to himself, Matty figured.

"I know. I just wish we could be in the same place, you know? Or at least, that there weren't so many miles between us... That maybe you could stay..." Matty trailed off.

"Yeah... I can't, man. I have responsibilities back home. I mean, it is what it is, right?" Ethan shrugged, the look in his eyes indecipherable.

"So, what *is* the plan now, Eth? You're going to Boston on your way home?"

"Yeah, just a quick visit. I promised Avery." Matty didn't know if it was just in his imagination, but Ethan's voice sounded sad at the mention of Avery. In fact, it was probably the saddest he'd ever seen his friend in all the years he'd known him. Ethan looked even more devastated than he had when his dog Polly had died when he was eight. Ethan had cried himself to sleep for a week until Dan had brought home a new puppy—the ugliest mutt that Matty had ever seen. *Walter.* Ethan had taken one look at Walter and the loss had evaporated from his eyes.

Ethan hadn't shared much about Avery. Just that they'd met on the road and hooked up. But it didn't take a fucking genius to see that something had changed inside his friend. He wasn't the same. He'd get this faraway look in his eyes as if he was adrift at sea. Lost. Like he was looking out for something

or rather someone. Hell, if Matty didn't know any better, he'd think that Ethan was heartbroken. Well, maybe he was. Maybe he was.

“And then what? Back to Eden and...?”

“Yeah, that's the plan. I have a full-time position waiting for me at Peterson's.” Ethan sounded like he'd just revealed that he was dying from cancer or that his entire house had burned to the ground.

“Oh, okay...” Matty felt something building. Frustration, perhaps. It wasn't a feeling he was used to when it came to his best friend, but fuck, Ethan was annoying the shit outta him as he sat there next to him, shoulders slumped, eyes blank.

“What?” Ethan looked at him questioningly.

“Nothin'.”

“C'mon, spill it. I can tell that you've got somethin' to say. So, say it, Matty.” Ethan's voice came out clipped, probably harder than he'd intended.

“It's just that... I always figured you'd go off to school somewhere. I mean, you were always the smart one, Eth. Kinda figured if anyone was gonna get the hell outta Eden, it'd be you, man.”

“Yeah, that's not in the cards for me, Matty,” Ethan sighed, eyes following a small fishing boat in the horizon. “Ryder is going off to college next year and the twins are still too young to be of any real help to Mom... So, yeah, school is just not an option...”

“Fuck, you always say that, and it always pisses me off. What do you mean by that? What fucking cards, Eth?” Matty felt his chest tighten and something building inside him which he hadn't felt in a long time. Anger? Yeah, it was anger, alright. He didn't recall ever being angry with his best friend before—not even when Ethan beat him in Uno for the fifth time in a row when they were kids.

“You know what I mean...” Ethan trailed his fingers along the sun-bleached wooden boards of the pier.

“You could always stay here. With me. And Austin. You could work on the boat with us. We used to talk about it, remember?”

“Yeah... I remember. That was always your dream, though, Matty, wasn't it? It was never mine. I can't stay.” Ethan shook his head, a strand of hair tumbling into his eyes. Matty realized that there were so many things he no longer knew about his best friend.

“Do you ever dream, Eth? And I don't mean when you're sleeping. I mean about the future. Do you ever have dreams for yourself? Dreams that are just for you. No one else's. Just yours. Selfish dreams.”

“Sure,” Ethan mumbled, looking at the sky as if it held the answer to Matty's question. “I dream... I mean, I do...” Ethan sounded everything but convinced. He sure as shit wasn't convincing Matty.

“Yeah, what do you dream about, then?”

“Look, man, it doesn't matter. Dreams are just a way of running from real life. They'll get you nothing except for a whole lotta heartache.” Ethan pulled at his hair repetitively, his freckled cheeks starting to turn pink. “I think I can make an okay life for myself in Eden, okay?” There was a pleading edge to Ethan's voice.

“Jesus, that's the most depressing thing I've ever heard. You sound like you're staring down the barrel of a gun. Are you, Eth? Are you staring down the barrel of a gun?”

“No... What the fuck are you talking about? There's nothing wrong with working at a farm. There's nothing wrong with helping your family.” Ethan looked at Matty defensively.

“Of course there ain't. Only, it ain't what you wanna do with your life. And you didn't answer my fucking question. What do you dream about?” Matty's voice was getting louder by the second, and his fingers itched. He felt like grabbing on to Ethan's broad shoulders and shaking some sense into his best friend. “When are you gonna stop doing what you think people expect you to and start doing what *you* want instead?”

“Matty...”

“I mean it, Eth. For eleven years, you were my fucking keeper. You were the man around the house when your dad was away. You worked your ass off through middle school and high school to put food on the table. You never wanted anything for yourself. You only ever thought of others.” Matty grabbed on to the back of Ethan’s damp neck. “And don’t get me wrong, Eth, that’s a commendable thing. It is. But now, you’re finally free to do what you want, and you choose to go back to fucking Eden and work at some godforsaken farm and just waste away? Cause that’s the plan, right?” Matty felt his chest tightening as the words spilled from his lips and he rested his forehead against Ethan’s.

“It’s not like that, Matty...” Ethan whispered, his warm breath hitting Matty’s chin.

“And what about you, Eth? How do you plan on being a gay guy in Eden? Or maybe you aren’t gonna be one?”

“I don’t fucking know, okay? Okay?” Ethan raised his voice, eyes burning with frustration. “I just know that I owe my folks—”

“You don’t owe them anything,” Matty interrupted. “Except for living your life the way you wanna live it. That town, man... It’s gonna suck the life outta you, Eth.”

“Well, at least I’ll be able to go to sleep at night knowing that they’re okay!” Ethan was shouting now, his voice shaking with a level of emotion that Matty had never seen or heard in his best friend before. “At least I’ll know that. That they’ll be fucking okay! That they won’t want for anything. Dad’s getting older. He’s worn down, man. How long do you think that he’s gonna be able to drag buckets of fucking bricks around at some building site in Austin? How long before they drop his sorry ass for some guy twenty years his junior?” The words came out in pants, Ethan’s cheeks scarlet, splotchy.

“Yeah, I get it. I get, okay. All those are valid reasons for going back, Eth. They are. And they’ll make a pretty fucking headstone one day, too. *‘He just wanted to make sure that everyone was okay.’*”

“Just leave it, Matty. Let’s not talk about me anymore. I don’t wanna... I just... Let’s not fight, okay? Let’s talk about you instead, Matty.” A weak smile covered Ethan’s mouth, but it never reached his eyes. Matty had never thought of it before, but in that moment, green was the saddest fucking color he’d ever seen. Not filled with hope. Just plain old surrender and sadness.

“Sure, Eth. Whatever you say,” he whispered, pulling away from Ethan, looking towards the ocean.

“So, you’re happy?” Ethan nodded, sounding relieved that they were no longer talking about him.

“Yeah, Eth. Yes, I am. I’m real happy,” Matty sighed.

“Good. That’s good. I’m happy for ya. You deserve it.”

“You deserve it too,” Matty blurted.

“I know but you deserve it more.”

“Eth...”

“No, you do, Matty. You do.” Ethan shook his head, a teasing grin building at the corner of his mouth. “Fuck, I never knew you were into dudes.” Ethan pushed at him, grinning.

“I’m not,” Matty replied solemnly. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

“Whatcha mean?” Ethan frowned. Matty loved how Ethan’s Texan drawl became more noticeable the longer they were together. He’d missed that. He’d missed everything about Ethan.

“I mean, I still like girls, too, I guess. It’s hard to explain, really. It’s not so much guys in general but more Austin in particular that I’m into.” Matty got the usual warm feeling in his stomach, whenever he thought of Austin. That weird grounding feeling. Like he stopped being in free fall and was just... settled.

“So, like a soulmate thing?” Ethan chuckled teasingly. “Aww, that’s pretty fucking cool, Matty.”

“Fuck you. It’s just... He makes me feel good, you know. He’s good to me. He’s always just so fucking good to me, Eth... They all are...” Suddenly, his hands felt clammy, and his heart started pounding out of his chest. “*Do you think anyone’s ever gonna want you, you fucking pussy? What are you good for anyway? You ain’t good for nothin’.*” For the first time in his life Matty answered his father back. He’d never done it in real life, and he probably never would get the chance to, but still, he answered him back.

*But I am. I am. I’m a better man than you ever were. I’ll be a great dad one day. A great partner. I’m sorry for the things that your father did to you, but it never gave you the right to pay him back by hurting me. That just ain’t right. You did wrong by me. So wrong. You should’ve taken all that pain he gave you and turned it into something else instead. If not love, then at least something like it. You could’ve been kind to me, Dad, but you chose not to be. But I’m gonna choose differently. I’ll always choose differently.*

“So... Has he asked you to marry him yet?” Ethan poked at his elbow, pulling him back.

“What?! Shut up, Eth. We’re not getting married any time soon...” Matty pushed at Ethan’s shoulder, while a warm feeling spread in his chest. *They so were.*

“You sure about that? I’ve seen the way that man of yours looks at ya.”

“Yeah? How does he look at me? Let me hear your words of wisdom, Eth.” Matty swallowed, his eyes stinging slightly.

“Like he wants to lock you up somewhere and throw away the key. Just wait, man. Before you know it, you’ll be all barefoot and... a ring on your finger.” A goofy grin spread across Ethan’s face, and suddenly they were eight again, racing along on their bicycles, stomachs full of stolen apples, screaming from the top of their lungs. *Matty and Sheila, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G...*

“Fuck, you were about to say pregnant, weren’t you?” Matty burst out laughing.

“Yeah...” Ethan laughed, throwing his head back.

“Yeah, maybe... Maybe you’re right. I mean, not about the barefoot and pregnant part.” Matty nibbled on his upper lip, contemplating how it would be being married to Austin. Not much different from what it felt like now, he guessed. Then again, they were so fucking young. Anything could happen. Who was to say that they’d still be together in five years? Or two, even? But he sure did hope so. He recalled last week on the boat. Austin had seemed so sure of how their future would play out. His faith in them unwavering. Always unwavering.

“Would you say yes?” Ethan frowned, searching Matty’s face.

“Sure, why not? I mean, the way I see it, you’ve got this one life, right? So, you might as well grab on to every little good thing that life throws at ya. You know what I mean?”

“Since when did you get so fucking smart, man? Is it the dick?” Ethan bumped his shoulder, grinning cheekily.

“What?!”

