

PRETTY DOGS

DIRTY STRAYS BOOK TWO

RILEY NASH

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DIRTY STRAYS #2

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*To everyone—trans, nonbinary, and otherwise—fighting with
courage to become your true self,
no matter the cost*

CONTENT ADVISORY (POTENTIAL SPOILERS)

This book contains adult content and dark themes. See the list below for specific warnings.

- Primal kink (light CNC roleplay, physical roughness and restraint, and fantasies involving chase and capture)
- Transphobia (internalized transphobia, insecurity involving birth anatomy, some instances of misgendering, brief strong transphobic rhetoric and threats of violence)
- Scene of violence and threat of violence involving a gun
- Mentions of poverty, homelessness, parent/child abuse, death and loss of a parent, sex work, gang activities, and descriptions of medical injections

Thank you so much for reading, and take care!

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DALLAS

I'VE BEEN RUNNING for such a long time.

From the moment they're born, prey animals are evolved to sprint without getting tired, to smell danger and go perfectly still and silent. To live.

No matter how hard I try, I'm not fast or quiet enough. My body betrays me.

I press a hand over my mouth, trying to muffle my ragged, sobbing breaths as I crouch in the pitch-dark shadow of a tree. My bare feet are burning with a thousand tiny gashes from dry grass and jagged rocks. I stink of fear and sweat and something else—something more shameful.

I've given him a million ways to track me down, no matter how far I run.

Muscles screaming in protest, I struggle to my feet and pick my way between sharp-smelling pine trunks that leave smears of sap on my skin when I touch them. A branch catches in my hair, tugging like rough fingers.

Crack! The snap of a twig behind me shoots chills down my spine. I swallow a whimper and break into a desperate, limping run across the moonlit clearing. Before I can reach the safety of the shadows on the far side, my foot catches on a root

and twists. I slam onto my hands and knees with a yelp of agony.

He's here. I can't see or hear him, but every inch of my skin crawls with the pressure of his hungry eyes. Every night, I tell myself I'll have some dignity this time. I'll stand defiant and proud. But just like every night, I start crawling through the dirt to try and get away, even though I know how much it turns him on.

Heavy-soled boots crunch through the grass, closer and closer, until they stop right next to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse a darker shadow moving against the velvety night. My fingers curl into shaky fistfuls of dirt as a feeling of helplessness sinks into my battered body.

"I thought the pretty rabbit would run further," a gravelly voice murmurs above me. "I'm disappointed."

I can feel hot blood flowing to my cock. The needy, unstoppable ache as I get hard. I can't let him see. I can't.

When he tries to grab my hair, I throw my body against his legs with the last of my strength. Rough denim scrapes my cheek as he tumbles backward onto the ground with a snarl of surprise. Now he knows how much it hurts.

Clawing at the grass, I scabble in the direction of the river. If I can hide under the overhanging bank, he'll never—

An iron grip clamps around my ankle. I scream in frustration as he drags me back on my face through the weeds and dirt.

This time, he doesn't speak. He doesn't play. He just flips me onto my back, ignoring my pathetic kicks. Shoving my thighs apart, he kneels between them and covers my slender body with his huge, powerful one.

I squeeze my eyes shut and go perfectly still as he brushes his lips up my neck, his hot breath trailing along my skin. He presses his nose under my ear with a slow, deep inhale, like a wolf scenting its prey. The body pinning mine smells like exhaustion and savage lust and victory. Teeth grip my earlobe, just hard enough to make me whimper and struggle uselessly.

“Shhh,” he purrs in my ear. “You let me catch you, little rabbit. I know you did.”

“I didn’t,” I lie. I’m so hard it hurts now. Every brush of his skin against mine makes me leak into my sweatpants. I twist and writhe, trying to hide my erection, but he pins my arms over my head.

His soft laugh tickles my jaw. “Are you sure?” Squeezing both my wrists easily in one hand, he slides the other inside my sweats. I jerk with a slutty moan when practiced fingers fondle my balls and wrap tight around my cock, turning my body limp with a single stroke. He knows exactly how to push me to the edge, because we’ve done this so many times. He’ll milk me dry, then flip me over and fuck me until—

“Hggggggghhhhgrrrrrrr.”

A bed-shaking snore rips me out of my dream so abruptly I can’t breathe. Disoriented, I stare at a streak of moonlight spilling past the broken blinds. The forest floor under my back turns into a lumpy mattress, and the skeletal branches overhead are replaced by a popcorn ceiling. The only chilly breeze here exists because some asshole kicked my comforter to the bottom of my bed.

I reach up with shaky fingers to brush my hair out of my face. Shit. My cheeks are on fire. A sheen of sweat glistens on my bare torso, and my boxers are bunched up between my thighs, sticky and hot. When I shift my weight, my dick throbs. I go still, gulping in an unsteady breath. I’m way, way too close to coming.

The brawny body pressed against mine hacks up another disgusting snore, like someone poured gravel up his nose. Nuzzling deeper into *my* pillow, because he always knocks his onto the floor, Beck slings a heavy arm across me. “Go the fuck away,” I hiss inaudibly, squeezing my eyes shut.

A severe addiction to sleeping in your best friend’s bed is weird enough. That friend waking up to find you squirming around, drenched with precum, is flat out unacceptable.

Wrinkling my nose, I lift his arm and wriggle my way to freedom. The muscular blond just rolls onto his other side and goes back to snoring. For a moment, I get distracted looking at his tattoos in the moonlight. A huge, intricate reaper dominates his back, with a scythe blade spanning the width of his shoulders and dark wings spreading down along the sides of his ribcage. A fire-breathing dragon in a mismatched style snakes around his hips and dips down onto the tops of his ass cheeks.

It's all very intimidating until you find out he calls the reaper Your Mom and the dragon One-Eyed Brian. Smiling to myself, I tuck the comforter up around his shoulder and tiptoe out the door, careful not to trip on any of the holes in our threadbare carpet.

Scout and Roman, our housemates and the other half of our makeshift little family, have their door tightly shut. They always stuff t-shirts around the bottom to try and muffle their sex noises, so I'm not exactly worried about waking them up.

Swinging the bathroom door shut behind me, I flick on the light. The unforgiving glare of the bare bulb makes my eyes water. I put a hand out to block my view of the evil mirror that makes everyone look like shit, cross the room, and kneel next to the drawer where I keep my toothpaste, deodorant, and hairbrush.

My fingers are still trembling a little as I slide my arm into the drawer and up through the gap above, feeling around the underside of the counter. With a *pop* of masking tape, I pry the small vibrator out of its hiding spot and turn it over in my hands.

A sour taste fills my mouth as the toy yanks me from hot-ass wet dreams into dysphoria. I don't actually have a cis cock and balls for my captor to play with, and this cheap piece of teal plastic came in a pink box that definitely wasn't aimed at men. But a trans virgin has needs too. Daily needs, in my case. Sometimes several times daily. In a house full of dudes with no boundaries, this is the fastest, most discreet way to deal with them.

Sliding the sunshine-yellow bath mat Roman picked out into the middle of the floor, I kneel on it with my thighs open. The dull hum of the overhead fan covers up the buzzing that starts when I twist the end of the vibrator.

I tuck the head up against the base of my bottom growth—the most sensitive part of my birth anatomy that, thanks to testosterone, has now enlarged into my dick. As soon as the rumbling vibration brushes the hot, wet skin, my whole body shudders and my eyes roll back.

The shitty bathroom fades away. I'm back in the forest with a stranger's hands all over me, pinning me down. It's a comforting fantasy, my oldest and most familiar, refined over ten years of playing with my body until I have every detail memorized. If someone asked me *why this*, since being assaulted is my biggest fear in real life, I don't know how I'd answer. Sometimes people just want things—to be pursued and taken with such single-minded intensity, to have all the control and overthinking stripped away.

Moaning softly, I thrust my cock against the thrumming plastic. The hunter's slick cockhead presses against my ass, huge and demanding. I beg him to be gentle, but he knows I'm lying—

The bathroom door rattles, and my eyes fly open. In my lust-haze, I didn't lock the damn thing. Yanking my underwear up, I silence the vibrator and throw it behind the trash can. When I stumble to my feet, flushed and breathing hard, I find myself face to face with Beck.

He blinks unhappily in the light, his face scrunched and sulky. His wiry, pale hair sticks out in every direction.

“What is it?” I prompt when he just stands there, swaying a little.

He clears his throat, his voice so low and gravelly with sleep I can barely understand him. “Where'd you go?”

I gesture toward the toilet. “Take a wild guess.”

Blinking like I just asked him the most confusing riddle of all time, he rubs a petulant arm across his face. “Come back.”

“Good lord you’re such a baby.” I go over and put my hands on his bare shoulders as he stares down at me with foggy green eyes. Even though he’s much bigger and stronger, he lets me turn him forcibly in the direction of the kitchen. “Go drink a glass of water.” I only need two or three minutes to find the vibrator and finish.

But he’s too far gone to listen. With an irritated grunt, he grabs my wrist in one powerful hand and yanks me back across the hall, kicking the door shut behind us. After having an orgasm ripped away at the last second, it’s impossible not to get turned on by the way he pushes and manhandles me into bed and crawls over me back into his spot. “Beck, I need to—”

“Shut up,” he grumbles, throwing a leg over mine and rolling half on top of me. Within ten seconds, he’s asleep again.

I’m fucking trapped with his fingers splayed against my sweaty skin and his knee nudged up dangerously close to my dick. My eyes burn with tears of pure frustration as he snuggles happily against my aching body. I’m so fucked up I consider rubbing one out the old fashioned way right here and now. Instead I just glare into the dark, wondering how I ended up here.

The first day I met Beck, when I was just a hungry, scared stranger, he let me sleep on a spare mattress in the corner of his trailer. “Just one night” turned into a week, then a month, until *his* home became *our* home, something I thought I’d never find again. The next spring, my mattress got bugs and we had to throw it out. We couldn’t afford food, let alone a new bed, so Beck offered me half of his broken futon.

It was supposed to be temporary. That’s what we told our friends. But somewhere along the way, without ever discussing it, we stopped looking for a replacement mattress. When the four of us moved to this derelict rental house, Scout made sure Beck and I had our very own rooms with our very own beds—the height of luxury.

We tried, we really did. I lay awake for so many hours that I found every shape hidden in the drywall—a horse, a chef’s

hat, a truck, the continent of Australia. My head hurt all day, and I kept snapping at everyone because I was getting two or three hours of sleep a night.

After a few weeks, I gave up and stumbled out of bed at two in the morning. I almost screamed when I pulled open my door to find Beck standing right on the other side with his hand out to grab the knob.

“Where are you going?” he whispered with this crooked, smug little grin.

I crossed my arms stubbornly, refusing to sound as desperate as he knows I am. “Looking for a snack.”

After a long pause, he leaned in until his forehead almost touched mine. “I’m a snack.”

“You’re a bag of rancid prawns. You give everyone the shits.”

He patted the side of my face with a grin, then shoved me out of the way and flopped face first into my bed with a contented groan. When I crawled in next to him, he rolled onto his side and dragged my body tightly against his chest. And finally, we both slept.

Scout and Roman still don’t know. It’s not a shame thing; the four of us had no problem sleeping together in the winter when the house wouldn’t stay warm enough. There’s just something private about those hours of darkness with Beck’s face in my shoulder, the warm, stale air cut through with the slow pattern of our breathing, the smell of his skin right before he wakes up. I’m not ready to share the irrational joy I get every single morning when he lifts his head, squints at the daylight like it ruined his life, and grumbles, “Make it stop, Dal.”