“Is it because you’re finally getting some dick? It is, ain’t it? It’s made you see the light?” Ethan nodded as if it was the most profound thought he’d ever had in his nineteen-year-long life.

“I don’t know, Eth. Maybe. I mean, I do get a lot, that’s for sure,” Matty winked.

“Dude! Don’t...” Ethan buried his face in his hands.

“What? I mean it’s your own damn fault if you’re not getting any. You only have yourself to blame for that from the sound of it.”

“Hmmm... maybe...” A thoughtful frown formed in Ethan’s forehead.

“Don’t fuck it up, Eth. Just don’t.”

“Wow, that’s deep,” Ethan shook his head.

“It’s fucking gold, that’s what it is. And I’ll give you one more for free, because you’re my brother.” Matty held on to



Ethan's stare.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. You ready?" Matty raised his eyebrows in question while Ethan nodded.

"No one expects you to save everyone, Eth. Not me. Not your folks. Not anyone."

"I know that," Ethan mumbled.

"Do ya?"

"Yeah, of course I know that." What sounded like doubt seeped through Ethan's deep voice.

"Okay," Matty nodded. "Then go be happy, Eth. No one deserves it more than you. I mean that. You need to go find your own path—no one else's—and be happy."

"Yeah..." Ethan looked longingly at the grey-blue sea. Clouds were beginning to gather in the sky which had been the clearest blue only a few minutes ago.

Matty rose from the pier and reached his hand down towards his best friend.

"C'mon, Eth. Rain's coming. Better get going."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

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### Ethan – Now

**“ETH? ETHAN?”** A distant voice pulled at him from a dreamlike state. He opened his eyes slowly and blinked at the sun. Taking in his surroundings, Avery stood on the sidewalk looking up at him questioningly, a soft smile covering his slightly parted lips. *Shit.* He must have dozed off. He sat up straight, rubbed his head which had been resting against the front door.

“Hey,” he mumbled sleepily, smiling back.

“What are you doing here?” Avery wrinkled his brows, golden locks pulled back in a messy ponytail. Ethan felt his fingers tingling, wanting to wrap them around the back of Avery’s neck, pull him against him and just... “If I’d known you were coming today, I would’ve come back earlier...” Avery squinted in the afternoon sun, cheeks taking on a pinkish glow. He was wearing dark jeans and his usual cotton t-shirt was replaced by a pale blue linen shirt that made his eyes pop. Ethan caught a glimpse of his slender collarbone, the two top buttons of his shirt unbuttoned, the pale blue of the thin fabric against his tanned skin.

“Yeah, that’s okay...” Ethan blinked. He hadn’t expected the physical reactions seeing Avery again would cause. “I just wanted to stop by real quick and say hi on my way back... uhm... home,” Ethan almost didn’t recognize his own voice. It sounded strange and his tongue felt thick and alien as he spoke. There was something about the words that felt wrong, and a suffocating sensation spread throughout his chest, squeezing at his ribs and his heart.

“Oh,” Avery whispered, his frail voice drowning in the afternoon traffic, eyes turning a darker shade of blue. “Well, come in then,” he breathed, not looking at Ethan, as he walked up the stairs, shoulders slumped forward. He looked smaller

than Ethan recalled. Thinner somehow. Only, he couldn't be. It was no more than two weeks since they'd last seen each other but still Avery looked different. Maybe it was the clothes. The shirt was kinda baggy. Or the way that the afternoon light hit his face.

Ethan got up and when Avery reached him, he held out his hand and drew Avery against him. Sighing into his neck, he inhaled all Avery's sweetness and on a strangled exhale Ethan once again felt this odd sense of belonging. Like he'd been adrift but now, once again being close to Avery, feeling his slender body flush against his own, Ethan settled into his own skin.

It was the first time that Avery didn't hug him back. He stood frozen at the top of the stairs, limp arms hanging along his sides, fists clenched, knuckles white. *Please hug me back, Avery*, Ethan thought as he felt the weariness in his bones. *Please hug me back*. But instead, Avery pushed at Ethan's shoulders and untangled himself from his embrace, face indecipherable. Pulling his keys from his pants pocket, his voice came out neutral, devoid of any kind of emotion.

"How was Maine?"

"Good. It was good, Avery." He sought Avery's gaze, searching for their usual connection, but Avery avoided his stare, face stoic aside from a nerve ticking at the corner of his left eye.

"Good. That's good," Avery whispered, a slight tremor in his voice. "C'mon, then," he continued over his shoulder as he unlocked the massive, wooden door, pushed it open and entered the security code. The house was empty and quiet, exactly as he'd left it a few weeks ago. It felt like yesterday that Avery had made him an omelet in the kitchen, telling him about his parents. Showing him pictures of Mattie. Letting Ethan in.

He trailed behind Avery into the kitchen, his gaze immediately landing on the ridiculous painting on the wall. The naked man seemed even more caricatured now, throwing Ethan an arrogant look. He felt like pulling it down, turning it

around, facing the wall. He didn't want to be scrutinized, judged perhaps, by the vulgarity in the man's eyes.

"You want coffee?" Avery asked as he opened the fridge. "Or something cold perhaps?"

"Avery..."

"Or something to eat, maybe? Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat." He spoke rapidly as he pulled a carton of eggs from the middle shelf.

"Avery..."

Avery turned around, his slender fingers clutching the carton of eggs desperately. His blue eyes pale and expressionless. But it was his lips that gave him away, the bottom lip shaking slightly.

"Stop... just... stop, okay?" Ethan whispered as he took a step towards Avery, who in return took a step back, holding the eggs in front of him, like a shield almost.

"Okay," Avery whispered, looking just as lost in that moment as Ethan felt inside. A sad, resigned slump in his shoulders, Avery looked at him, a single tear trailing down his left cheek. Ethan was suddenly lost for words, brushing his hand through his hair. How had it all suddenly come to this? But then again, what had he expected, dropping by like this on his way home? They both knew that this was a stopover and not a stay put.

"Why are you here, Ethan?" Avery's defeated voice hung between them, as he brushed the solitary tear away. "I haven't heard from you in two weeks and now you suddenly appear out of the blue looking like it's the end of the fucking world. So, why are you here, Eth? What do you want?" A weak laugh escaped Avery's lips before he continued. "I know it's not my heart you've come back for because I told you already. It's yours whether you want it or not..." additional tears spilled from his sad eyes contradicting the frozen smile on his lips.

"Avery..." Ethan murmured as he came to a stop in front of him. Reaching out, he wiped at the tears before he leaned in and brushed his lips against Avery's. The taste of salt exploded

on his tongue. And something sweet, perhaps. Avery sagged against him as a strangled sound escaped him. “Baby, please...” Ethan mumbled, nibbling at Avery’s smooth chin. He didn’t know what he was asking, though. *Baby, please don’t cry. Please, just let me hold you. Please, just let me pretend for a while that I can stay.*

“Yeah, I know... You can’t stay.” Placing his slender hands against Ethan’s cheeks, Avery rested their foreheads together. Breathing in the man in front of him, Ethan momentarily contemplated what it would be like if he stayed. Images of a life with Avery flashed past him like a fast train. Avery smiling at him while he sketched, fingers smeared with black charcoal. Avery wrapping himself around him on the couch. Avery waking him up with a kiss on the forehead, mumbling *handsome...* His chest tightened, the air seeping from his lungs along with each memory of Avery that didn’t belong to him. That would never belong to him.

“I have to go home,” he whispered against Avery’s lips. “I just... I just didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.” Something wet hit his cheek and he knew that it was a tear. Whether it was Avery’s or his own, he didn’t know. It didn’t matter. It didn’t take a tear to tell Ethan that in that moment his own heart was breaking too.

Avery nodded, a hum leaving his mouth. Eyes closed, he breathed against Ethan’s lips.

“Just my luck, huh? Falling for a nineteen-year-old Texan guy who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders.” Avery attempted a weak smile, exhaling deeply. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in love before. It kind of sucks, to be honest.” As Ethan opened his mouth to respond, Avery covered his lips with his own, mumbling against them.

“Don’t say anything. Please. It’s okay. It’s not your fault. You can’t give me something you’re not ready to give willingly. Just let me love you one last time, Eth. Okay?”

Ethan nodded, knowing that one last time with Avery would never be enough. How could it be? But it would have to do. He knew that he should say no. That he was just drawing

out the goodbye. Postponing the inevitable. But in that moment, Ethan didn't care. Right now, this very second, he felt selfish. He wanted to have this one last memory with Avery that he could unwrap whenever he was alone and felt like just revisiting this summer.



It was the strangest feeling, moving inside someone when you were both crying. When you knew that with every move, with every kiss and with every touch, you got one step closer to the end. With every stroke, it felt like Avery vanished just a little bit more. Pulling away. With every moan and every whispered *please*, the imminent departure closed in on Ethan and he felt Avery slowly slipping away between his fingers.

It dawned on Ethan that it was the first time that they weren't fucking. This—skin against skin, lips meeting lips in return, fingers linked through fingers—the lightness of every touch and every sigh, the intimacy. This wasn't fucking. It was something else entirely. It was beyond any physical sensation that he'd ever experienced. It was a push and a pull. There was no giving, there was only taking. As if they were both preparing themselves for being without the other, catering to their own selfish need to force as much pleasure out of this moment and memorize the feeling of the other until it was imprinted into every fiber of their soul. Ethan felt like his insides were being pulled apart, while the bond that connected him with Avery was being stretched out until it threatened to tear.

“Make me come, Eth,” Avery pleaded beneath him, his fists white from clenching the sheets continuously. “Please, make me come,” he whimpered. Biting his bottom lip, Avery writhed with frustration and unfulfilled need, his hips meeting Ethan's thrust for thrust.

Wrapping his hand around Avery's smooth hardness, he began stroking him. Slow at first, but when Avery cursed at

him to *fucking get me there, Eth*, he stroked him faster while fucking him harder. Through a veil of tears, he watched Avery fall apart, screaming out his release, a pained and devastated look on his beautiful face where there should have been bliss and contentment. Instead, there was a deranged type of ecstasy. Ethan felt his own desire vanish at the sound of his lover sobbing into the pillow.

“Avery...” he whispered, brushing at his damp hair that spilled across the pillow. “Baby...”

“Just go,” Avery hiccupped. “Please just go.”

“What? Now?” Disbelief coursed through Ethan, something resembling a tight fist squeezing around his heart. “I... I don’t have to go right now. I can stay awhile... let me hold you for a bit...” he trailed off, the squeeze intensifying, every breath a painful reminder that he was falling apart. But Avery squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head, defiantly almost.

“Please, Eth. Just go now,” he whispered.

“Okay... if that’s what you want.” *Fuck!* He knew that wasn’t what Avery wanted. Avery wanted him to stay. Only, he couldn’t. He had people back home who counted on him. Responsibilities. When he added it all up in his head, it should’ve made sense. It should’ve felt like all the pieces were falling into place. That he could finally settle into his old life back home now that he knew that Matty was safe. That he was happy. Only it didn’t. How come it didn’t? Why couldn’t he just place these few weeks with Avery in a mental box along with other memories and put the lid back on?

Slipping from Avery’s hot tightness, he felt like the lowest of the low. As he got off the bed and reached for his discarded clothes, Avery curled onto his side, his back to Ethan, knees tucked to his chest.

*He looks so small*, Ethan thought to himself, and in an instant, it shot through his mind. *He looks like mine. Shit.* Why the fuck did Avery look like his when he wasn’t? *Do you ever dream, Eth?* Matty’s voice resounded from afar. Pulling on his pants and his shirt, he reached out to touch Avery one last

time, but his hand froze midair, and he clenched his fist, while biting the inside of his cheek, tasting blood. *I don't know, Matty.* Relaxing his hand against his side, Ethan slowly turned towards the bedroom door. *I don't know anything anymore...*



## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

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### Matty – Now

“**YOU WANNA BRING** this, too, sweetheart?” Austin was holding up a canvas duffel bag that Matty had left on the front porch.

“Yeah, I guess...” Matty shrugged, feeling out of sorts. He looked at Ray, who was putting a leash on Cassie, smiling weakly. Ray had come to see them off and take Cassie with him to his place. Suddenly, he wasn’t so sure that it was a good idea to go back to Eden. Well, they weren’t exactly going back to Eden just yet—first stop was Waco, where his mom was admitted to a rehabilitation center specializing in respiratory injuries.

Fiona Craig’s esophagus had been nearly crushed when her husband of twenty-two years had attempted to strangle her to death using his bare hands. She still couldn’t breathe without artificial assistance and her vocal cords had been injured as well, making it difficult for the forty-two-year-old woman to communicate. The rehabilitation center in Waco was supposed to be really experienced in these types of injuries, offering physical therapy, speech therapy and specialized counselling.

“You okay there, son?” Ray rested his large hand on Matty’s shoulder, shaking him out of his straying thoughts. The kind eyes of the older man were surrounded by an intricate pattern of wrinkles from years spent at sea subjected to all kinds of weather.

“Yeah, Ray, I’m okay...” Matty nodded. He attempted a weak smile, but it died prematurely at the right corner of his mouth. Dropping the leash on the ground next to them, Ray pulled him against his chest in a massive, all-consuming embrace. Matty melted into the older man’s chest that smelled of the ocean and a hint of sweet tobacco. Ray had always enjoyed a pipe at the end of a long day at sea, not being able to

shake the bad habit even though his doctor had reprimanded him about the possible dangers of smoking. As Ray had told his son on one of the many occasions that they had discussed the matter, “*as long as I can still beat your sorry ass in arm wrestling, I decide when and how much I smoke.*” That had been the end of it. The twenty-one-year-old Austin was still no match for the older O’Neil when it came to arm wrestling.

“Everything’s gonna be okay, son. Don’t you worry now,” Ray mumbled against the top of Matty’s head. At 6’3”, he towered over Matty by several inches, his shoulders carrying a slight slump from years of hard physical labor. “My boy’s gonna take good care of ya, you hear me now?”

Matty could all but nod as he sniffled against Ray’s broad chest. Words were escaping him—everything just too raw, too intense, in that very moment. He was still recovering from the news that Wilson had brought with him from Eden and from seeing Ethan again after all this time. A few weeks in the company of his best friend after three years of separation was not nearly enough even though Ethan had promised that they would text and talk all the time—a promise, he’d kept so far, calling Matty several times a week.

The concern about his mother was a constant presence, much like a fly buzzing around in the back of his mind. Even though the specialist from Waco, a Dr. Judith Swanson, whom he’d talked to on the phone, anticipated that his mother would make a full recovery considering her injuries, age and overall general health, Matty still worried about her. It was as if now that his asshole father had finally been taken out of the equation, Matty could allow himself to worry about his mom. To care about her once again, picturing a future where they could perhaps one day become something resembling a mother and a son again. Where they could work at rebuilding the relationship, which had for so many years lived in the shadows of his father’s terror regime.

Exhaling deeply, Matty disentangled himself from Ray’s firm hold.

“I’m okay, Ray, truly,” he murmured, his voice strange to his own ears. Frail. Shaky. “Everything’s gonna work out—

your son has booked us a hotel and everything. There's even a pool," Matty grinned weakly.

"A pool?" Ray huffed. "Now, what the heck do you boys need a pool for? You oughta be fine for a few weeks without a swim. Ain't no need to hop in a lukewarm hole full of chlorine when you've got the ocean waiting for ya when you get back home. You'll probably just catch one of those city bugs or one of them STDs." The older man shook his balding head while he mumbled something unintelligible to himself, looking in Austin's direction.

"You okay for cash, Junior?" he hollered at Austin who squinted against the late afternoon sun, smiling at the older O'Neil.

"Yeah, I'm good, Pops," Austin grinned, his deep voice filled with affection. There was a rather unique bond between father and son. So similar in their mannerisms and ways. The sound of their voice and the humor they shared between them. From appearance, you never would've guessed that Ray and Austin were related. Austin looked every bit like his mother with his dark hair, gray eyes, olive complexion and high cheekbones, whereas Ray lived up to his Irish name with his auburn beard and blue eyes, skin pale as the day he was born. But they resembled each other where it mattered, as Ray used to say, when people commented on the physical differences between father and son.

Ray nodded as he picked up the dog leash and murmured something about a *"juicy bone"* at Cassie, and Matty couldn't help blushing as his gaze connected with a smug Austin. *Jesus Fucking Christ.* That man. *My man.* Leaning against the hood of their truck, beefy arms on full display, his broad chest encased in a tight, white t-shirt, Austin winked while he adjusted himself discreetly, just in time before Will's old truck pulled up behind his. Patches of rust were still bleeding through the layer of blue paint, and Matty reminded himself that he needed to remind Will to take the truck to the garage. Yeah, once he got back, they would deal with that.

"Hon, I know you said you were gonna eat on the road..." Millie started as soon as she got out from the passenger side,

struggling with a midsize cooler, “but I made some sandwiches for you boys, just in case.” Her husband was grinning in the background, shrugging at Matty, who just shook his head in return. He’d accepted a long time ago that it was no use arguing with Millie Hart about mundane things such as food, sunscreen, and an extra warm sweater for chilly summer days at sea. Once the stubborn fifty-six-year-old put her mind to something, you might as well just throw in the towel.

“Looks damn good, Millie,” Austin nearly drooled as he lifted the lid and peeked at the six sandwiches. “Is it roasted chicken I smell?” He asked, licking his lips suggestively. His man was always hungry—hell, he could clean out their medium-size fridge in an afternoon and still complain that he was famished.

“It is,” Millie beamed as she gave Austin a quick peck on the cheek, before turning her attention to Matty, who just stood there, smiling goofily. “And no salami, sweetheart,” she crooned, a brief shadow moving across her kind face before she pulled Matty against her chest.

Yes, he’d decided to come clean and tell Will and Millie everything following Deputy Wilson’s visit in Grant’s Harbor. Matty was tired of hiding such a huge chunk of his past from two of the most important people in his life. It was exhausting, really, to not be able to share these parts of himself with his found family. Because as much as he hated Eden and what had happened back then, the ugly parts, the scars and the bad memories were as much a part of him as all the good stuff. There was no way around it. It had happened. It had been done to him. It had not broken him, and it was about time that he shared his past with the people who loved him. Because there was no doubt in his heart that Millie and Will loved him.

*“We couldn’t have loved you any more even if you were our own flesh and blood.”* Matty recalled Millie’s words on the night that he’d told them everything. No sugar coating. No secrets. No shame. Austin had almost squeezed his fingers off as they’d sat next to each other on the brown corduroy couch in the Hart’s living room. *“No one’s ever gonna hurt you*

*again, kid,*” Will had spoken, his voice vibrating with pent-up anger, but more steadfast than ever. He’d looked like he was ready to smash something with his bare hands but being the kinda peace loving man that he was, Will had instead shredded his napkin into tiny, little pieces. Millie had suggested that Matty find a therapist even though he didn’t feel that he needed one. In her own careful way, Millie had reminded him that even though he felt somewhat at peace with his past, there was no telling if it would at some point come back to haunt him. *Better safe than sorry, hon,* she’d smiled at him, her gentle gaze peeling away yet another layer of Matty’s protective armor.

“Thanks, Millie,” Matty whispered as he breathed in her familiar smell of lavender and coffee.

“Don’t mention it, sweetheart,” she mumbled against his ear, once again pressing a soft kiss to his cheek.

Releasing himself from Millie’s embrace, Matty gazed at Austin, who in return nodded at the truck. They were ready. Well, as ready as he’d ever be. As he looked around, taking in the group of people, who looked back at him fondly in return, the previous tightness eased from his chest, and he could once again breathe more freely. Whatever happened in Waco or in Eden or elsewhere, Will, Millie and Ray would be right here, waiting for them. For him. And it felt comforting. He bent down and ruffled Cassie’s soft fur while she stole a doggy kiss from him.

“You be a good girl now, Cassie,” he whispered into her warm neck. “I’ll be back real soon, girl, real soon.” His eyes burned once again, his heart swelling from the love he felt for his dog. *His dog.* “I love you, Cassie. You’re my best girl in the world.” He rose, wiping at his moist cheeks, while Cassie looked at him with her devoted, chestnut eyes.

“You ready?” Austin wrapped him in a tight embrace from behind.

“Yeah, I’m ready.” *I’m ready.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

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### Ethan – Now

“WELL, THIS WAS the saddest fucking meal I’ve had in a loong time,” his younger brother Reeve sighed as he pushed away from the dining table.

“Reeve! Language,” his mom scolded, a stern look directed at her youngest son. Reeve Bishop was seventeen minutes younger than his twin brother River, who right now tried to muffle a “*sucker*” behind his right hand. “And that goes for you, too, River. I’m just about fed up with you boys and your language around the house. And so is your father.”

“Sorry, what, hon?” his dad looked up from his Sunday paper, a slightly confused look on his prematurely wrinkled face, elaborate crow’s feet around his gentle eyes.