Sometimes I just hit him with a pillow until he gets up. Other times, I say, “I’m sorry. My creation needs the sun for the growing of crops and the functioning of human civilization.”

He always regards me with a pout. “But I’m your favorite. Fuck them.”

Then I hit him with the pillow, because I'll never admit to him that I'd consider letting the planet fall into ruin just so he could get another fifteen minutes snuggled under my covers. His ego's big enough as it is.

"Are you ready, Dallas?" Scout hollers from the kitchen.

I freeze halfway through forcing myself into a pair of too-tight acid-washed jeans. "Shit, I don't know," I yell back, hopping on one foot. "Am I standing in the living room fully dressed saying 'I'm ready'?"

He doesn't answer. A few seconds later, the door to my tiny room creaks open and he leans on the frame, studying me. "What are you doing?"

Yanking up the zipper on the jeans, I open my shirt drawer and stare at the neat piles. My clothes are the only folded things in this entire house of twenty-two-year-old hooligans. "Getting dressed."

"You were already dressed." The delicately gorgeous man with his silver hair and lip ring crosses his arms. "We're gonna be late. Roman and the dog are already in the car with everything packed."

"Okay, Dad." I hold up a gauzy white t-shirt that Beck likes, then throw it onto the bed and dive back into my drawer.

"What's the matter with that one?"

I glance over at him, hesitating with the strange, irrational gut-punch of guilt that hits me whenever I commit the sin of not passing perfectly as cis. "It's...kind of see-through."

His fine eyebrows pull together as he glances at my chest, with no nipples and two long, slightly ragged scars along the bottom of my pecs that didn't heal as cleanly as they were supposed to. "Wear a fucking see-through shirt if you want, Dal. You look sexy in white."

I'm not an apology.

I read that in a book once, and I never forgot it. It's true for all of us. The world doesn't want four ragtag, misfit guys with nothing except each other, a shithole house, and a big, smelly dog. But here we are. And we're not sorry.

Grabbing the white shirt, I drag it on over my head and pull my chest-length hair into a messy bun. The pale fabric complements the light brown skin and black hair I got from my mother's Indian heritage. "I'm not trying to look sexy."

When I glance at Scout, he raises one eyebrow with a small smile. "Right. Well, you're failing then."

I grab my flannel-lined denim jacket and follow him through our threadbare house—just a dog bed, a ripped couch, and a TV that sits on the floor. Sometimes I think back to my childhood with the huge playhouse on the lawn, my room lined with trophies from chess contests and spelling bees, and a hot, home-cooked meal every night. Now I spend my time literally counting dried beans, sliding them across the counter into piles as I try to portion out how many meals we can make them last.

But whenever I start to feel sorry for myself, Roman comes and helps me count, pinching individual beans as he murmurs numbers in his soft, rusty voice. Then Beck and Scout burst in, arguing about something ridiculous like whether hot dogs should be categorized as sandwiches or tacos. Those are the moments I know everything's going to be okay. What hurts us will never be stronger than what we have together.

Tubbs, our huge, fawn-colored mastiff, starts barking from the back of the '97 Civic when Scout and I emerge into the late afternoon sun. Scout's boyfriend, Roman, glances up through the passenger seat window and beams gently at me, waving for us to hurry up. I check my phone; it'll be tight to reach downtown Fort Holden by five o'clock, thanks to my totally unnecessary wardrobe change, but Scout has a very loose relationship with speed limits.

Once I manage to pry open the rusty, dented rear door, I slide into the back seat and pet the dog until he loses interest in

sniffing my ears. Warm light flickers over me as I watch the endless flat, scrubby fields fly past, just starting to come in green with summer crops. On the horizon beyond them, the hazy blue bulk of the Rocky Mountains reminds me that it's almost time to make our traditional drive up to Estes Park and get Beck his once-a-year box of fudge.

After a while, I realize I'm looking at my reflection in the window instead of at the view. My shirt does look good, as long as I don't mind people seeing my top-surgery scars. Wide, dark eyes gaze back at me, above a narrow nose and a soft mouth. My thick, unruly hair is already starting to tumble out of my bun and frame my face. Beck thinks my hair and my eyes are pretty. He even likes my nose. I think he likes everything about me—he's a simple guy.

I'm a lot more complicated.

Sometimes I see my mom when I look at myself. I miss her so fucking much it makes me want to tear out my insides to make the hurt stop.

Sometimes I see a version of me whose name I will never say again, but who will always be there. She carried my soul for fifteen years, until I could set it free. On the hard days, I feel like that person is all anyone sees, like I'll never be free of her.

But today I'm just Dallas. The name I chose, the man I've always been. I have my mom's eyes, and I look good in white. My three best friends and roommates are my entire world, even though they drive me insane. And I feel right in my body more often than I feel wrong—something that sounds simple but feels like a miracle every damn day.

2

BECK

“THIS IS THE KITCHEN, and that’s the bathroom. Dad’s bed is behind there.” I turn in a slow circle in the middle of our new home. The narrow, beat-up trailer smells like old leftovers and pee. Standing on my toes, I push the photo in my hand flat against the window over the sink. This view out the back of the trailer park, with the fields and river and sun on the mountains, is the only nice part of this place.

“Here’s my room.” I taped together a bunch of cardboard this morning to make a divider between my twin mattress and the rest of the house. A fruit crate in the corner holds my clothes, a Walkman with an Iron Maiden CD, and my tiny collection of cool rocks and bottle caps. Balancing on one foot, I poke my wrinkled rocket ship sheets with the toe of my sneaker. “Everything’s set up. I tried to be neat like you.”

My mom’s photograph slowly folds up along the creases when I set it on my pillow and sit down next to it. “That’s everything. I don’t like this place.”

We never had much, but Mom always made sure I was clean and dressed. Now I’m a scrappy little piece of garbage with my filthy, ripped jeans and uncut hair. I ride my bike around with the other stray kids—spray-painting shit, throwing rocks at cars, and stealing booze for the older boys in

exchange for candy bars. At least I did, before we moved to Paradise Peaks. Here, the air feels so thick with misery that I can't breathe. Not even Mom would be able to find a speck of goodness in this shithole.

The front door creaks open, and Dad's heavy boots stagger inside. Folding mom's picture as fast as I can, I stuff it in the tiny leather bag around my neck, where I keep her wedding ring. "Where the fuck are you, brat?" he slurs from the other side of my cardboard wall. When we drove our boxes from Arvada to Fort Holden this morning, he backed over my bike in the driveway and got the bent frame stuck in the undercarriage of the Civic. I helped him rip it out, but now the car makes weird noises and leaks pools of dark liquid into the dirt when you turn it off. The old man will be drunk and kicking my ass until he finds someone to fix it.

Scrambling silently to my feet, I push open the small window over my bed and stick my head out. It's a six foot fall into spiky weeds, but that's better than whatever Dad has in mind. I grab the frame, hoist myself up, and wriggle out into the noon sun. One of my small hands slips on the hot vinyl siding and I tumble onto my ass in the prickly bushes. Good thing I'm unbreakable.

There was a scrawny kid with big, gray eyes watching us move in this morning, but I can't see him anywhere. I run down the unfamiliar dirt road full of potholes and lined with overflowing trash cans. All the dogs tied to random trees and porches lose their shit as I pass, throwing themselves against their ropes and screeching like they want to kill me.

Since I need to pass time until Dad forgets I exist, I walk out through the front gate under the weather-beaten 'Paradise Peaks' billboard and start exploring the neighborhood on the far side of the road. Sweat stains the armpits of my t-shirt, and my back hurts from carrying boxes that were too heavy for me. I miss my buddies and my bike. I miss my mom.

The cigarette smoke reaches me first, bitter and intriguing. Fearlessly, I follow it around a spray-painted house with boards nailed over the windows. Four boys are lounging against the back of a shed in a haze of smoke and other drug-

smells I don't recognize. The pile of bikes on the ground pulls my eyes like a magnet. They're so cool, with sturdy, colorful frames and fat tires that make me itch to take one off a jump.

A guy with curly brown hair who looks about sixteen or seventeen lowers his bottle of beer, then elbows his buddies until they all shut up and stare at me. I'm not even ten yet, but I cross my arms and watch them back like a challenge.

"Hey, little punk." The brown-haired boy grins. "You new around here?"

"I just moved into Paradise." I should probably be nervous, but the only thing in the world I'm scared of is my dad. When I come closer, the guy offers me his beer. It burns when I swig, and I cough with my lips pressed together. "It's boring around here."

One of the others, a Latino boy with a Metallica t-shirt, follows the direction of my stare. "You like our bikes?"

"Uh-huh." I ogle the gleaming metal, drooling at the thought of gripping the thick, rubbery handlebars while the wind rushes through my hair.

They exchange looks, like they're silently agreeing on something. "We could help you build one," the first guy offers. "If you want."

"For real?" My eyes go huge. I'm not stupid—they're going to want something back. I just don't care what it is. It's not like I have a reason to stay out of trouble. "What do I gotta do?"

The Latino man glances at his friends, then shrugs. "Nothing much. Just hang out with us." He holds out a big, rough hand, and I shake it as firmly as I can. "I'm Pascal, and this guy is Alex."

"Beckham. Beck." Mom's the only person who ever bothered to call me by my full name.

"Good to meet you, Beck." Alex punches my shoulder lightly. "You look like you'd be good at helping us run errands. Nobody watches cute kids."

“Yep.” I crouch down and admire the angled-back bicycle seat, almost touching the rear tire. Sometimes when I’m supposed to be in school I go to the library instead and watch hours of dirt bike tricks on YouTube. “I can fit a lot of candy in my pockets, or Hot Wheels.” Glancing over at their tattoos and tough bodies, I adjust my offer. “I steal cigs for my dad all the time, too. And booze.”

Alex barks a laugh. “Good kid. You’re gonna fit right in.”

I did fit in. I got my bike, a shiny red one, and the three of us would ride to the skate park at night and do all kinds of stunts that should have gotten us killed. Eventually, I stopped running errands for them and started working for the guys above them. Pascal and Alex taught me how to fight and shoot, listened to my problems, and let me ride along on jobs when my dad was on a bender. Scout—the gray-eyed boy I saw across the street—became my best friend, but those two basically raised me.

Over ten years later, when someone asks “Why did you decide to join a gang? What pushed you over the edge?”, I think back on that hot, lonely afternoon, the bikes, the photo of my mom, and the only two men I’d ever met who didn’t hit me and cuss me out. And I don’t know how to answer, because it’s always too simple and too complicated at the same time.

“Hurry the fuck up, Beck.” Alex knocks warningly on the hood of the black Mercedes, with its tacky gold rims and detailing.

“Calm down. No one’s coming. They’re too busy snorting coke off someone’s tits.” Making sure I don’t scrape the paint, I work my wedge further into the driver’s side door and hold my breath. My long, stiff rod slips through the gap and taps the button just right.

“Good girl,” I croon as the door pops open all sweet in my hand.

What can I say? I’m good at pushing all the right buttons. A lot of men would agree.

“I’m the one who’s gonna get a bullet up my nose if they open that door,” Alex gripes from his lookout spot, pointing at the back entrance to the Euphoria Nightclub.

“Look on the bright side.” Pascal hands me a small plastic box with a green light shining in one corner. “You wouldn’t get those migraines anymore.”