“Their language, Dan,” his mom repeated. “Your sons sound like they were brought up in a brothel or, even worse, in some big city.” She shook her head, while she rose from her chair. “You boys can start clearing off the table and do the dishes...” She looked in resignation at her twins.

“Mom, c’mon, we did them only just yesterday...” River whined, shooting daggers at Reeve, who looked smug. Punishments such as doing the dishes or cleaning out the chicken coop were always easier when you weren’t doing them alone, but alongside your partner-in-crime.

“And *why* did you do them yesterday?” she raised a questioning eyebrow at River, placing her hands on her broad hips. She was still wearing her floral apron which she wore most of the day, always busy with housework.

“It was an accident!” Reeve blurted, cheeks flushing.

“Accident my ass...” his dad murmured from behind his paper, “ain’t no such thing as a darn accident with you boys

around,” he winked over the top of the paper at Reeve.

“Now, hon, how am I supposed to teach our boys good manners when their own father has the mouth of a sailor?” his mom shook her head, failing to hide a fond smile directed at her husband.

“Why can’t Ethan do the dishes? How come he gets to sit around all day, just moping like he got his privates caught in the electric fence?” Reeve gestured at Ethan, who was oblivious to the ruckus going on at the dinner table. Ethan had been in his own head during most of the meal—hell, ever since he got back from Maine, really—and had only contributed a few “*yes, please*” and “*no, thanks*” to the conversation.

“Your brother isn’t feeling well, so you leave him outta this,” his mom raised her voice an octave as she threw her eldest a concerned look. “Now, get goin’, the two of ya!”

“Sorry, what, Mom?” Ethan looked up from where he’d been rearranging the green peas on his plate for the one-hundredth time.

“Nothin’, sweetheart,” she smiled at him, “just your brothers being little brats again.” She winked at the twins in her usual way to signal them, “*I don’t really think that you’re brats, you just drive me up the freaking wall most days.*”

“Oh, okay...” Ethan trailed off, once again focusing on his peas. No matter how many times he tried to count them, he always lost his thread when Avery’s sad, beautiful eyes appeared in front of him. Ethan couldn’t stop thinking about the way that Avery had looked the last time he’d seen him. Curled up on his side, knees tucked to his chest, whimpering like a wounded animal. Please, Eth, just go.

No matter how hard he tried, Ethan could no longer recall the rational thought behind leaving Avery that day. There probably hadn’t been any. In that moment, he’d just felt so... Afraid. Yes, afraid. It wasn’t often that fear took hold of him, but in that moment, standing in Avery’s bedroom, he’d been consumed with fear. Fear of taking a leap. Of stepping into the unknown. The more he played the whole day over and over in

his head, he realized that he'd done wrong by Avery. He shouldn't have gone back to Boston in the first place—that was a selfish fucking idea if there ever was one—but he had just wanted to see Avery so bad. To smell his hair again and taste his skin. To feel Avery's slender fingers trailing along his spine while he whispered sweet nothings into his ear. And he should never have slept with Avery. That was a cruel thing to do, and Ethan had never considered himself to be a cruel, uncaring person. But he had, nonetheless, even though he knew that he was breaking Avery's heart. *I know it's not my heart you've come back for because I told you already. It's yours whether you want it or not...* Fuck, he was such an asshole. Such a spineless, gutless coward.

In three days, he was supposed to start at Peterson's farm. Mr. Peterson had put him in charge of the stables since Ethan had always had a knack for horses even though right now, he doubted that he'd be able to tell a stallion from a mare. Since he'd gotten home, he'd spent his days in a haze and his nights tossing and turning in his bed. Until he, in the early morning hours, finally succumbed to a turbulent sleep filled with images of Avery naked, smiling, crying. He would wake up, drenched in sweat, his sheets tangled between his thighs as he hugged his pillow against his chest, sobbing. Shit. He was only nineteen and still it felt like the fucking end of the world. He knew, of course, that it wasn't. That notion was, of course, ridiculous, and yet, the feeling lingered that he had fucked up...

“Son, are you gonna give me a hand tomorrow with the fence?” He hadn't noticed that everyone had left the room aside from his dad who stood next to him, a semi-worried frown between his brows, his large hands placed carefully on Ethan's shoulders.

“Sure,” he whispered, staring out into nothing. “I can do that.”

“Son, are you—?”

“Dad, I don't wanna talk about it, okay?” He sighed, brushing his hands through his longish hair. He needed a haircut. And a shower. And a...



“Sure thing, son. I just...” his dad looked at him, his pale blue eyes filled with concern. “Just know that I’m here—your mamma’s here—in case you wanna talk. Or not.”

“I know, Dad. Thanks. I’m just... you know...” He shrugged, pushing his chair back from the table.

“Yeah, I know, son... I know.”

As Ethan climbed the stairs to the second floor, his old dog Walter got up from the floor under the dining table and followed him upstairs. Blind in one eye with arthritis in his hind legs, it was quite an effort for the old mutt, but since Ethan had come back from Maine, Walter followed him everywhere. It was okay, though. He preferred dogs over people these days. Walter didn’t ask any well-meaning questions or send him compassionate stares across the dinner table. He just was content to finally have Ethan home again.

As he closed the door behind him to his bedroom, Walter immediately headed for his favorite spot on a worn Army blanket on the floor next to Ethan’s bed. Sighing deeply into the scratchy blanket, Walter closed his eyes, and rested his old bones for the day. He’d always been a good dog. Good-natured and loyal. *Loyal*. Suddenly, Matty’s words coursed through his mind. “*When are you gonna stop doing what you think people expect you to and start doing what you want instead?*” Was Matty right? Was he wasting his life by staying in Eden and working on the farm? In a year, Ryder would be off to college and the twins were old enough to help around the house, making ends meet, too.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about it since returning home. What it would be like to go to college. To get a degree in teaching kids with special needs like Matty. Ethan had even gone as far as Googling colleges that specialized in teaching dyslexic children and children with learning disabilities like his younger brother. He’d checked out various student loan options and scholarships. Avery was right. There wasn’t really anything standing in his way. So why was it that every time he pulled up an online application form, he hesitated? Something held him back. He couldn’t pinpoint it. Every time the reason

was just within his grasp, it escaped him. Slipped through his fingers.

Pulling out his phone, he opened his message thread with Avery. His last one was from two-and-a-half weeks ago.

**Me:** I got home okay.

**Me:** How are you?

**Me:** I'm sorry, Avery.

**Me:** I'm sorry.

Avery never replied which was all the same because nothing Avery could say would keep Ethan's heart from breaking any less. He wondered how long it took to get over a broken heart? If Avery was over him yet? *"I don't think I've ever been in love before. It kind of sucks, to be honest."* Yeah, something told him that Avery probably wasn't. He knew that he was an asshole for even thinking it, but somehow it gave him comfort. To know that Avery was probably just as sad as he was. Because then there would still be something connecting him to Avery. A bond of sadness. Yeah, Ethan both welcomed and dreaded the day that he would wake up and no longer feel sad...

## CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

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### Ethan – Now

“**HONEY! ETHAN, YOU’VE** got a visitor,” his mom’s voice rang through the open door from the porch. He’d just gone inside to get a drink before going back to helping his dad mend the fence next to the chicken coop. The wind and the unforgiving weather of West Texas had eaten away at the old wooden poles and replacing them was way overdue. He removed his baseball cap and wiped at his sweaty forehead, strands of hair plastering to his skin. It was fucking ruthless today, the August sun beating down from a cloudless sky. Every piece of clothing just stuck to you, and Ethan held the cool glass against his forehead, closing his eyes momentarily.

“Ethan! Hon...” his mom’s voice took on an insistent tone, and he poured the remaining water into the sink. *Shit!* The last thing he felt like was having company. It was enough that his brothers were home, messing around, smelly clothes lying around everywhere, open peanut butter jars and half-eaten sandwiches on the kitchen counter. Ryder wasn’t so bad—he was off at practice for most of the day. Summer break didn’t mean the end of practices—not if you were on a fast track to a scholarship. No, it was the twins, River and Reeve—also known as the devil’s spawns. They were fucking annoying little pests, with their farting competitions and crude remarks. If they weren’t beating each other up, they were running around the backyard, throwing water at each other, screaming their heads off. That’s why Ethan had opted for helping his dad. He could just barely deal with his dad’s occasional remarks as they worked side by side in the blistering sun, but if it was one of his acquaintances from school, he’d have to tell them to fuck off—or at least, to come back another day when his heart wasn’t fucking broken.

Opening the screen door, Ethan went out on the front porch and was met by his mom’s hesitant smile as she held out

her hand.

“Avery’s here!” She briefly touched Avery’s shoulder while she raised a questioning brow at her son—a silent plea in her green eyes. “Drove all the way from Boston to see ya. Ain’t that nice, honey?”

Ethan felt like he’d been run over by a truck and, at the same time, he felt his chest expanding as he took the first real breath in what seemed like weeks. How was it possible to feel happy and miserable all at once? He didn’t know. He’d never been one for diving into his feelings and dissecting them more closely. But if he were to pinpoint how he felt in this very moment, Avery’s hopeful blue eyes gazing back at him, it was torn.

“Hi,” Avery smiled, uncertainty painted all over his handsome face. “I... I’m on my way to Austin and...”

“Austin?” Ethan blurted. “Then you’ve gone too far. You’ve already passed Austin.” Was that his voice? He didn’t recognize it. It sounded cold, unfriendly even.

“You know what,” his mom interrupted. “I’ll just go get Avery some iced tea.” Her eyes shot daggers at Ethan, and he looked away, an uncomfortable heaviness settling in his stomach. *Fuck*. Smiling at Avery, she continued. “You must be thirsty, sweetie, from that *long* drive.” The word *long* was drawn out and Ethan cleared his throat still avoiding his mother’s gaze. Once she’d disappeared inside the house, he looked at Avery.

“What are you doing here, Avery?”

Avery held out his hand, a denim jacket clenched between his fingers.

“You forgot your jacket.” His voice came out frail and breathy. “Thought I’d just drop it off before I leave.” His brilliant eyes seemed to burn right through Ethan, all the way into his soul. They were the bluest of blue. Mesmerizing. Drawing Ethan in just like they’d done from the moment they’d first met in that changing room. It suddenly felt like

yesterday that Avery had smiled at him for the first time, blond locks framing his face.

“Eth?”

Shaking his head, Avery’s words registered in his head.

“You’re leaving? Where are you going?”

Avery raised his chin, a serene, determined look on his face.

“I’m going to Bolivia. I’m flying out of Austin tomorrow night. To La Paz.”

*Bolivia. As in fucking South America Bolivia?*

“Bolivia... what’s in Bolivia?” Ethan worked the words over in his head.

“I don’t know yet,” Avery smiled timidly, brushing a lock of hair behind his left ear, his silver earring catching the light. “I’m joining an international excavation at the foot of the Andes. A group of local archeologists found what appears to be an ancient village... well, at least the remains of one.” He shrugged, worrying his bottom lip. “It could be something huge, life-changing even, or nothing at all.”

Ethan felt that Avery wasn’t just talking about the excavation and suddenly it became hard to breathe.

“How long are you gonna be gone for?” Ethan’s mouth felt excruciatingly dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, the words struggling to exit his lips.

“I don’t know,” Avery whispered, shuffling his boots against the gravel, kicking up dust.

“But... What about your job? At the university?”

“I told them I can’t take the position after all.” Avery’s face seemed to relax, a hint of relief in his voice. “I’m not a teacher, Eth. I mean, I could do it and I’d probably even be okay at it. But it wouldn’t be me and I wouldn’t be great.” He paused briefly, frowning at Ethan. “Only those great at teaching should teach. Those who can make an actual difference. As it turns out, I’m better at digging. And drawing.

I kind of already knew that but it took me a little detour to get there.”

*Detour.* Was that what their time together had been? A detour.

“What did your parents say?” Ethan took a step closer to Avery.

“I haven’t told them. I figured they’ll learn soon enough once the academia gossip reaches the Hamptons. In any case, it’s my decision. My life.” The defiance was back in Avery’s eyes and Ethan realized that he admired him. In that moment, he admired Avery—and he envied him, too. Because for once in his life, Avery had done something selfish. Something that was just for him. And that made him so fucking brave. Braver than Ethan could ever be.

Avery closed the distance between them and held out the denim jacket. His challenging stare didn’t leave Ethan’s. He closed his hand around the worn fabric, but Avery didn’t let go of the jacket. He continued to look at Ethan, nothing but fierce honesty in his eyes.

“I want to be with you, Ethan. For real. No *but*s or *ifs*. Just you and me, finding our way in life. Figuring it out. Together. I think we could be good together. We *are* good together. Good for each other.”

“Avery...”

“What?” Hope and vulnerability seeped through Avery’s gentle voice.

Ethan shrugged his shoulders. He felt lost for words. Or maybe just lost.

“Are you just going to stand there like you’re carved out of stone? Like I don’t mean anything to you? Like your heart isn’t fucking broken just like mine?” Avery’s voice had a slight tremble to it but aside from that he looked calm. From the corner of his eye, Ethan noticed that his dad had dropped his hammer and looked in their direction, watching intently. *Fuck.* He couldn’t do this. He just couldn’t.

“What do you want me to say, Avery? Huh? That I’ll come with ya? That I’ll leave this place and my family and my job? And then what? What’s your grand plan, Avery? Tell me! I wanna know.” The words had come out harsher than he’d intended, but it felt like he was slowly losing his cool. One more look or word from Avery and he wasn’t sure that he could keep up the wall that he’d built around him. Between them.

“I don’t know, okay? I don’t have some masterplan. But I know that I’m in love with you and I want to fucking be with you, you stubborn idiot. I know that I don’t want to be without you. And the rest? We’ll figure it out along the way, okay? That’s what people do when they care about each other. They figure it out. Please tell me that you want that too, Eth.”

“That’s it? *We’ll figure it out*? Well, that’s just not good enough, Avery. It isn’t. Life isn’t just fucking rainbows and roses. Real life is hard. It isn’t some fairytale and this... you and me...” Ethan motioned with his hand between them, “there’s not gonna be some fairytale ending if that’s what you came lookin’ for.”

Avery nodded quietly, burying his free hand in his pocket. Even if Ethan had hit him across the face, Avery couldn’t have looked any more devastated.

“Okay... I guess I was mistaken then. I shouldn’t have assumed that you felt the same way about me that I feel about you... It just felt like it for a while, on the road. That this, us, that it was something.” Avery released the denim jacket and took a step backwards while shaking his head in resignation.

Ethan twisted the worn material in his hands, as he stood frozen, his eyes suddenly blurry. Briefly, Avery parted his lips as if he was going to say something, but then he turned around towards his car. Opening the side door, he got in, about to close the door.

“Avery! Sweetie, wait a second,” his mom came bolting through the open door, a glass of cold iced tea in her right hand filled to the brim with ice cubes. As she hurried down the porch steps, tea spilled all over the place, splashing the front of

her green cotton dress. Ethan couldn't recall that he'd ever seen his mom sprint like that before, always hollering at him and his younger brothers that they shouldn't run inside or down the steps. Placing the now half-filled glass on the dusty roof of Avery's car, she leaned against the side door, catching her breath while tapping lightly on the car window.

Rolling down the window, Avery glanced briefly at Ethan before he turned his gaze towards his mom.

"Please don't go like this, sweetie. At least stay for dinner. You've come all this way, Avery." She gestured at her husband who was walking towards Ethan, a determined look on his face. "Everything'll be just fine, honey. You'll see." She nodded reassuringly as she reached to open the car door.

"Jesus, Mom!" Ethan yelled, kicking at the dirt ground.

"Ethan Emmanuel Bishop, I've told you before and I'll tell you again. I'll not have you take the good Lord's name in vain! Not on my watch." Her green eyes beamed fiercely at her eldest child.

"Emmanuel?" Avery mumbled. "Your middle name is Emmanuel?" A small smile started tucking at the corner of his mouth as Avery got out of the car. His eyes had a moist sheen to them as he blinked at Ethan's mom in amazement.

"Yes, it's a family name," his mother chirped. "You see, sweetie, my grandfather, Ethan's great-grandfather, Emmanuel, was a proud and stubborn man—not unlike someone we both know," she mimicked while nodding in Ethan's direction.

"Aww, for fuck's sake," Ethan shook his head as he turned on his heel and headed for the cornfield behind the small farmhouse. He was done with this shitshow of a meet-the-parents or whatever the fuck it was supposed to be. If his own parents wanted to treat him like a child who couldn't decide for himself, he sure as shit wasn't gonna act all mature and grown-up. If his mom wanted to recount the entire family history to Avery, he might as well just go hide away some place. Once his mom got started about her ancestors, there was no telling when she would be done. *So fuck it. Fuck all of it.*



## CHAPTER SIXTY

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### Ethan – Now

“**SO, YOU’RE JUST** gonna let him leave like that? After what that boy just told ya?” His dad stood in front of him, where Ethan was sitting, hiding away in the cornfield. It wasn’t often that his dad voiced his opinion about anything—he usually left it up to his wife to tell their four children off when they screwed up or misbehaved.

“Dad, please...” Ethan brushed at his hair, dusting invisible dirt off.

“I’ve always been proud of you, son. And I’ve always supported every decision that you and your siblings have made. Even when you chose to drive across the country to find Matty. But this time, I don’t know what the heck is going on in that stubborn head of yours.” As if to emphasize his words, his dad shook his head, sighing deeply.

“Dad, it’s my life and I’m a grown man and I can make up my own damn mind...”

“You’re a pissant, is what you are!”

“Jesus, Dad, tell me like it is, wontcha?” Ethan’s cheeks heated up, his mouth going dry.

“Well, you are. Did you not just hear that young man? Are you slow? Or are you just too young and careless to give a damn?”

“I’m not careless, Dad...” he murmured, kicking his cowboy boots at the ground. He’d started wearing them again as soon as he’d returned home, hiding his hiking boots all the way back in his closet.

“Yeah, I know you ain’t. And you sure ain’t slow either. Top of your class. Then what is it?” He raised his eyebrow at Ethan.

“I’m... It’s not gonna work.” Ethan shrugged, still avoiding eye contact with his dad.

“How do ya know that when you haven’t even tried?”

Ethan’s eyes started burning and briefly he squeezed them tight, shutting out the world and his dad’s voice. When he felt that he could speak without bursting into tears, he continued, his voice shaking.

“Because... Avery is everything that I’m not. He’s a freaking professor, Dad! He knows about all sorts of things that I’ve never even heard about. He comes from an entirely different world, Dad. Okay? And he’s older than me. I’m just this kid from West Texas and he’s...” Suddenly all the excuses seemed insignificant. lame, even. Because that was exactly what they were. Excuses. Ethan searched his mind, but it was all a blur by now, the valid reasons escaping him. Looking at his dad, the man he’d looked up to all his life, Ethan was met with nothing but understanding in the older man’s eyes.

“And he draws,” Ethan blurted, brushing at the tears that had, after all his attempts at holding them back, begun trailing down his dusty cheeks.

“Does he now?” his dad smiled at him affectionately, the skin surrounding his eyes crinkling with careful amusement.

“Yeah... He draws these beautiful sketches, Dad...” Ethan’s voice hitched. “That’s why his fingers are always stained black.” He looked at his dad, who nodded at him reassuringly. “And he’s a fucking nightmare on the road. He hums along to every goddamn sad love song he can think of... Jarvis this and Morrissey that. And he’s like a kid when it comes to food... I mean, what twenty-eight-year-old lives off strawberry milkshakes and Reese’s Cups? He’s just so... and I’m not... I’m not...” Ethan looked at his dad, who smiled at him, the way he’d always smiled at his firstborn. Whether Ethan had just crashed his bike or had gotten an A on his history test. Or whether he’d convinced his younger siblings to steal apples or forgotten to close the door to the chicken coop. With fondness and love.

“But you love him,” his dad’s voice wrapped around him like a soft blanket.

“Of course, I fucking love him, Dad! What’s not to love?” Ethan brushed furiously at a tear that hung from his chin.

“Well, you tell me? Because apparently there must be somethin’...” he nodded challengingly at Ethan.

“He’s too good for me.”

“Bullshit.”

“Dad...” Ethan sighed, biting the inside of his right cheek.

“I think he’s just right for ya.”

“Dad... You don’t know that.”

“Oh, but I do know that. You wanna know how I know that?” His dad took a step towards Ethan and sat down next to him, his right knee squeaking in the process. Ethan nodded weakly, still brushing at his tearstained cheeks. “Because I know you, son. I’ve known you since the minute I first saw ya. And you know what? You are good too, Ethan.”

“Dad...”