I love hotwiring cars. They taught me how when I was twelve. Alex popped open an old ‘87 Camry in the back of a movie theater parking lot and knelt next to me with an arm around my shoulders, coaching me through the tangle of wires as my hands shook with excitement. When the engine rumbled to life, he whooped and let me drive it a couple of miles before trading spots. These days, it all comes down to this little box that turns me into Beckham Alexander, international super spy.

Carrying it toward the brick wall of the nightclub, I visualize the map I saw of the inside. The car’s owner, a boss from a rival gang pushing into our territory, should be enjoying himself in a room right on the southern corner. With one eye on Pascal, I climb behind a dumpster that’s in my way, ignoring the godawful smell and the skitter of a rat running away.

For a minute, I think the relay isn’t going to pick up the signal from the key fob in the guy’s pocket. “Come on,” I breathe, pressing it closer to the warm, crumbly brick.

“We’re golden,” Alex yells as the engine purrs to life. Now we just need to get it to the guys at our garage, who can rekey it permanently. “Get in, get in, get in,” he chants, yanking open the passenger door while Pascal dives in the back.

“Shouldn’t we change the plates?” I point toward the fake plates with their white and green mountains sticking out of Pascal’s bag.

“We can do that anywhere but fucking here.” Alex is going to have an aneurism if I don’t start driving.

“Do you think it has ass-warmers?” I ask, sliding into the driver’s seat and adjusting the mirrors as slowly as possible to

troll him. Metal screeches as the back door of the club creaks open. “Oh *shit*.”

I slam the accelerator, and my head bangs against something as the car slams up onto the curb and back off. Someone roars in fury behind us, followed by a familiar *pop*. Pascal and Alex hit the deck, while I duck as low as I can without taking my eyes off the road. A couple more gunshots ring out, but no glass shatters, thank fuck. I don’t want to get penalized for doing a messy job.

I don’t see the speed bump until I hit it at almost forty miles an hour, and I swear all four tires leave the road at once. Alex curses, Pascal yelps happily, and I tilt my aching head back with a wolf howl of pure adrenaline. We’ll be long gone before the rival boss finds someone to chase us, and I’ll keep my reputation as the guy you call when you need a car lifted fast and clean.

When we pull into an alley to switch the plates, I check my phone and do a double take—4:45. Fuck. ““Lex, I need to go.”

He shoots me a weird look. “You don’t want to deliver this yourself?”

Of course I fucking do. But the sick, creeping guilt in my gut wins out. “I have to be somewhere. Tell them I did everything while you stood around bitching, or else I’ll cut off your nuts, chop them into a bowl of lettuce, and make you eat ‘em with fucking ranch dressing. Yeah?”

Grinning, he steals my place in the driver’s seat. “My nuts taste amazing.”

Pascal slaps my ass on his way around the car. “Good one, kiddo. Driving this around is gonna put the boss in a good mood for at least a month.” Saluting them, I wait until the ugly, pimped-out car blasting heavy metal disappears onto the main road. Then I turn and sprint down the street.

By the time I reach the community center eight blocks down, I’m staggering and dripping with sweat in the eighty-five-degree heat. I have about thirty seconds to wipe my face on my white tank top and catch my breath. My skin looks

flushed and blotchy in the reflection of the nearest window, but it's too late. Over my shoulder, the most recognizable Civic in Fort Holden pulls up to the curb. Rust is eating away every part it can reach, and the four of us have scratched a million profanities and doodles all over the paint job. My dad would roll over in his grave to see what we've done to his precious car, and that thought makes me happy every single day.

Scout was supposed to be picking me up alone, but I see Roman's chin-length mop of hair in the passenger seat. He sticks his arm out the open window for a fist bump, and "I'm Just A Girl" comes pouring out. We're supposed to take turns DJing, but somehow we always end up with Scout's music.

Trying not to gasp for air, I splay out in the back seat and wait for the air conditioning to wash over me. I'm filthy, my stomach is empty, and the sight of the community center makes me sick. I just want to shower and eat as much food as I'm allowed to without bankrupting us. Tubbs the dog shoves his head over the seat and tries to lick sweat off my neck, but I lean away. "Not now, dude."

"Hi." I startle at the perky voice coming from right next to me. Dallas flashes his flawless, shy smile, his excited eyes searching my face. "How was the meeting?"

I let my eyes flicker over his body, from the see-through shirt to the chaotic hairdo. He must be having a carefree, flighty kind of day. They don't come often, but I like them. My best friend thinks so hard all the time that he deserves a few minutes free from worrying.

"Was it good?" he prompts, tilting his chin toward the white concrete building behind me—the one I was supposed to be inside all afternoon.

"Yeah." Clipping my seatbelt, I slide down until my knees hit the back of Roman's chair. "It was cool and shit."

Dallas rolls his eyes. "Right." I've said *cool and shit* every time they pick me up from one of these intervention meetings, which are put on by a local task force of retired cops and ex-gang members.

“It was fine.” I reach over and squeeze the back of his neck. He shoots me the look that tells me everything he’s not saying. All the things he wants to ask. Have they fixed me yet? Is this the day? They’ve waited years for me to get out and become a law-abiding citizen.

When Dal dropped me off at the first meeting, I wanted to try. The air-conditioned room smelled like Lysol and whatever cookies the leaders brought and left on a table in the back. It was like some freaky mixture of a lecture and an AA meeting. I watched through the doorway as everyone sat in a circle and talked about support systems, life skills, personal growth. Like making birdhouses is gonna rewrite a story that started the day my mom never woke up. After a few minutes of eavesdropping I bolted into the back alley, where I could breathe without hyperventilating, and smoked until Dallas picked me up. Every week, I wave them off and then meet up with Alex and Pascal to work. Today was the first time I almost didn’t make it back by five o’ clock.

It takes me a couple of minutes to realize we’re not driving north, toward home. “What’s going on?” The sooner we get back, the sooner Dallas will go to bed and I can fall asleep on him.

Dal bounces adorably in his seat, his smile widening. “You’ll see.”

I don’t do patient. Leaning forward, I squeeze Roman’s shoulders. “Buddy. Tell me what’s up.”

The big guy must not be talking today, because he launches into our messy, cobbled-together sign language that’s half ASL we learned from the internet and half shit we made up. Rome’s voice abandons him sometimes, but we make sure he always has a way to communicate.

Sir says I can’t tell you, he signs emphatically. Between calling Scout *sir* and the leather collar I can feel around his neck under his hoodie, I realize he’s in sub-mode. He and Scout have a whole bondage porn channel, where Rome gets off on being bossed around and tied up. Dal and I don’t see the appeal, but it doesn’t bother us.

“Good puppy,” Scout praises, taking Roman’s hand. I’m glad someone’s having a good time, because I’m not.

“Dickholes.” I slump back and prop my head against the seat, studying Dallas again. He narrows his eyes, finally taking in my flushed skin and sweat-stained shirt.

“What the hell were you doing in there?”

“I got in a pushup competition.” It’s the most random excuse ever, but no one even questions my madness.

“You stink, dude.” He reaches across and tries to fix my damp hair, wrinkling his nose. “Did you win at least?”

I flex my left bicep, the one tattooed with my mom’s favorite animal—an elephant. “What do you think?”

He drinks me in like a parent picking up their kid from camp and hearing about all their favorite activities. “I’m glad you’re making friends. That’s healthy, right?”

Grunting noncommittally, I frown out the window to try and figure out where we’re going. We’ve left town in the wrong direction, cruising arrow-straight through half-grown fields and cow lots. When Scout takes a turn by a collapsing white barn, I realize what’s up. “The hell? I thought we couldn’t afford a movie.”

“We can’t,” Dallas points out instantly. He keeps an iron grip on our budget so we don’t end up living in the streets. “But improvisation is free.”

A vintage red and white sign by the road announces the *Moonlight Drive In*. Underneath, someone spelled out the movie names with little plastic letters. *Throwback Night: Iron Man and Galaxy Quest*. I’ve never seen either one before.

Instead of pulling into the line of cars, we keep driving a mile on to a dirt road blocked by a sagging metal gate. Scout murmurs something in Roman’s ear, and he scrambles out to check. Sure enough, someone cut the chain a million years ago and just draped it over the lock for show. He throws it in the dirt and swings the gate wide enough for the Civic to creep through, then shuts it behind us.

“My brother Jackson told me he and his friends used to come up here,” Scout explains while Roman catches up with the car. Gravel pops under our tires as we follow a winding path through the low hills, until he cuts the engine on a wide overlook a mile or so above the drive-in. The sky is turning purple and hazy as tiny guys in orange vests direct the cars into rows in front of the screen.

I get out and stretch, uncut grass tickling my ankles. It’s dead quiet up here. We won’t be able to hear the movies, so technically this is worse than just streaming them at home. But it smells nice, and when I turn around Dallas is pulling blankets and pillows out of the hatchback while Tubbs bounds down and starts sniffing everyone’s feet. With a bag of popcorn tucked under each arm, he turns around and offers me a bottle of Jack Daniel’s with a crooked smile. “A toast to you.”

I have to shove my hands in my pockets as I stop in front of him, to hide how jumpy and awkward this makes me feel. “Why?”

“You’ve gone to five whole meetings.” He peers up into my face, his brown eyes solemn. “We’re all so proud of you, Beck. I know it’s not easy.”

I meet his stare, just for a second. This close, between the two of us, he almost pulls the truth out of me. But right when I open my mouth, Roman laughs loudly and Dal bounds away to finish setting up whatever movie-viewing throne he has in his head.

Scout appears at my elbow and steals the whiskey. The amber liquid sloshes as he takes a gulp, then taps the bottle against my shoulder. “Here’s to making it.”

“Whatever that means,” I mumble. Ever since I met him as a dirty little kid, Scout’s dream has been to *make it*. We made it out of Paradise, sure, but he wants more than that. In his perfect world, we can eat our fill and sleep safe at night. We aren’t treated like trash the rest of the world throws out behind the dumpster. And I’m not in a gang. He won’t rest until every piece of his vision comes true.

“Maybe we should make resolutions,” he rambles like he’s already drunk, gesturing at the view. His throat bobs as he chugs another mouthful. “Every year we can measure how much has changed.”

Some twisted part of me misses the old way. Paradise was a hellhole, but I *fit* there. I could be wild and unchained, without the constant knowledge that I’m not good enough. I became a man in that place. I watched my dad die and met all my best friends. I got drunk and got stabbed and got laid there. Out here, I don’t know what I am.

“You think too much, man.” Taking the whiskey back, I drink until the numb feeling starts. Scout opens his mouth to protest, because that boy never stops pushing, but a whistle from Roman has him spinning around to watch his boyfriend’s hands as he waves us over.

The two of them flop down with Tubbs in the middle of Dallas’ blanket fort. As the darkness thickens into something silky and cool, I prop my shoulder against Roman’s sturdy back, while Dallas snuggles up on the far side of Scout. This feels right. We’re four parts that make a whole, no matter what.

The movie screen lights up, and we all whoop and whistle. It plays some cartoon with dancing hot dogs and popcorn buckets, then jumps into *Iron Man*. Even without sound, the plot is easy to follow. During the long talking parts, we discuss which Marvel characters we’d want to fuck. Everyone thinks I’d be into someone snarky like Star-Lord, but I’m torn between Bruce Banner’s sweet nerd energy and Loki, because his hair reminds me of Dallas’. I don’t say the last part, though.