“You are. You’re a good and decent man. You’re a good son. All those weeks, sometimes months at a time, I was away in Dallas or Austin. Who was there for your mamma and your brothers? Always busting your ass at Peterson’s to make ends meet.” A dark shadow swept across his dad’s face. “I know I depended too much on ya, son. I see that now. It should never have been your responsibility to help provide for our family, but I was struggling to make ends meet and somewhere along the way that struggle became yours, too. But I’m telling you now that that’s not your burden to bear. Not anymore.”

“Dad, I never saw it as a burden. Don’t say that. It’s my family, too...” Ethan’s voice came out raspy. It was the first time in his life that his dad opened to him like this and somehow, he felt his dad’s honesty chipping away at his resolve to be strong.

“It is and I love you for thinkin’ like that. I do, son, but it was never right. But that’s just the kinda man you are. You’re

a good brother, Ethan. A good friend. You're the reason Matty came away from that awful childhood with more than a shred of humanity left in him. Because you're a good friend and because you were good to him when hardly anyone else was. So don't you dare sit there and tell me that you aren't good enough for someone like Avery."

"But what about the farm? I can't just keep Peterson hanging..."

"You can and you will. That farm is still gonna be here when you get back. Or if we are real lucky, you won't wanna come back at all unless it's for a birthday or a holiday."

"But..."

"What? Are you gonna bust your ass like your old man for the rest of your life until every goddamn bone in your body hurts every damn minute of the day?" He tapped at his right knee. "I want more for you and your brothers. I've always wanted more for you. I'm not ever gonna give you the *'if it's good enough for me'* crap. No, sir. I'll consider it a failure as a parent if you kids end up busting your asses in the fields whether they're made outta corn, oil or covered in concrete."

"There's nothin' wrong with good honest work, Dad."

"No, there ain't. But there's nothin' wrong with wantin' more either... You've got a good head on your shoulders. No reason why you can't be anything you want."

"You've got it all figured out, huh?" Ethan shook his head, feeling the fear slowly loosening its grip on him.

"Sure do. Now what's the real problem, cowboy?" His dad kicked his own dusty cowboy boot against Ethan's equally dusty one. "You afraid you're gonna fall off the horse?"

"Yeah... maybe..." Ethan couldn't help chuckling.

"Yeah, I thought so... Whatcha gonna do if you fall off?" His dad pushed at his shoulder.

"I'm gonna get back up right away."

"You will. Good boy. Now, let's go save that young professor of yours from your mamma. If I'm not mistaken,

she's pulled out the heavy guns by now, showin' him your baby pictures, naked butts, and all."

## CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

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### Ethan – Now

“**SWEETHEART, I THINK** we have just about enough now.” His mom gestured at the large bowl filled with green beans on the kitchen table in front of Avery. The very same table where Ethan had eaten thousands of meals, telling his mom about his day and yet another adventure with Matty. It looked so domestic, Avery sitting there picking green beans from his mom’s vegetable garden, a mild blush in his cheeks. “Oh, there you are, hon,” she noticed Ethan, standing frozen in the door opening to the kitchen.

Avery looked up from his chore, a hesitant look in his blue eyes, pink lips slightly agape as if he’d momentarily stopped breathing.

“Hey,” Ethan spoke softly, eyes not leaving Avery’s. A hesitant smile began to slowly form at the right corner of Avery’s mouth, before it broke free and spread to the rest of his face.

“Hi,” Avery whispered, the blush in his cheeks turning a shade pinker, a slight wariness remaining in his eyes.

“Where’s your father?” his mom wiped her fingers in a kitchen towel, looking at him questioningly.

“Uhm... he’s just outside...” Ethan gestured behind him, his mom’s voice sounding distant, his attention focusing solely on Avery who still looked like he was holding his breath.

“I’ll just run out and tell him to dig up some potatoes, then,” she gave Ethan a pointed stare in passing and there was no doubt about the underlying message in her stern eyes. *You boys sort it out, now.* “You can help Avery with the corn,” she added in passing.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ethan nodded, as he reached to pull out a chair across from Avery, whose gaze moved between mother and son.

“Not that one,” his mom’s small hand clasped around his wrist as he started pulling out the chair. “The legs are all wobbly. It needs fixin’.” She nodded at the chair next to Avery instead, “you take this one, hon...”

Ethan sighed deeply as he pulled out the chair next to Avery, who was trying to hold back a small, timid smile. *Yeah, you just wait until they gang up on you, Avery.* His parents didn’t often meddle in his life but when they did, they came blasting alright, full steam ahead. If you underestimated the quiet nature of Dan and Belinda Bishop, you’d end up being ambushed. They may not be the loudest in the crowd, but they fought tooth and nail when it mattered. And their children mattered more than anything.

Sitting down next to Avery, Ethan’s head suddenly overflowed with things he wanted to say. Things he needed to get off his chest. *I like you, too. Scratch that. I’m in love with you, too. Shit. But I’m scared. I’m so fucking scared. I’m scared shitless. But I wanna be with you, Avery. More than anything. Fuck.* But all that came out was a muffled, “I’m sorry,” as he reached for Avery’s left hand, tangling their fingers together. As soon as their skin touched, the air between them changed.

Finally, Avery exhaled and as soon as the withheld breath had left his lips, a solitary tear slipped from his hopeful eyes, followed closely by a stream of others. Ethan felt his heart breaking at the display of raw vulnerability, his own heart trying to break free from his chest to reach Avery’s. If he’d thought for one minute that the bond between them had been severed when he’d left Boston, he’d been mistaken. It might have been stretched to the maximum, but it wasn’t even close to being torn.

“Baby, please don’t cry,” Ethan pleaded as he reached out and brushed his thumb against Avery’s tearstained cheek. “You’re gonna break my heart if you cry.”

A mixture between a hiccup and a whimper burst from Avery's lips as he started crying in earnest, small puffs of his warm breath hitting Ethan's right cheek. Instinctively, he reached for the back of Avery's neck, just below the messy ponytail, and pulled him against his chest. His frail shoulders shaking, Avery sobbed into Ethan's collarbone, and he squeezed him even tighter.

Shit, he was such an asshole. Such a selfish asshole. In his misguided need to protect himself, he'd hurt Avery. He hadn't realized the effect he'd had on Avery. How his rejection had almost broken the other man. What it must have taken for Avery to come to Eden, bare his heart to Ethan in front of his parents and everything. He realized that if he didn't fix this, he was gonna hate himself for the rest of his life.

"Baby, please. I'm so sorry. Please don't cry..." The words continued to tumble from Ethan's lips now that he'd woken from the slumber he'd been in since he'd left Boston. "Don't cry, Avery. I can't bear it when you cry. I love you, baby. I love you so much... I'm so sorry it took me this long to tell ya..."

Avery sniffed against his chest, fingers twisting in the fabric of Ethan's t-shirt, his breath slowly settling, no longer coming out in gasps. Ethan's body relaxed, his heart settling in the cavity of his chest, air filling his lungs. *This is what it feels like to be free.* He'd never imagined that he'd find this feeling in another person. Sure, he'd felt free when he'd roamed the country roads on his bicycle, Matty by his side. Or at least, somewhat free, because Matty was right. Ethan had always been his keeper. He'd never let himself completely surrender to the moment. It was the same when he was running track. He'd loved the feeling of his body working as one powerful machine, miles beneath his feet, his heart pounding away in his chest. But there'd always been this nagging thought at the back of his mind. Was his dad okay? Was his mom okay? Ryder, River, Reeve... But in this moment, holding Avery close to his chest, there was nothing except for this feeling of freedom and belonging and then... nothing else.



Avery continued to cling to him, but the crying had ceased, the front of Ethan's t-shirt wet from his tears.

"Avery, please say something," Ethan whispered into the citrusy softness of his hair. He couldn't help chuckling as he more felt than heard Avery mumbling something into his chest. "What was that, baby?" He carefully pushed at Avery's shoulders, searching his eyes, as he held him out in front of him.

Avery met his eyes, his own red rimmed but filled with something which had been there all along and which Ethan now recognized as love. It was love, unfiltered, unguarded, and it had been there all along, right in front of him. He realized that Avery had bared himself to him since day one and every day since. In every look and in every touch. In every gesture and in every smile, Avery had told him. *I love you. Please, be mine because I am already yours.*

"I'm yours, too," the words escaped his lips without Ethan realizing it, Avery's face transforming in front of him.

"Are you?" Avery whispered carefully. "Are you truly mine?" His eyes seemed to search Ethan's face, examining it carefully. Ethan nodded, swallowing against the lump in the back of his throat. Avery nodded too, his eyes turning impossibly blue.

"Because if you are, I'm going to want all of you. Not just a fraction of you. All of you. I'm going to want you when you're scared or when you're sad, too. Maybe I'll even want you the most when you feel unsure about yourself. About your place in the world. Yes, I think I'll want you even more, then."

Ethan continued to nod, his eyes burning, his chest tightening with what he now recognized as fear. But it was a good kinda fear. It was a fucking great kinda fear. Because it was the kinda fear you only felt when you were finally awake. Truly awake. It was the kinda fear you could only feel when there was something at stake.

"But you have to talk to me, Eth, okay? I'm not a fucking mind reader. Half the time, I don't even know what's going on in that stubborn head of yours, let alone your heart." Avery

smiled, stabbing his right index finger at Ethan's chest, releasing a wince from him. "I've been surrounded by people all my life who don't speak. Well, they do. But they don't say anything. Not really. I can't do that anymore. I *won't* do that anymore." The final words were spoken with an unwavering clarity that Ethan hadn't heard before.

"I want that, too," Ethan whispered, and he felt the last protective shield fall away from his chest. "I really want that, too, baby. So, so much." He reached out and twisted a golden lock that had escaped from Avery's ponytail around this finger.

"Okay," Avery nodded. "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

A smile spread across Avery's sensual mouth, his eyes once again tearing up. In a frantic movement, Ethan pulled him against his chest and started pressing kisses everywhere he could reach. He heard Avery chuckling against his chest as he squirmed beneath Ethan's lips. Releasing himself, his lips finally found Ethan's, and he sighed deeply into his mouth. How had he ever in his right mind pretended that he could be without this? Without him. Without Avery. *Avery*. Such a remarkable name for someone who was made just for him. *Mine. Mine, mine, mine*, his heart called out. No, it fucking roared as Avery's sexy tongue teased the corner of his mouth. He opened for him, his own tongue searching for Avery's, once again savoring his sweetness, his familiar taste. Avery moved in his arms as he got up from his chair and straddled Ethan, settling in his lap. He wrapped his arms around Avery's waist, squeezing him closer yet. Avery whimpered, as he started grinding his hips against Ethan, moaning shamelessly into his mouth, his tongue battling with Ethan's for control.