Scout wants Tony Stark as his mouthy sugar daddy, and Roman does some Googling before holding up a picture of Black Widow. I raise an eyebrow at him, and Dallas giggles. “Hate to break it to you, pup,” Scout teases, nuzzling his shoulder. “But I think you’re gay.”

I don’t care, Rome types emphatically into our group text chat. *She’s way better than those other losers. She doesn’t even*

need powers.

“Fair.” Dallas shivers a little, pulling a blanket over his legs. “I’ll go with Thor, I guess. I’d lift his hammer any damn day.” The boy hasn’t even had a sip of whiskey yet, but he cracks himself up and flops over into the pillows, snickering like he’s the funniest man alive.

Roman arranges an open bag of popcorn in his lap where we can all reach, and feeds half his pieces to the dog. I haven’t had so much salty-buttery goodness in such a long time, and I can’t stop licking my fingers. The whiskey gets passed up and down the line until it’s empty and we’re all just the right amount of loose and tipsy.

During the end credits of the first movie, I realize that Scout, Roman, and Tubbs are all asleep in a tangle of blankets and limbs. Dallas looks across at me and grins. I raise my eyebrows at him, pouring the rest of the popcorn straight into my mouth.

It takes the employees about ten minutes to change reels. *Galaxy Quest* is a lot harder to understand without voices, but it must be funny as shit because we can hear people laughing all the way up here.

Dallas yawns and stands up to stretch, arching his back and curling his bare toes into the blankets. When he catches me watching him, he smiles and steps carefully over Roman’s bulk. “Bored of the movie?” He drops cross-legged next to me, right where I wanted him in the first place.

“I just have no clue what’s going on. They’re at a space geek convention or something, but then there’s real aliens.”

He shrugs. “No idea.”

“Really?” I toy with his soft, frizzy bun. “You didn’t memorize all the scripts so you could narrate for me? You’re slipping, Dal.”

“Hey.” His chin tilts up until our eyes meet, our noses almost touching. “You’re a dick.”

“I know.” I must be drunker than him, because I’m the one who cracks up first this time. The ground is swaying a little,

now that I think about it. I drop my head against his shoulder to try and stabilize everything.

The main character shoves his alien-head buddy into the wall as they argue, and Dallas pipes up in a screechy, pissed-off voice. *“Get the fuck out of here, Bob. I can’t fuck that blonde when she’s only hot for your nasty purple alien head. How do you do it?”*

Grinning, I voice other guy with a sexy growl. *“Maybe you’re hot for the purple alien head, George. I’ve seen you looking at me all day. You want me to invade your galaxy, huh?”*

“I’ll explore every fucking black hole you have,” Dallas purrs as the guys’ faces get closer and closer together. “Wait, are they actually gonna kiss?”

I push myself upright, leaning forward. “Come on, come on.”

At the last second, George or whatever his name is shoves Bob away and storms off.

“Damn it.” Dal slumps back against the car, crossing his arms.

I look up at the huge sky, with a half-moon hanging over the mountains. The cool air teases my hair in a way that makes me feel sleepy and safe. “Thanks for this, Dal. It was great.”

After a long pause, I glance back to see him tearing off bits of grass and piling them on his knee. “How are the meetings going, for real?” he asks carefully, without looking at me. In a flood of relief, I imagine that he figured out all my secrets without me having to confess them. But then his gaze flicks up to mine and I realize it’s not true. “What life skill classes sound most fun to you? Have you found any good mentors yet?”

Pressing my lips together, I focus on the movie screen. My feelings are always big, solid, and loud, filling up my whole head. Right now, it’s guilt—a bitter burn on my tongue like vomit. “It’s intense,” I say finally. “I don’t know what I want.” It’s all true, but not true enough.

He punches me gently in the shoulder. “You can do anything, Beck. Truly.”

“I have no clue what makes you think that,” I murmur, looking down at my hands in my lap.

With a rustling sound, he kneels behind me, wrapping one hand around each of my shoulders. The boy likes to try and give back rubs, but his fingers are so slender and my muscles are so thick that it doesn’t work unless he uses his elbows with his full body weight. I like it best when he gives up and just rubs the back of my neck. “Take it one day at a time, okay?”

A lot of things happen one day at a time. My mom going from healthy to sick. A kid earning his bicycle from the cool guys in town. A guy and his best friend getting addicted to sleeping in the same bed. Worlds change one day at a time. But when my days are built of half-rotted lies, I have no idea what they’re going to change me into.

3

DALLAS

WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN, I broke down into hysterical tears and stumbled around the house until I found my mom weeding her tomato bed in the backyard. I fell on my knees in the grass and sobbed out that I was a boy. No explanations, no reasoning, just the raw screaming of my heart.

The poor woman had no idea what I was talking about, but she pulled me into her arms and whispered that she loved me more than anything. Even though I knew she'd never reject me, coming out to her was the scariest thing I've ever done in my life.

So I don't know what possesses me to come out to Beck just a month after I moved in with him. For some reason, my soul demands that I open up to this macho knucklehead with his ripped wife beaters, hand tattoos, and the gun stuffed down the back of his jeans.

When he comes home one evening, I sit him down on the saggy futon. I'm shaking so hard I couldn't hide it if I tried. A man chased me out of my home with a gun at my back because of my identity. Today, it might happen again.

I open my mouth, get stuck, and just stare at him. If he hurts me, it will break my heart in so many ways.

Just when I start to stammer “never mind”, he reaches across and wraps one big, rough hand around both of my slim ones, like it’s nothing. His forehead creases as his eyes search mine. “Don’t be scared,” he says, squeezing a little.

“I’m trans.” The words come out so fast I can’t control it, because I’ve been choking on them for weeks. If he’s going to be my first real friend, I want him to know my truth—that I’m built of stories and scars, not chromosomes.

Beck blinks, confusion etched into his face. “What’s that?”

Shit. I forgot that he grew up with almost no access to a world of ideas beyond this filthy place. Now I can’t find the words to explain, because saying it out loud brings up a kind of shame I can’t quantify. “Um...I...”

“Wait.” Fishing his perpetually dirty, cracked phone out of his pocket, he scoots over until he can sling an arm behind my back. Right there in front of me, chewing solemnly on his lip, he Googles, “What is trans”.

As ridiculous as it feels, it’s easier this way.

When he sees the answer, his body goes very still for a moment as he double and triple checks the words. I fix my eyes on a hole in the linoleum, waiting for one of the questions that are almost worse than getting punched—Can I see pictures of you before? or Which one are you actually, between your legs?

For once, he doesn’t say anything. I feel his ribcage move against my arm as he sighs, then his arm around my shoulder tightens. He rests his cheek on top of my head with a quiet, protective, final kind of sound.

I break down crying, making disgusting noises as I try to hold in the sobs.

“Here.” He offers me the front of his oversized t-shirt so I can blow my nose and wipe my eyes.

We just sit like that, his head resting on mine and my face in his chest, for hours. Until the afternoon turns to darkness in the dirty windows.

“Jesus fuck.” I snap out of my daydreaming and floor the brake pedal. The Civic skids sideways with a horrible grinding sound and lurches to a stop.

My heart pounds so hard I can’t breathe as I pry my death grip off the steering wheel. Wiping my sweaty, shaky palms on my jeans, I tip my head back and close my eyes to stop the world from spinning. The spot where the seat belt locked around my chest is going to bruise tomorrow.

For a moment, I can’t remember why I stopped. One second I’m listening to the radio talk about water rights disputes and reminiscing about Beck, the next I’m sideways in the road in a cloud of dust like a scene from a fucking action movie.

Just when I start to wonder if I got a concussion, it comes back to me. Fumbling my seat belt off, I half fall out the door into the road. Dirt stings my eyes and coats my tongue as I peer over the hood.

“Mewww.” The tiny black and white kitten is old enough to have its blue eyes open, but not big enough to run away.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry I almost wiped you out.” Scooting closer, I offer my hand for it to sniff. Animals are loud and dirty and expensive, but I have to admit this one is pretty cute. “How did you get out here, little guy?”

It blinks at me uneasily. To my surprise, it looks clean and well-fed.

“Hello?” I call out, straightening up. Before I can scan the fields for its owner, something heavy slams into my back and throws me face down into the gravel. Remembering the self-defense Beck tried to teach me, I lash out and struggle to roll over. My fingers skim a head of thick, short hair, but a knee jabs viciously into the middle of my back and I curl up in the dirt, wheezing. Cold terror trickles out along my veins, like it’s being injected through an IV. I’ve always known that if the wrong punk messes with me and figures out what isn’t in my pants, I could be tortured and put down like an animal. I can

see our fucking house from here, just a few miles away. Too far to hear me if I scream.

“Forget the damn cat. Look in the car,” a voice snaps right behind me. “Hurry up.”

“What the fuck do you want?” I thrash with my whole strength, gravel ripping at my skin as I claw blindly for anything I can get my hands on. If I’m gonna be found dead, I’ll have the skin of my attackers under my fingernails and their blood in my mouth.

“Shut *up*. Calvin, hurry!” Hands grab my wrists and twist them behind my back until it feels like my bones are about to snap. All I can do is lie there, shivering, as the doors of the Civic creak open one at a time. When I twist my head painfully to the side, I can make out a pair of dirty white sneakers.

“It’s just food,” whines a kid’s voice that hasn’t even started to break yet. He sounds almost as panicked as I feel. “Can we please go?”

The man on top of me kneels on my wrists, then starts shoving his hands in my pockets. I twist my hips, trying to stop him from groping the silicone dick tucked in my briefs. But he just throws my keys aside, then fumbles through my wallet. All he’s going to find is a King Soopers membership card, two dollars in cash, and a sticky note from Beck that says *If you drink my orange juice again I’ll kill you bitch*, with a detailed illustration of himself wielding a bloody knife.

“Fuck,” the stranger snarls, his voice sharp with desperation. “Get out of here, Cal. *Run*. Take the food.”

With a skittering of gravel, the white sneakers disappear. The weight on my back gets heavier, and I twitch when lips brush my ear. “If you move in the next thirty seconds, I’ll come back and hurt you, got it?” The more this man talks, the more I get the feeling he’s bluffing. But there’s no way I’m fucking around and finding out.

“Fine.” I splay my scraped palms in surrender. “I won’t, I promise.”

When he stands up, I suck in a shaky lungful of air and curl my fists in the dirt. I'm alive. I can see tiny brown rocks next to my nose, and smell fresh air full of the waxy scent of growing things. I count to one hundred, just to be safe, then push up onto my hands and knees. My face hurts where my forehead bounced off the ground, and my fingers come away with a streak of blood.

I want to cry when I see the ragged hole in the knee of my jeans and the soil staining my pale green sweater. Every piece in my tiny wardrobe represents months of saving and weeks of combing consignment store sales, not to mention hours of washing and ironing. Limping to my feet, I brush sharp rocks away from my sore palms and spit out a mouthful of dirt. I can't see a soul in any direction. The car idles nearby with all the doors open, empty except for one can of corn that rolled behind the front tire. The plastic USB adapter on the ground means they took Scout's one nice charging cable, too.

"Damn it," I breathe, blinking painfully in the midday sun as I try to process what just happened.

"Meeewwww." A pathetic chirp jerks my head around. That damn kitten, the decoy for my ambush, cries out and tries to stand up. I check the fields again, but no one's coming back. Maybe they don't give a shit, but something about the kitten's glossy coat makes me think they panicked and forgot.

"This is fucking awkward," I tell it as I fish the can of corn out from under the car and wipe it clean. It won't feed four men for even one meal. Scout doesn't steal much anymore, now that we're settled, but this week he's going to have to if we want to eat. "You're not mine, but if I leave you here, a hawk or coyote is gonna make you a snack."

The kitten's white-tipped ears swivel, and it meows at me again.

Tossing the corn into the back seat, I dig around and pull out an old gray towel covered in Tubbs' hair. "This seems rude," I muse as I fold the towel into a nest shape, "but maybe you're too young to be afraid of dog smell yet."

Fixing my ponytail, I kneel down next to the cat. “How does one pick you up without getting scratched?” I try to slide my hands in one way, then another, second guessing. Do they need their heads supported like a baby, or do I snag them behind the front legs like a lobster?

I desperately want to go home and soak in a hot bath, so in the end I scoop it up as fast as I can and dump it in the towel before it can react. Wrapping it in a lopsided cocoon, I climb behind the wheel of the Civic and tuck it between my thighs where it can’t fall out. “Stay put, please.” I hope someone at home knows what to feed this thing.

My whole body starts to ache as I creep down the country road and up our long driveway. The kitten fires off an irritated-sounding mew every once in a while, but it doesn’t struggle. Today was my turn with the one car we all share, so everyone else is hanging out at home. I have to hope the cat will distract them from my disheveled state long enough for me to tell the full story.

Nudging the screen door open with my ass, I tiptoe into the kitchen and set the towel-wrapped kitten on the plastic folding table. It must be in shock, because it sits there with its eyes half closed, breathing shallowly. Now I just need to figure out how to explain—

“I wanted bagels. Scout said you wouldn’t let me have them, but I texted you. Did you get...” Beck stops halfway across the kitchen, his voice trailing off when I turn around. His eyes flick over my torn clothes and filthy skin, the dried blood on my head. So much for breaking the news carefully. “The fuck?” he breathes, his voice hoarse.

“It’s nothing,” I say hastily. “I’m fine. There was just a little situation on the road. They took the groceries, but I think I can make it work.”

Every word in the English language leaves my head when Beck stalks across the room and grabs my shoulders. The spring green of his eyes has gone dark and dangerous as he tilts his head to examine the scrapes on my face. “I—” I flinch

when he grabs my wrist hard and turns my hand over, exposing the torn skin. “I promise it’s not as bad as it seems.”

“Look at me, Dallas.” When I meet his gaze, his stubbled jaw tightens. “Who touched you?” he asks in a terrifyingly quiet voice. Beck is not a quiet guy, and he’s freaking me out. For the first time, I can picture him intimidating gang members.

“I got mugged for our groceries. I’m *okay*.” I emphasize the last word, but my voice trembles. The bigger man tenses when he hears it. Gripping a fistful of my sweater sleeve, Beck crowds me back until I’m pressed against the refrigerator. His wide palm splays against the beige plastic next to my head, and he leans in until our foreheads are touching. When I thought I was going to die, all I wanted was to smell his coconut-scented deodorant again. Well, here I am.

“Tell. Me. Who. Fucking. Touched. You,” he growls, like the warning snarl of a predator waiting in the bushes to rip your head off. I can feel his heart going crazy in his chest.

I’m so shocked that I almost start laughing. I’ll never be able to date anyone; Beck won’t let them within twenty feet of me. When I find someone I’m serious about, I’ll have to talk my best friend down and keep him very far away from them until he gets used to the idea.

Luckily for me, footsteps come bounding down the hall and skid to a stop in the doorway. “What the fuck is going on in here?” Scout blurts.

Beck jerks away and turns toward the silver-haired man, who is wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. “Someone attacked Dallas.” His voice grates harshly, and he still hasn’t let go of my sweater.

Scout’s cool gray eyes widen when he sees my torn clothes. “Damn, are you okay? I’m in the shower for six minutes and everything goes to shit.”

“I’ve said I was fine seventeen times and no one is listening to me. A literal child stole our groceries. That’s it.” I sound a little hysterical, dizzy with leftover shock and Beck’s

fingers digging into my arm. “Make this man let go of me, please.”

“Beck.” Scout snaps his fingers. “Take a deep breath, buddy. You’re scaring him.”

Beck’s head swivels toward me, and his grip pulls away reluctantly. “Are you scared?”

“No,” I lie, hugging myself and imagining how nice that bath would feel right now.

The kitten screeches miserably, and we all turn toward the table, where it’s tottering around in the folds of the towel.

Beck cocks his head like he’s never seen an animal before, and Scout sighs. “Six minutes and you manifest an entire cat?”

Groaning, I clunk my head back against the fridge door. “The muggers left it behind. I didn’t want it to die. Do either of you want to touch it?”

Scout holds up his hands, and Beck takes a step back. “Roman?” Scout hollers at the top of his lungs. “I have a present for you.”

After a long pause, clunking footsteps give way to a sleepy-looking Rome, who must have just crawled out of a nap in his hoodie and boxers. As soon as his golden eyes land on the table, he gasps, “Oh shit.”

“Do you know how to take care of...” I quit mid-sentence, because the man isn’t listening to me. He shoves past Scout, scoops up the kitten with no hesitation, and cradles it to his chest with a series of gentle crooning noises. Scout raises his eyebrows at me, like *see?*

“What’s his name?” Roman asks, as if he thinks I adopted it from the local shelter. When I don’t answer, he glances up and finally notices my injuries. Instead of asking if I’m alright, he looks down at the kitten with solemn awe. “You got him good, didn’t you? You’re a fighter.” I’m pretty sure he’s making fun of me, but with him it’s always impossible to tell.

I spread my hands indignantly, as Scout stifles a snort. “What do we do with it?”

Roman kisses the cat between its ears. “I’m gonna look up what to feed you, Rambo.” It looks comically tiny in his huge arms as he carries it out of the room and down the hall without another word.

“Rambo?”

Scout waves a finger up and down my disheveled body. “Because he can beat up people a hundred times his size.”

“Great.” I sigh, but being mocked feels like a relief after getting pinned against the fridge by a feral man. “Roman knows he can’t just keep it, right? I think it belongs to the muggers.”

He shrugs, adjusts his towel, and wanders back down the hall toward the bathroom. “You’re welcome to try taking it away from him. Good luck.”

Worry twists in my gut as I walk gingerly through the living room and kneel on the water-damaged sill of the bay window. I can’t even tell where on the road I was ambushed. If it weren’t for the very real headache throbbing in my temples, I’d wonder if I made it up.

A shoulder bumps mine, but I don’t have to look around to know who it is. I tap the dirty glass thoughtfully. “I don’t see anyone looking for the cat.”

“Good.”

I glance up at Beck. “Because you’d go down there, rip out all their fingernails, set them on fire, and bury them in a shallow grave.”

“Yep.” His hand brushes my lower back as he squints flatly out into the bright glare of the afternoon.

“One of them was a little kid. The other one didn’t sound any older than us.”

“They’ll burn just as well.” His eyes are still dark and stormy. After a long pause, they clear a little and he glances down at me. “Did I really scare you?”

I don’t tell him what I was thinking about right before the ambush—the afternoon where he heard my deepest secret and

held me for four hours with unquestioning acceptance. “I could never be scared of you. You need to cool your fucking jets, though.”

The slightest reluctant smile pulls at his lips. “You know I can’t.” When he brushes a thumb across the blood-crusted lump on my forehead, I jerk away with an irritated yowl that sounds like Rambo the kitten. “I have the recording of yesterday’s race pulled up. You didn’t cheat and look up the results, right?”

“I was too busy getting mugged.” Groaning, I pull my ponytail out of the hair elastic. “Scalding bath, then loud cars.” It took us a few months as roommates to find our only commonality—Beck and I both love NASCAR. We’ve spent countless nights sprawled on Beck’s bed, drinking and freaking out at the big crashes. When we run out of new races, we go back and look up classic ones from the sixties and seventies. I squint out the window one more time, then give up. “I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Everything’s going to be alright, once I’m clean and curled up next to my best friend, dozing on his shoulder. I’ll be able to feel his wound up predator body slowly relax until he’s back to the big goofball I know, and this fucking day will disappear.

BECK

“FUCKING RACCOONS. GOTTA GO.” I hang up on Scout and grab my gun from the bedside table, checking to make sure it’s loaded. Ever since the guy across the street left an entire rotten chicken in his trash, the critters are overrunning my trailer, throwing garbage all over my front steps. If I start turning them into coonskin hats, maybe they’ll get the idea.

Kicking open the front door, I switch on the outside light. The little shits don’t care if I’m quiet or loud; they just keep stuffing their faces like I’m not even there.

“Your corpse is gonna look real good on my head,” I holler, cocking the pistol and aiming at the dented metal bin.

A skinny, dirty boy jerks upright from where he’s digging in the trash. He’s about the same age as me—nineteen or twenty. When he sees the gun, he stumbles backward in terror and slips in the mud, landing on his ass. “P-please don’t,” he stammers, his voice cracking. “I’m sorry.” His huge, dark eyes look haunted in his thin face, and his torn gray beanie can’t hide all of the black hair tangled around his shoulders.

I point my pistol at the ground and put the safety on. “The fuck are you looking for? I sell anything worth cash.”

He shakes his head quickly. “Just food. I- I wasn’t trying to rob you. I’ll go.”

“If I have food, I eat it,” I point out. People around here can’t afford to waste anything.

Biting his dry lower lip, he struggles awkwardly to his feet. He’s even filthier now, with mud smeared all the way from his hair to his sneakers. He hugs himself, shivering.

I’m always half a step away from homelessness—hungry, cold, and clinging to a trailer that isn’t much better than a cardboard box. I can’t afford to feel sorry for homeless people, even if I wanted to. But underneath all the dirt, this guy has perfect skin, Lucky brand jeans, and a soft, confused look in his eyes that tells me he doesn’t belong in Paradise Peaks.

“Come here.” I slide the gun into the back of my jeans.

He shakes his head warily, taking a step back. “No, thank you,” he says with perfect manners. Oh yeah, he’s fucking lost. “I’m gonna go...”

When he trails off, I raise an eyebrow. “Where are you gonna go, raccoon boy? You’ll have to walk four or five miles before you find somewhere with food in the trash and people who don’t shoot everything that moves.”

His slim shoulders collapse, and he sucks in a slow breath like he’s trying not to cry. When his brown eyes catch on mine, I feel like I’m drowning, or falling.

“Come on,” I say finally, turning and going back inside. I pull some matches out of a drawer and use one to light the camping gas burner I use in place of my broken stovetop. Once I fill my pot with water, I put it on to boil and dig in the cupboard for a box of macaroni. I only have one bottle of my favorite beer saved in the fridge, but I get it out and set it on the table.

When I turn around, the boy is standing in the doorway, looking around curiously. I’ve nailed colorful wool blankets all over the walls, partly to make it warmer and partly to cover up the filthy, peeling paint. It’s pretty cozy, if you ask me.

I stick out my hand. “Beck.”

His eyes flicker over me, taking in just how much bigger and stronger I am. He looks even more delicate in the light,

with a fine-boned jaw, rich light brown skin, and that thick, black hair. He's lucky someone as pretty as him made it this far in one piece. Grabbing my warm hand in his cold one, he shakes it with a lot more stubborn courage than I expect. "Dallas."

There's something weird about the way he says his name, like it means more than six simple letters. Like he's daring me to question it. He smells like fear and courage and foolishness and hope. It makes me want to crowd him against the wall and sniff his neck until I understand him.

I blink back to reality when he smiles a little nervously and points behind me. "Your water's boiling over."