They continued like this for a long time, the outside world disappearing, only the two of them. Hands, tongues, whimpers, and muffled words. *Baby. Sorry. Love you. Mine*. In the end, Avery broke free from his kiss, eyes love-drunk, lips bruised, his sweaty hair plastered to his forehead and temples.

Resting his head against Ethan's, he mumbled against his equally bruised lips,

"I love you so much, Ethan. So, so much." He suddenly shook his head, laughing. "I feel so close to Mattie when I'm with you... I can't explain it. It's just... It's as if she no longer only lives in the shadows or inside my heart. It's as if she becomes alive again when I'm with you. I know it's silly but... It's how it feels..."

Ethan reached out and held his hands against Avery's heated cheeks, framing his beautiful face with his large, calloused hands.

"Look at you," he breathed. "You're so fucking beautiful, baby. It looks good on you, Avery."

"What?" Avery laughed.

"Being mine. Belonging to me. It looks so fucking good on you, baby." He dug his fingers into Avery's soft skin as it vibrated beneath him.

"I'm gonna let it slide, just this once, hon," his mom's reprimanding voice interrupted their world of two. "But no more cursing, Ethan." She raised an eyebrow at her son, while Avery buried his scarlet face against Ethan's chest. "And I see, I'm gonna have to do the corn by myself."

"Sorry, ma'am," Ethan mumbled as he fought to hold back a laugh.

"You're forgiven now that I see that you've finally pulled your head outta your stubborn butt and come to your senses," she winked, while nodding at Avery who was still in hiding against Ethan's broad chest. Digging into the front pocket of her sky-blue apron, she pulled out a small booklet and threw it on the table next to Ethan. "And you're welcome, hon. Now go get your stuff together before we eat."

Avery looked up from Ethan's chest and stared at the dark-blue passport next to him. Ethan hadn't seen it in years, even forgot that he had it in the first place. He'd gotten it for a school trip to Mexico in the tenth grade. He'd been busting his ass off at Peterson's for months to be able to afford the three-

day trip. Avery swallowed before his surprised eyes found Ethan's who looked just as baffled.

"What—? You're coming with me?" he blurted.

"He's comin' with ya," his mom replied in what Ethan recognized as her *no-point-in-arguing-with-me* voice.

"But..." Ethan frowned, a million questions building.

"I said, you're goin' with Avery, and that's final. Your father has already gone to Peterson's. The twins can help him after school instead. They need to start gettin' off their lazy behinds, anyway, earning their keep. It's long overdue, but I only have myself to blame for that, nursing them around the clock. But that ends now."

"You're coming with me," a stunned Avery repeated.

Ethan looked at his mom in disbelief, who in return raised a challenging eyebrow at her son. Doubt momentarily coursed through him. And fear. But then the words came like a giant wave, washing away everything, until there was only the truth left. *Then go be happy, Eth. No one deserves it more than you.* Yes, he was gonna go do exactly that. He owed it to Matty, who'd fought so hard for his own happiness. He owed it to his parents, who'd always fought for him. Fuck, he owed it to Avery, who was fighting for them right now. But most of all, he owed it to himself.

Looking into Avery's blue eyes, which held nothing but love and the promise of more, just *more*, Ethan shrugged.

"I guess, I'm comin' with you, then."

## EPILOGUE

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### Ethan – One year later

“**I CAN’T BELIEVE** you did that,” Avery chuckled as he hid his face against Ethan’s naked chest. “You’re such a dork.” Ethan wrapped his tanned arms tighter around his boyfriend as he peppered kisses against Avery’s right shoulder.

“If I’m a dork, you’re a fucking dork too, baby.” Yeah, they were both ridiculous, but Ethan didn’t give a shit—he was in love, and it was still the best fucking feeling in the world. He kept expecting it to wear off—at least, just a little bit—but most days he only just managed to close the door behind him to the bungalow, before a horny and half-naked Avery jumped him, whining “*I need you so bad, Eth,*” against his lips. Yeah, it wasn’t wearing off. They were both crazy in love. It was as if there was this unspoken agreement between them that when Avery was home, they would make up for when he was away and go at it like bunnies on speed.

Home was a small bungalow thirty minutes outside of Boston. They’d bought it three months ago—Avery had spent the rest of his inheritance from his grandfather for the down payment—they’d taken out a loan for the rest. Once Avery had quit the job at Boston University, he never looked back. They’d ended up staying in Bolivia for four months and Avery sold a series of articles about what, in fact, turned out to be an ancient Inca village, to a large magazine in Boston. They’d already commissioned him for his next trip to Chile in October. Ethan was starting school in September at a community college in Boston, studying to be a teacher. He’d been working at a coffee shop ever since they’d returned from Bolivia since he didn’t feel good about letting Avery support him.

“True,” Avery murmured as he continued to suck on Ethan’s Adam’s apple. “It was sweet, though. I love that you

did that,” Avery chuckled as he unfused himself from Ethan’s neck and looked down at him. “Who knew my boyfriend was such a romantic...” His eyes were beaming brightly in his sun-kissed face, his blond hair gathered in a messy bun on top of his head. In one swift movement, Ethan flipped them, so it was now Avery who was lying on the sandy-white beach.

“Hey, I’m plenty romantic!” Ethan protested, stabbing at Avery’s ribs, making him squirm deliciously which set off a chain reaction, stirring Ethan’s dick to life behind the confinement of his board shorts. He groaned against Avery’s chest, biting at his nipple, which was perhaps not the smartest move, come to think of it. Because Avery was a slut for nipple action, and now he was pretty much grinding his hard cock against Ethan’s thigh.

“Here we go again...” a deep voice sounded from further down the beach. “We can’t leave the two of you alone for more than five damn minutes and you’re goin’ at it again.” Ethan looked up and spotted Austin carrying a cooler and a six-pack, a knowing grin on his face. A couple of yards behind him, Matty appeared from behind a sand dune, quickly buttoning his cutoffs, cheeks flushed a dark pink.

“You’re one to fucking talk, man,” Ethan yelled back, nodding at his best friend. Austin looked over his left shoulder, eyeing his boyfriend, then shrugged as if he could care less that they’d been caught too. He probably could, seeing as he was planning to make a decent man out of Matty very soon. Matty, of course, didn’t know that. Austin had pulled Ethan aside yesterday on the beach while Matty and Avery were tossing a frisbee with Cassie.

“You think it’s too soon?” Austin had whispered, shifting nervously on his feet.

“Hell, no,” Ethan had grinned. “He’s gonna say yes for sure, man.” He’d become great friends with Austin too, often spending a long weekend in Grant’s Harbor when he and Avery could both get away.

“It’s all Ethan’s fault,” Avery mumbled, eyes shining, lips pouty. “He decided to suddenly be romantic,” he continued,

gesturing at the sand closer to the water.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Ethan groaned as he brushed his hands through his sand-covered hair. “I’ll never hear the end of it, will I?”

“Hey, Eth,” Matty stood before him, bending down and wrapping Ethan in a solid hug.

“Hey,” Ethan sighed against his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Not much. You?”

Before Ethan could reply, Avery blurted,

“Ethan drew me a heart. In the sand. Over there.” He pointed at the large heart in the wet sand, his smile competing to outshine the sun.

“Fuck me!” Austin grinned before he knuckle-slammed Ethan, admiration on his face. “Way to woo your man.”

“Thanks,” Ethan grinned, cheeks flushed pink.

“What does it say?” Matty asked as he scrunched his nose, stepping closer to the outline of a heart in the sand.

“*You’re the light, baby,*” Austin read aloud, a puzzled frown between his black brows. “What the fuck, dude?” he grinned at Ethan.

“I know, right?” Avery cooed, making googly eyes at his boyfriend. “Isn’t it just spectacularly romantic in a Captain Wentworth kind of way,” he continued, a dreamy look in his love-drunk eyes.

“Captain who?” Matty asked, raising an eyebrow at Ethan, who looked slightly confused.

“Captain Wentworth,” Avery groaned, nearly melting into the sand. “Seriously, you guys. He’s only the dreamiest male protagonist ever in English literature...” He pretended to swoon into Ethan’s lap, a slender hand against his forehead.

Ethan leaned back on his elbows, tangling his fingers through Avery’s hair. He failed to bite back a loud laugh as Austin chased a screaming Matty around the beach, making kissy faces while yelling “*Captain, my Captain.*” Cassie

started barking enthusiastically as she chased after the two of them. Reaching for the cooler, Avery got out a cold beer, handing it to Ethan, before once again settling his lovely head back against his boyfriend's thigh.



## EPILOGUE

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### Matty – Four years later

“I **NEVER** IN a million years thought I’d say this, but it feels... okay to be back in Eden, Eth.” They were lying in the cornfield behind Ethan’s house. Well, it wasn’t exactly Ethan’s house anymore. He still lived just outside of Boston, in his small bungalow with Avery and their endless shelves spilling over with books. Their home office was a joke—half-graded history papers and sketches scattered everywhere. How they’d managed to fit in two desks was beyond Matty’s comprehension, but they both insisted that they worked better sitting across from each other. *Working, my ass.*

But it was a cute fucking bungalow, and they could afford the mortgage between them with Ethan working at a school in Boston with dyslexic kids and Avery writing articles for various magazines. Mostly anthropology these days. And William loved their garden. He and Cassie could spend hours playing, before he retreated to the tree house that *Uncle Ethan* had built him in an old walnut tree.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Ethan smiled as he squinted at the cloudless Texas sky, freckles exploding across the ridge of his nose. “It ain’t so bad as long as you’re here, too, and I don’t have to stay for good,” Ethan winked, a broad smile coasting across his face.

They were back in Eden for the Fourth of July. Matty was staying at his mom’s house with Austin and their foster son William—Ethan and Avery had arrived only just yesterday in time for the barbeque tonight at the Bishops’ house. They often did that, he and Ethan, coordinating their visits. It was always more fun to be back in Eden when he’d get to hang out with his best friend. They tried to get together at least once a month, Matty sometimes taking the trip to Boston for a

baseball game, or Ethan driving down to Grant's Harbor for the weekend.

It still made his heart swell when he thought of that day when Ethan had shown up in Grant's Harbor out of the blue. Some days Matty almost forgot that there'd been a time when he didn't have Ethan in his life or that they'd been separated for three years. Everything was just so natural when it came to their friendship. So effortless. So real. Always had been.