"Do you know how to make macaroni?" I ask. Scout usually does it. "Mine sucks."

His grin widens into something real, his eyes brightening. "It's easy. Do you have an onion and some hot sauce? Oh, and some paprika?" He nudges past me and pours the pasta into the bubbling water.

"Did you just ask me if I have fucking paprika?" I wave my hand at the empty cabinets, but he's too focused on stirring the pot to notice.

"You should pick some up. It's tasty. In Indian cuisine every dish has like sixty spices, but paprika is so underestimated in my opinion."

This might be the weirdest conversation I've ever had. Since I don't know anything about spices, I pop the cap off my cold beer instead. "Want some?" I still don't understand why I feel the urge to share with him.

"No thanks," he answers solemnly without looking up from his work. "Beer gives me reflux. I'm starting to think I might have some kind of gluten intolerance, you know?"

I have no idea. Where the hell did this freak come from? "You shouldn't be wandering around here at night," I blurt. "And you shouldn't go into random guys' trailers just because they tell you to."

He pauses halfway through pouring the cheese powder into the pot and stares at me, his face clouding over a little. "I'm fine. I can take care of myself."

"I don't think so." I cross my arms, irrationally pissed off. "As far as I can tell, if some fucker has paprika, you'll do anything he says."

With a small huff of incredulous laughter, he sets the packet down. It's like he's actually seeing me for the first time. "And what? Are you volunteering to be my protector? Make sure nothing bad ever happens to me?"

His mocking voice cracks a little when I take a step toward him, but he squares his shoulders and refuses to budge. I catch a whiff of sweetness under all the grime as I reach past him, pull a bottle of hot sauce out of the cupboard, and shove it into his chest. "Maybe I will."

"You're too late," he murmurs. I don't think he meant to let the words out. His eyes are bottomless, and so sad.

"There's no such thing as too late," I point out. "If you show me who fucked with you, I'll go set them on fire right now."

Surprise crosses his face and then, when he realizes I'm not kidding, a small but dazzling smile. "Let's eat first. Macaroni doesn't reheat well after a human bonfire."

And maybe I didn't know it then, but that's the first time I fell a little bit in love with Dallas Santra.

Roman and I take turns checking the locks every night, but this time I stop and triple secure every window. Whoever jumped Dal is still out there. He's so sheltered, assuming they can't be dangerous just because they're young and had a kitten. I've met kids in my life who would be more than happy to break in and kill us all, just so they can loot our stuff.

In the living room, I almost trip over Roman. He's sitting on the lip of the fireplace in his pajamas, below the giant pride flag Dallas hung up the day we moved in. Tubbs leans his

massive head on Rome's right thigh, his gaze fixated on Rambo the kitten, who is sleeping on the man's left leg.

Rome stops petting the cat long enough to wave at me.

"Is he staring like that because he wants to be friends, or because he wants to eat him?" I ask, squinting at the dog's obsessed brown eyes.

Roman's lips twitch. "I have no idea," he whispers, caressing the dog's ears. "Cross your fingers for friends."

"Tell Rambo he needs to look less like a chicken nugget." I brush my fingers in his messy touse, then go back to locking down my house tighter than Fort Knox. We all have to work our asses off just to make rent here, even though it's such a dump the landlord wouldn't be able to find any other tenants. Dallas stocks shelves and runs the register at the grocery store, I do all the stuff we're not supposed to talk about anymore, Scout bounces between a couple of porn accounts and odd jobs doing door-to-door sales, and Roman works for the landlord renovating properties. And if we're lucky, maybe we each get a dollar or two a month to save up for something fun.

I left Dallas asleep on his face in my bed, but when I come back from my rounds he's sitting up and studying his phone. He loves his fashion, but this outfit's my favorite—a torn white t-shirt three sizes too big for him, plaid boxers, and little plastic clips pinning back the shorter hair around his face.

When I turn around from shutting the door, he's watching me with a goofy grin and wiggling a little. "Guess what?"

"I have no idea."

He throws the phone on the bed between us and slaps both hands on my brown wool blanket. "I fucking found it. But I'm too scared to click on it."

"No way."

"Yes way." He pumps both fists in the air, then scoops the phone back up. "I win."

My shitty metal bed frame, which we pulled out of a dumpster, almost collapses when I throw myself on the

mattress next to him. “Don’t be a little chicken. I bet you three bucks he makes Rome lick food off his feet.”

Dal gags. “I think you’re making up kinks that don’t exist.”

He’s stalling, so I reach over his arm and hit the *videos* tab on Scout and Roman’s BDSM porn profile. Scout decided last weekend that we weren’t allowed to see it, which of course meant Dal and I raced to see who could find it faster. It only took us three days.

“Oh god, I don’t know.” Dallas drops the phone and covers his face with both hands before the page can load. “What if it’s...I mean...”

“You’ve seen both their penises before,” I point out, scrolling through thumbnails while Dallas sneaks peeks between his fingers.

“Yeah, but I’ve never seen them...you know.” He sticks out two fingers on each hand like floppy dicks and slaps them together.

Rolling over, I grin up into his dark eyes. “Like what now? Show me slower, with sound effects.”

He blinks at me, then punches my shoulder as hard as he can. His fist bounces off of me pointlessly. Dal isn’t weak, but I’m built like a brick shithouse, as the weird old lady who lived next door when I was growing up used to say.

“Fine, get it over with,” he grumbles, leaning in next to me and tapping a random video.

It must be part two of some mega sex marathon, because it starts right in the middle of the action. I can tell from the setup that they’re in the bedroom across the hall from mine. Roman’s hands are tied to a metal hook in the wall, his helpless body stretched out, and Scout is balls deep in his—

We both move so fast that I don’t know which one of us slaps the phone face-down on the bed. Nobody paused the video, so the moaning and wet sounds keep going, muffled by the blanket.

“Jesus Christ, make it stop.” Dallas pounces on the phone, trying to pause the video without looking at it. When he finally shuts it up, he throws the phone across the room into a pile of my dirty clothes, then runs his hands down his face. “You know what I learned tonight?”

“What that random hardware in their wall is for?”

He snorts a giggle, then flops onto his back with his head on the pillow next to mine. After sharing a bed for so many months, I’ve gotten used to having his flyaway hair in my eyes, my nose, my mouth, and tickling my neck. “I learned that there are some things I do not need to see in my short life on this earth. And my two best friends doing...whatever that was...makes the top of the list.”

I hold up my hand in the air above us with my pinkie extended. “We swear that we’ll close that tab and never open it again.”

“Damn straight.” He hooks his slim, tan pinkie through my pale, crooked one. “I swear to god, if I have a dream about that, I’m going to need therapy.”

He stretches like a sleepy cat, but his yawn turns into a miserable groan as he rubs his face in the pillow. “My back is killing me, and I have to get up and go again in like five hours.” Trying to get comfortable, he slides a hand in his underwear and pulls out the silicone packer we got him for Christmas last year. When we first lived together, he’d lock himself in the bathroom to sneak a sock into his jeans for a bulge. Now he just throws his cock on the bedside table without even thinking.

“Ask your boss to let you stay behind the registers tomorrow.” I prop myself up on one arm and study his profile—thick, long eyelashes, a pointy nose with a bump in the bridge from where Roman accidentally broke it once, and the swollen scrape on his forehead.

Pursing his lips, he blows out a bitter laugh. “My boss fucking hates me. He makes me carry these fifty-pound boxes of canned beans around the store all day while dipshits slam their carts into my ass.”

“When your boss is scarier than *my* bosses, it’s time to rethink your life.” I reach over and brush my finger down his nose. “I think it’s getting more crooked.”

“Fuck off.” He swats my hand away. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t afford to stand up to him.”

“Apply to that clothing store you’re always staring at. They had a sign in the window.”

His eyes widen and he slides further down in the bed. “Shut up. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Look at me.” He waves a hand at his ripped clothes and crazy hair. “*Carrying boxes of beans* is not a relevant resume for a luxury boutique.”

“Oh shit!” I scramble into a sitting position and dig through the blankets for my phone. “Who’s a fucking genius?”

The stinker just raises one eyebrow at me.

“We’ll make you an account online for posting all your outfits, and you can use it like a resume.”

His forehead furrows in confusion. “That sounds... complicated.”

“It’s easy if you don’t suck at social media.” My fingers are already flying over my screen, setting up a new account. I spend literally all my free time online following sneaker hauls and reviews.

He opens his mouth, shuts it again, then scrunches up his tired face. He’s trying so hard to process the way I just trampled all over his plans that I think his head is going to explode.

Reaching across, I wrap my hand around his face and push him down into the pillow. “Just relax, baby. I’ve got this.”

“No,” he mumbles sulkily. “You need supervision.” But the boy must be exhausted. Within a couple of minutes, he takes the three little snorting breaths that mean he’s dropped off into sleep. I lose all concept of time as I play with the

fluffy hairs at the nape of his neck with one hand and work on my project with the other. He's been texting me 'outfit of the day' pictures for years, so I have tons to work with.

My phone tells me it's four in the morning when he groans and lifts his tousled head. "Why are you still up?" he croaks, squinting at me.

"Check it out." I lean over and hold up the phone, scrolling through row after row of aesthetically-edited outfit pics. "Do you like it?"

"Jesus." Pushing himself up on his elbows, he rubs his eyes. "Why did you save all these?"

I shrug one shoulder. "I like looking at them. What do you think?"

A shy, unconscious smile tugs at his mouth as he studies the screen. "It makes me look like a pro or something. You didn't have to..."

"Just promise me you'll call the store tomorrow."

He swallows, frowning at the pictures one more time, then drops his forehead against my arm and closes his eyes. "I promise, Beck. You always get your way, don't you?"

I want to tell him it's not as fun as it sounds. If he got his way, I'd be going to the intervention meetings and they'd be working. I'd be on board with this perfect future that everyone seems to be able to see but me. Getting my way fucking hurts.

"Let me in." I pull on the blankets, rolling off of the edge so I can wriggle underneath into the soft warmth of his body heat. If I didn't have this every night, like an anchor, I think I'd go insane.

He's picky and always has opinions on how he wants us arranged, but tonight for some reason he stays still and quiet, letting me choose. Instead of getting myself all wrapped around him like usual, I scoot over and rest my head on his chest. Instinctively, he starts carding his fingers through my hair while I listen to his heart beat. Now that I've run out of things to distract myself with, it's too dark and quiet in here. Dallas got cut and bruised today, and it feels like my fault,

even though that doesn't make any sense. The loneliness of lying to all my best friends is starting to fuck me up.

"I don't want them to laugh at me," he mumbles suddenly, already half asleep again.

I skim a thumb along the raised ridge of his surgery scar. "No one could ever laugh at you. If they did, I'd wreck them." Breaking shit might be the only thing I'm good at, but at least it means I can keep my boy safe. If that's all I ever had to show for my life, I'd be pretty satisfied. But that doesn't stop me from feeling small and sad as I stare into the dark and wait for all the shit in my life to catch up with me.

5

DALLAS

“YOU’VE FORGOTTEN what color a sky is. Fucking brilliant, dude,” I mutter, propping my chin in my hand and looking from the smudged piece of cardstock in front of me to the tin of colored pencils in six million shades. Drawing a beach sunset for my mom sounded easy, but I’m finding myself severely underqualified.

The cute guy who cleans the popcorn machine at my movie theater job always looks so zen when he sketches, so I thought I’d try it out. Mom excitedly dragged home a pencil set that was almost too big for her to carry, because she’s convinced I’ll be a genius at any hobby I so much as glance at sideways.

Picking up two random pink pencils, I contemplate what on earth the difference could be between a “deco peach” and a “peach beige”. The sunset blazes over our neighbor’s garage and right into my bedroom window every single night. I should fucking remember what it looks like. But sometimes you don’t look for something until it’s not there anymore.

Huffing in frustration, I grab every single pencil with the word “peach” in the name. Maybe sticking to a theme will help.

The deafening bang of my door slamming open makes me jolt and leave a scar of dark orange across the middle of my

picture. Heart pounding, I stare blankly at Hayden, my mom's boyfriend—shaved head, thick muscle, and the charming baby-blue eyes that everyone adores. Right now, they're so cold, like pressing a shard of ice against your neck and feeling it drip down your spine.

“Can I help...” My voice fades when he holds up a little plastic box, one that was supposed to be safely hidden in the bottom of my bathroom drawer. It's empty, the two halves flopping open like a bird with broken wings, which means he found the syringes and needles. The glass vial labeled ‘testosterone cypionate’.

I open my mouth, but I couldn't speak if my life depended on it. When he takes a step into the room, I shrink back against the edge of my desk, willing this to be a nightmare. Everyone loves Hayden's jokes, his good looks. He helps out around the house and takes Mom on the most romantic dates. But I've always been scared of him for some reason, the small edges of something dark that I catch in passing moments. When I told Mom, she didn't listen. She so badly wants him to be the one to step in and cherish her after eighteen years of raising me alone.

“I heard about this on the news once.” He throws the box at me, and I flinch away as it bounces off my shoulder. “You're a fucking girl, and you doped up and cut your tits off because you're sick.”

I stumble to my feet, trying to make my voice sound manly and assertive. “No, I'm not.” It comes out more like a squeak, thick with tears and panic. “Get the fuck out.”

His eyes narrow, and I can see a cruelty there that doesn't have an end. I should never have let him in our house, no matter what Mom said. “Take your pants off and prove it.”

Self preservation overcomes the terror and I make a break for it, ducking past him and sprinting out of the room. I skid on the hardwood and almost fall, clawing back to my feet. “Mom! Mommy!” My voice breaks as I yell for her, trying to figure out where she went. I was still naive enough to believe, in that moment, that she had the power to fix everything.

“She’s not here to protect you, little fucking pervert.” When I turn around, he backhands me. The world spins like a teacup ride at the fair as I go falling and rolling down the stairs. My head slams against something hard, and the banister makes a cracking sound as my body bounces off it and lands in a bewildered, painful heap at the bottom.

“This is my house,” I scream in a ragged voice as I struggle to stand up. “Get out of our house.” I don’t know what I think is going to happen. Even though I was a trans kid, I’ve had a soft life until today—the meds I needed, the surgeries, a school that accepted my name and pronouns. It tricked me into believing that good was stronger than evil.

He pulls a pistol out of his jeans and advances slowly down the stairs. Mom’s a pacifist; I’ve never been near a real gun, or even a plastic toy. “Either you get out and never come near us again, or I throw your body in the river and tell her I have no idea where you went.”

“You can’t.” I whimper, trying to hold my ground. “If I go missing, she’ll never stop looking for me.”

“She will when she realizes her precious, brain-sick baby ran away on purpose and is never coming back.”

My heart stops as the barrel of the gun taps my chest. Hayden towers over me, crowding me toward the door. “I’m gonna count backwards from ten,” he says.

I’ll always feel guilty about the moment where I snatch up my sneakers and stumble outside into the wet grass. He follows me onto the porch and watches as I limp to the sidewalk. This is a beautiful, safe neighborhood, but everyone’s at work in the middle of the afternoon. “If I see you anywhere in five miles of here, or talking to the cops,” he calls after me, “you’re dead. My friends and I will hunt you down. So you’d better keep running.”

And I do. I have no idea how far five miles is, so I stumble along as best I can until the afternoon sinks into evening and I curl up against the wall of a grungy pizza restaurant in a part of town I’ve never seen before. I spend all night there, staring at the dirty brick wall in complete shock. The next morning I

feel more dirty and cold than I ever have in my life, my stomach cramping with unfamiliar hunger. I have no idea how much worse it's going to get.

I left my phone behind, and I'm terrified that if I call or look for my mom, Hayden will hurt both of us. I'd rather never see her again than have her harmed because of me. It takes me a week of sleeping on back doorsteps and eating pizza from the trash to work up the desperation to go back.

I reach my street at the break of dawn, when both of them should still be asleep. Neither Mom's red Impala nor Hayden's black truck are in the driveway. I'm about to leave and come back later when I notice that the corgi-riding garden gnome that used to peek out between two rose bushes isn't there anymore. A light blush of deco peach—or is it peach beige?—spreads over the houses as I creep across the street and up the grass. When I press my face to the living room window, the place has been stripped—no more pictures of my grandfather on the wall or the little animal figurines mom loves to collect.

Trying not to hyperventilate, I circle the whole house, prying at windows and trying to smash the lock on the back door with a rock.

She left me.

I don't understand.

What the fuck happened? What did he tell her? My whole life, it's been just her and me. And now she's gone. I don't even know, as I huddle in the corner of the front porch, that when I finally manage to call her number, it will be disconnected. That I'll sleep on this porch for five days, too wretched to even care about Hayden, before I wake up to some guy in a suit poking me with a stick. A realtor, here to show the house to new buyers.

Loss comes fast and breaks hard, like a tidal wave. The grief lasts forever, an endless undertow choked with the wreckage of everything it destroyed, leaving the world behind it unrecognizable. It never stops pulling, because it knows that part of you just wants to drown.

The little, dark-haired girl stares up at me from the package of biscuits cradled in my palm. I used to see her in our kitchen cupboard every single morning when I got out the tea. I told myself this morning that I wouldn't cry today, no matter what, but my throat hurts.

“Ooh, cookies.” Scout the sugar-whore bumps my side as he cranes his neck to see over my shoulder. “Parle-G? Are they good?”

“They're not sweet like Oreos. You dip them in tea.” Clearing my throat, I look him up and down. There's a reason he's standing next to me out of the entire grocery store. “What do you want?”

He fixes the Broncos cap over his messy silver hair. “Rome asked if we could get a tin of kitten formula for Rambo.”

“Oh.” My eyes trail back to the girl on the packaging. For Mom's birthday the year before she met Hayden, I spent all day trying to make her these crazy French cookies I saw on *Bake Off*. They turned out absolute shit, and I felt like such a dick. She just laughed and told me to put on my sandals. We walked all the way to the grocery store in February at night to get a pack of Parle-G and some cinnamon and cardamom to make our own chai.

I turn the biscuits over in my hands one more time, then push them back onto the shelf. “Yeah, okay. Grab the formula.”

“Are you alright?”

The words startle me out of the fog in my head. “Huh?”

“Formula costs money. You hate spending money. Do you have a fever?”

I roll my eyes and turn toward the front door. I'm good at hiding pain. Mom was the only person who could always tell when I wasn't okay. “I would pay any amount of money to be home taking a nap right now, so hurry up.”

Instead of waiting for Scout to make his purchases, I head out to the Civic parked crookedly under a huge oak. The sun is harsher in Colorado, with less atmosphere to block it, so I can already feel it trying to burn my bare arms. The oak's leaves flutter in the breeze, making a gentle sighing sound as Roman rolls down the passenger window.

I prop my hip against it and peer in at the cardboard box cradled in his lap. "How's Rambo?"

He scratches at the cat's black and white head with a fingernail, and it arches into his touch. "Good. He's hungry all the time."

"I told Scout to grab the formula. If we're gonna keep collecting ravenous pets though, someone in this house needs to get a better job."

Roman shakes his hair back out of his face and looks up at me with a surprised, grateful smile that makes enduring Scout's snark worth it. "I'll get a goat next; it can mow the yard at least."

I manage a weak chuckle as I shake my head and squint out at the eastern horizon. It's a dark, dangerous purple, but the storm won't reach us for hours. "Hey. Want to watch me do something stupid?"

"Sure." He rests an elbow on the open window and cocks his head at me as I pull out my phone and search for a number.

"Here we go. I need you to be my witness later, to Beck." Bending over and propping both elbows next to his, I put the phone on speaker and balance it on the door.

"This is Richard from Copper Canyon, how can I help you?"

Shit. I spent all morning banking on getting an answering machine. Roman's eyebrows go up as he rests his chin on his arm and listens to me flub epically.

"Oh, uh, I'm sorry. I mean, hi. My name is Dallas Santra." I hesitate way too long, grabbing for what to say next.

“How can I help you, Dallas Santra?” There’s a twist of dry humor in the older man’s voice. At least he’s not an asshole.

“I’m calling about the cashier position you have posted in your front window. I love your store, and I was wondering if I could possibly have an interview...” I close my eyes, picturing Beck in the dark working so hard on that website. “I don’t have specific fashion experience, but I’ve run registers and stock rooms before and I have some pictures of my own outfits.” Every word out of my mouth makes me cringe, but Roman nudges me and offers a thumbs up.

There’s a pause. Right before I can stammer an apology, Richard speaks up. “Sure, why not? Can you stop by at the end of this week?”

“Really?” I blurt, then want to slap myself. “I mean, yes sir, I can do that. Thank you so much.”

Richard hangs up after settling on a time, but I just stare blankly at the phone. On another day, I’d probably be celebrating. Right now, I just feel incredibly overwhelmed.

“Good job.” Roman picks up Rambo and solemnly bumps the kitten’s tiny, wet nose against mine. “He says good job, too.”

The rustling of grocery bags announces Scout’s arrival. “I came up with a plan,” he proclaims as he shoves the food into the dog-hair-covered cargo area. “We play twenty questions on the way to get Beck and the loser has to wash dishes for two weeks.”

I bite back a sigh. Twenty questions isn’t a game between the four of us—it’s a sport. Beck and Scout have been trying to stump each other since they were ten years old. You’re fucked if you’re not mentally prepared, which means I’m going to be scrubbing a lot of pots and pans in the near future. “I don’t—”

Before I can finish, Roman brightens up. “I thought of a really good one the other day. You’ll never get it.”

It feels like the car ride is never going to end. I scrunch down in the overly-warm back seat with my head propped

against the dirty window and stare at my skinned knee where it shows through the hole in my jeans. Every once in a while, when I notice a pause, I throw out *is it bigger than a loaf of bread* or *do people keep one in their house* without really listening to the answers. Pulling out my phone, I ignore a vague churn of car sickness as I flick through the social media I almost never use.

We make a detour to the hardware store on our way to pick up Beck from his meeting. There's only one reason Scout and Roman come here—cheap stuff for making BDSM gear. Trying not to think about the video that scarred me for life, I stay in the car and watch them cross the parking lot hand-in-hand before going back to my phone. I don't know what I'm looking for, but the algorithm keeps cluttering my feed with random local news stories. *Denver High School Faces Backlash Over Transgender Swimmer*.

I *know* I shouldn't open the comments. I fucking know. Once you've started, you can go on and on for days, because the hate never ends. I've crawled down this hole before. It cut me up and poured poison in the wounds, making me question things I made peace with a long time ago. Today, that's exactly why I click on the article.

I'm so lost in reading comments that I jump as Scout and Rome open the doors and toss a plastic bag in the seat next to me. When the air conditioning blows a swirl of cool air across the sweat gathered on my neck, I close my eyes in relief.