"Yeah," Matty sighed, his gaze tracing an airplane. "Your folks seem happy."

"Yeah, they are," Ethan grinned. "I think Dad is loving his new life as a cowboy."

Dan Bishop was no longer working construction. He'd taken a job at the Peterson farm, responsible for the horses. Ryder had gone off to college and the twins had graduated high school, now working in Waco at a large auto repair shop. Matty knew that it meant a lot to Ethan, no longer having to worry about his family. Matty sensed a change in his best friend. Like a weight had been lifted off Ethan's shoulders and he finally allowed himself to live his own life without the constant guilt of not being back home.

*Home.* Well, Grant's Harbor was home now, wasn't it? Still, a part of Matty would always be linked to Eden. His mom and their newfound relationship and her settling into her new role as a grandmother. His fond childhood memories—because there were some—of him and Ethan roaming the country roads on their bikes, tongues pink from cherry popsicles and grass staining their knees. In many ways, things had come full circle after his father had gotten his sentence. Twenty-five years. Twenty-five. Matty didn't know if it was a fair sentence. Who was he to judge? How did you even measure out all the hurt and neglect in years? All the beatings and the hateful slurs. All the broken bones and the hungry nights. You couldn't. You shouldn't. It didn't matter anyway. He'd made peace with that part of his life a long time ago, focusing on the silver lining instead. Austin, William, Millie, Will. And Ethan. *Always Ethan.*

“Life’s pretty good, ain’t it?” Ethan turned to him, a content smile bursting from the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, it is. It’s real good.” Matty paused briefly, taking in his best friend. Ethan’s hair had grown quite a bit, auburn locks covering his ears. Not shoulder-length like Avery’s but still... “Do you think Avery’s the one?” Matty asked, his gaze connecting with Ethan’s.

“I’d like to think so, yeah. I mean, I really love him, you know. We work well together. He gets me. I mean, it’s not like you and your baby daddy,” Ethan pushed at Matty’s shoulder teasingly, a broad grin lighting up his face. “Compared to the two of you, constantly sucking each other’s faces off...”

“You’re such a liar, Eth. You’re so whipped. I’ve seen the way you look at your man. Like he hung the fucking moon.”

“Shut up, dude,” Ethan grinned, looking pretty content with the idea of being whipped. *Fuck, now Matty had the image of Avery in his head, holding a whip. Shit!* “Enough about me. What about you? How’re your men doing?”

Matty got a goofy look on his face. He always did when someone brought up his husband and their son William. They’d become his foster parents a year ago when he’d just turned four. Catherine, a social worker from Biddeford, had contacted them since Matty and Austin volunteered at one of their shelters on weekends and they’d become good friends. The little boy’s mother had disappeared and left him unattended for days until a neighbor had called the CPS. Apparently, the single mother worked as a prostitute and with no living relatives willing to take him in, the four-year-old, who hadn’t spoken a word since he was discovered, had been in a group home for three days. When Austin and Matty arrived at the home in Biddeford, the boy had caught Cassie’s attention immediately and as soon as the boy had noticed her, he’d whispered “*dog,*” stunning everyone.

They’d discussed having kids for a while, and when Austin’s gray eyes had found Matty’s across the room while mouthing “*sweetheart?*” that had been it. They’d been approved for foster care, initially on an emergency basis, but

they were now in the process of adopting William, since his mother had turned up dead a month later because of a drug overdose. Catherine had assured them that they stood an excellent chance since they were married and owned their own home and business. It didn't matter, though. In their hearts William had become theirs the moment they saw him and had been ever since.

"Yeah. Austin's the one. There's no one else out there for me, Eth. He's it." Matty's voice came out steadfast as ever. "Some things you just know." He hesitated, eyes lighting up with unfiltered happiness. "Like that day a baseball practice. You remember? We were only five and six, but I just knew that we would be friends. And here we are. All grown-up and you're still my best friend. My brother."

"Yeah, I know," Ethan nodded.

"It's like... You're this constant in my life, Eth. Always have been. Whatever happens. It all comes back to you, you know?"

"Matty..." Ethan's voice came out muffled as he swallowed audibly, his green eyes meeting Matty's blue ones, like they'd done that day at baseball practice so many years ago.

"No, it's true, Eth. Everything that happens... The good and the not so good. I can face it all because I know that you'll always have my back. Just like I'll always have yours. That's real friendship, Eth. That's..." Matty paused, his eyes watery as he played with a straw.

"Family," Ethan whispered.

"Yeah. It's family." Matty nodded, quiet for a moment, his gaze meeting Ethan's in silent understanding. "So, how's work?"

"It's good," Ethan smiled, his face lighting up with eagerness. "Real good. I like it. I don't know if I'll ever get used to being called Mr. Bishop, though. Half the time, I'm looking over my shoulder, expecting to see my dad," he grinned.

“Yeah, I bet,” Matty laughed, the idea of Ethan with such a formal title still foreign to him.

“But the kids are great. Pretty amazing, actually,” Ethan spoke, his voice filled with warmth and affection.

“Lucky kids,” Matty smiled, a wistful look momentarily flashing across his face.

“Nah, I don’t know about that... I guess, I’m just as good as the next middle school history and geography teacher,” Ethan shrugged, a modest smile tugging at his lips.

“I bet you’re the best goddamn teacher those kids’ll ever have,” Matty spoke, his voice unwavering, eyes piercing blue.

“Thanks, man,” Ethan mumbled, a timid pink flush painted across his cheeks. “There’s this one kid... Liam. He reminds me of you, Matty.”

“Yeah? How?” Matty sat up, a brow raised in question.

“He’s just so... I don’t know. Curious, I guess. Easily excitable.” Ethan chuckled. “He knows all sorts of things about the most random stuff. Only last week, he entertained the class about volcanoes.”

“Volcanoes?” Intrigue skated across Matty’s face, eyes alert.

“Yeah, it was amazing. The whole class was fucking spellbound. Like with you and your goddamn ants.” Warmth spread through Matty’s chest as he imagined the boy, Liam, sharing his passion with his classmates, unafraid, in the safe environment of Ethan’s classroom. He was so fucking proud of his friend.

“So, you’re happy, then? Being a teacher,” Matty spoke, his voice gentle, a tenderness in his eyes as he looked at Ethan.

“Yeah, I’m happy,” Ethan shook a lock of auburn hair from his forehead, his eyes meeting Matty’s. “I think, I’m even happier than most.”

“Yeah, me too, Eth. Me too...” Matty sighed. “Not too shabby for two country boys outta Eden, Texas, huh?”

“Nah, I guess not... Matty?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m real happy for you, you know that, right? Proud of you. I mean, with the life that you’ve made for yourself. Because you did that. You went out and you made a fucking life for yourself. Despite everything. Despite *him*.”

“Yeah, I know... Thanks, Eth.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, the rustling of the wind in the corn surrounding them, Matty tracing the flight of a bird of prey across the vastness of the sky.

And life *was* good. For the most part it was even great. Hell, some days life was just flat out spectacular. The way the ocean breeze would just tousle Austin’s hair the right way when they were out on *Stella*. Or how Ray would teach William how to bait a hook, his gray eyes wrinkling with pride. Or how Will would brush tears of laughter away from his eyes when Smitty told the same bad joke he’d told numerous times before. Or in April, when Matty’s mom had stayed with them for two weeks, and they’d finally talked. Really talked. And cried, too. Or when Millie made her famous rhubarb trifle and piled extra cream on the top for Matty because *he was still too darn scrawny*. Yeah, life was extra cream on the top now. And Austin stealing a kiss over the dishes while Cassie chewed on her bone in front of the TV, William snuggling up against her, Austin’s old teddy bear, Harold, firmly clasped in his chubby arms. Yeah, life was fucking spectacular when you took a step back and looked at everything you had. And right at the center, next to his heart, there was Ethan. *Always, Ethan.*

*The End.*

## AFTERTHOUGHTS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you so much for reading *Loud Places*. I hope you liked my boys and perhaps you even saw pieces of yourself in them. I know I do. None of the four boys are me, but if I had to choose one who resembles me the most, it would have to be my boy, Ethan. His struggles are similar to mine. The feeling that you are only worthy if you are there for others. That you must take care of everyone else and, in the process, end up forgetting yourself. Luckily, Ethan has two parents who know how to give him that necessary push into the unknown.

Growing up with abuse changes who you are. It changed Matty and it changed me. But if you have that one person in your life that is always steadfast and there for you, it can be that light that you navigate towards. To Matty, Ethan was that light growing up. To me it was my mother, Ulla, who is no longer with me physically but walks beside me spiritually every step of the way. *Mom, I always felt loved. You always told me that I was wanted. That I was good. I know your words of kindness can never make up for his words spoken in hate, but you made it easier by loving me and my brother fiercely. I wish you had been stronger for the three of us and left him, but regrets are pointless. They only keep us stuck in the past.*

So, thanks are in order and the list is long, so buckle up!

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To the three most important people in my life: my hubby Casper, my fierce warrior Villads, and my little light Nora. You are the reason why I get up in the morning and push through. For you guys, I will always try to be a better version of myself than the day before even if I don't always succeed. I love you, my beautiful family.

Finally, I hope you will all stay with me for the next part of my journey. It will be filled with men in uniform, past trauma, lace and a whole lotta love. With Noah and Joe's story I'm going back to basics with a classic hurt/comfort novel. Thank you for naming my boys, Emma and Colleen. I hope you will both be proud mamas when the book is done.

Love is and always will be love,

Anja

Stay in touch! You can find me on:

Instagram: @anjalovesbooks

Facebook: A.E. Jensen

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/author/aejensen>

Goodreads: A.E. Jensen

Bookbub: A.E. Jensen

# SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

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Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me – The Smiths

Various Storms and Saints – Florence + The Machine

They Don't Own Me – Richard Ashcroft

There Is a Light That Never Goes Out – The Smiths

Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain – Willie Nelson

Exploding – Mehro

Chance With You – Mehro

Loud Places – Jamie XX, feat. Romy

And No More Shall We Part – Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds

I know It's Over – Jeff Buckley

Nude – Radiohead

I Didn't Understand – Elliott Smith

Song For Zula – Phosphorescent

Love Love Love – Of Monsters and Men

Shiver – Lucy Rose

Drive Darling – BOY

Pretty Face – Sóley

From Afar – Vance Joy

Don't You Give Up on Me – Milo Greene

Grid – Perfume Genius

Bored in the USA – Father John Misty

Alcoholic - Starsailor