“It's your turn.”

When I realize Scout's waiting for an answer, I lift my head. There's a greasy, bitter taste in my mouth, and a throbbing behind my eyes that keeps getting worse. I feel a little like I'm drunk, but only the bad parts. “Oh, um...I'm ready.”

“Is it edible?” Scout asks with laser precision, following the optimal strategy he's developed.

“Yep.”

“Is it a sandwich?”

“Yep.”

“Is it a PB&J?”

“You got it.”

He creases his forehead at me in the rearview mirror. “Are you throwing the competition?”

“No, I just...” I shrug, mentally begging him to leave me alone. Sometimes the charm of spending 24/7 with your best friends wears off a little. “I was going for reverse psychology.”

“Ohhhhh. I never thought of that.” He props his arms on the wheel and drives on in silence, like I just broke his brain.

Every week I’ve wanted to go inside the community center and check out the setup for the meetings, maybe say hi to the leaders. See how my boy is doing. But Beck is always waiting on the curb with his hands in his pockets when we drive up. He circles the car and slides into the back seat next to me in a flurry of summer air and the warm, slightly sweet smell that clings to his skin. “Sup?”

“Twenty questions,” Roman answers as we pull away from the curb and finally turn toward home, thank god.

“Fuck yeah, I’m ready.” He rubs his hands together and leans forward, flashing me a grin. He once had us guessing for four hours before we figured out that his answer was the concept of ambidexterity.

Their words bounce vaguely around my head as I go back to reading endless comments, like an addict. Because at least for an hour I found an easier, sharper pain than the screaming hurt I woke up with this morning.

“What’cha reading?” Beck plucks my phone out of my hand before I can react. I scramble for it in a panic, but he pushes me away with one arm and holds it out of reach with the other.

“No,” I hiss, under the hum of the conversation in the front seat. “Give it back. I’m not kidding.” When he doesn’t listen, I curl my fingers tight in the sleeve of his t-shirt. “Please, Beck.”

I can see the confusion first, the tilt of his head as he scans line after line of pure hate, then the moment his whole body deflates. The knot of self-loathing in my throat feels so thick I can barely swallow around it when he turns and pierces me with his green-gold eyes. “What the hell?” he murmurs.

“It’s nothing. Please just drop it.” Reaching past him, I grab the phone and stuff it in my jeans, then press my shoulder against the door and stare out at the nail salons and burger joints flicking past. I should have stayed home this morning. If I don’t get some fresh air, I really am going to start crying. The fifteen minute drive between me and my bed sounds like an eternity.

After a couple of minutes, my phone buzzes against my thigh and snaps me partway out of the fog in my head. Everyone I text is already here in the car. When I see that it’s a video from Beck, I glance over at him in confusion. He’s just lounging casually in his seat, arguing with Scout about the validity of my “reverse psychology” method of twenty questions.

Chewing my lip, I open the file. It’s a video of Beck’s right hand, the faded letters *S-T-A-Y* tattooed along his knuckles. Based on his jeans and the ripped tan upholstery, he took it in the last minute or two. He can’t really sign properly one-handed in his lap, so he quickly spells it one letter at a time. *I think you’re awesome.*

I look at him again, but he’s ignoring me on purpose. The second time I play the video, I watch the sure, easy way he shapes the letters, the flex of tendons in his sturdy forearm. I know the tattoo on his left knuckles says *T-R-U-E*. As far as finger tats go, it’s not too bad. And I’ve never met anyone who lives by that adage as purely as Beck.

A new video pops up while I’m still watching the first one on loop. This time he spells *You’re cute, too*. I shoot him a skeptical look, and he smiles at me—the heart-crushing grin that makes my knees go weak, even though he’s my friend.

Looking away again, I focus past my reflection onto the sun shafting through the trees and playing along the glass.

Warm fingers wrap around my hand where it's resting on the seat between us and squeeze. I close my eyes and squeeze back.

Someone says something—I don't catch what—and then the Civic is pulling into the bike lane and stopping next to the sidewalk. I glance around, confused, as Beck circles the car and opens my door, looking down at me from under his backwards blue camo hat. "Come on." He makes it look like he's just helping me up, but in reality he practically has to lift me out of the car. I stumble a few steps and lean my forehead against the rough brick wall of some upscale steakhouse, gratefully gulping in the cool, open air.

When I feel less like I'm about to have a panic attack, I turn around and realize the car is gone. Beck's leaning on the wall next to me, watching me closely. "Better?"

Closing my eyes, I let out a deep breath. "Yeah. Better." I point to where the Civic was. "Where did they go?"

"They'll be back in a couple of hours. I told them you needed to take a massive dump."

I cough a weak laugh, propping my head against the brick again. "You're a sack of soggy coleslaw."

He grins, then tips his head toward the park across the street. Bright green grass dotted with fir and maple trees slopes down to a reservoir pond big enough for people to take boats on. Everyone's out enjoying the breezy weather before midsummer, when the temperatures will climb into the low hundreds. "Can we check it out?"

I just shrug wearily. We take the crosswalk, then wander over the grass until we find a wide concrete path that circles the entire lake. After five minutes of companionable silence, Beck's rumbly voice breaks the quiet. "Help me out, buddy." He doesn't explain what he wants, but I know. This boy always needs a *why*. Otherwise he'll wrestle with it until his brain breaks trying to work out an answer.

I tighten my jaw, squinting out at the sparkling water. "Today's the two year anniversary of the last day I saw my

mom.”

“Oh.” I can feel his eyes on the side of my face, but I don’t look at him.

“I can’t stop thinking about how, if I hadn’t transitioned, we’d still be together right now.” I scrape rough fingers through my hair. “The more time passes, the more I realize I might never see her again, all because I couldn’t suck it up and be satisfied.”

“But—” Beck stops walking, his forehead creased. “But you had to transition, right? You’re *you*. You’re Dallas.” There’s the faintest hint of distress in his voice.

“I guess.” I kick a rock into the water, enjoying the pain in my toes, and watch it splash. “I just don’t understand why some people are born with the soul of one person and the body of another, and then get punished for it their whole lives.” Trying to get control of the shakiness in my voice, I swipe an arm across my eyes and keep walking faster.

After a pause, I hear his sneakers jogging to catch up. I don’t resist when his strong fingers slide between mine, pushing them apart. This is a strange line we’ve been pushing, something that started naturally a few months ago. Beck had the flu, so I drove him into town to pick up some cough medicine. He curled up in the passenger seat, shivering and feverish, as we bumped along through dirty snowbanks in the dark. At some point, I reached over without thinking and took his hand—not the normal way, but lacing my fingers through his and stroking his knuckles with my thumb. He hugged my hand to his chest and closed his eyes, finally drifting off.

We never acknowledged it, but every once in a while it happens again when we’re walking alone or riding in the car. It’s too viscerally comforting to stop, even if it feels like a dirty secret. Today we’re doing it in front of several hundred strangers, but Beck doesn’t seem to care.

“I think I’m just gonna kill everyone,” he offers happily, when we’re a quarter of the way around the lake. “The whole world, except you and Scout and Rome and your mom.”

When I realize that's the extent of his thoughts, I glance up at him. "Thanks, I guess? That's not a solution I'd considered."

"I think about it a lot," he explains matter-of-factly. "It would fix all my problems." His lips twist into a small smile, but I can't tell if he's kidding or not. I honestly don't think he is.

"I'm honored that I get to survive the purge." The absurdity of the conversation distracts me from my sick sensation of drowning. This is Beck's superpower, to pull me back from the edge of anything. With the warm scratch of his voice, his wild energy, and the big, solid body I sleep snuggled up against at night. I didn't believe in soulmates—platonic or otherwise—until I met mine.

He swings our joined hands. "Baby, you're the king of my new world order. We need someone to tell us all how to be good."

We pause next to an empty bench, right on the edge of the shade with a perfect view of the whole park. The seat is covered in goose shit, so Beck clambers up to perch on the narrow wooden back and tugs me up after him. I have to grab his arm to keep from falling off backwards as I get myself balanced and find clean spots for my sneakers to rest. Finally, I pry my fingers off his tattooed skin, thickly dusted with pale hair, and rest my elbows on my knees. We watch a guy way out in the middle of the lake who's been waterskiing for almost five minutes without falling.

"Is she starting to feel far away yet?" Beck asks suddenly. "Or can you remember everything?"

I glance over and study his profile. He's told me how his mom died of sepsis from a lung infection when he was six.

Shrugging, I weave my fingers together in my lap, twisting them into different shapes. "When I came out to my mom, I told her how I had always wanted to get a Hot Wheels car for Christmas like my cousins, instead of dresses and shit. Literally the next day, she drove me to the store and we picked out a toy car together. For years I carried that thing in my

pocket everywhere I went. But when her boyfriend threw me out, I had to leave it behind, along with the pictures and voicemails on my phone. On days like today, it kills me that I don't have a single reminder of her."

Beck nods slowly, watching the boat as it drives in tight, wavy circles, trying to make the guy wipe out. Then he digs in his pocket and pulls out his battered wallet. "I can't believe I never introduced you," he murmurs, like I'm supposed to know what that means.

He fishes past the one bank card Scout got for all of us and a load of half-finished punch cards for places we never go, then finally produces a folded photograph, frayed around the edges. The easy way he smooths it open on his knee tells me he does this every day. Careful not to disturb the picture, he shifts his thigh across until it's pressed against mine so I can see the image clearly. "It's Mom."

The photo has faded, but I can make out a cheerful woman with waist-length blonde hair and a flowery dress that makes me think of a hippie from the sixties. She has Beck's smile—or he has hers, I guess—wide, playful, and unrestrained.

"She's beautiful," I breathe, glancing up at him. His eyes, even greener with the reflection of the sunny grass, search my face like he's checking to make sure I mean it.

After a moment, he picks it up and folds it delicately. "I wore her wedding ring around my neck every day. But the cunt—" that's his name for his father "—stole it and pawned it when I was fourteen. I begged him to go get it back, but..." He shrugs instead of finishing. Sometimes when we're alone, I catch a defeated look in his eyes that he hides the rest of the time, a reminder of what an unfairly shitty life he's endured. Elbowing me, he smiles a little weakly. "So you and I are like same-same."

"We are." I study our sneakers side-by-side on the bench, my black canvas slip-ons next to his muddy, ripped basketball shoes. Nothing about us is same-same, not really, and yet I understand him better than I even know myself. "What do we do? Have a 'watching our loved ones disappear into the

oblivion of time' party? I don't know what kind of cake to serve for that."

He cackles softly, like I knew he would. But my heart stutters when he leans over and rests his forehead against my shoulder for a brief, soft moment. Before I can react, the guy on the waterski gets thrown headfirst into the lake and Beck pops up with a piercing wolf whistle of approval.

"Well." I sit up and straighten my t-shirt, making my voice business-like. "Now that I've taken my massive emotional dump straight in your lap, what do we do for the next hour?"

6

BECK

I NEVER KNOW where I'm going—I just start walking until I find trouble or see something that will make one of my boys happy. Those are the only two things I care about. Today, I have one hour to make Dallas smile. I'll know the right thing when I see it.

We don't hold hands as we retrace our steps around the lake, but he walks so close to me I can smell his hair. On a whim, I pull off my hat and plonk it on his head. It's so big that when I tug the brim down it covers his whole face and he has to shove it up, spluttering. "Wouldn't want you to burn," I offer, like I'm so generous.

He looks pointedly between his tawny complexion and my pasty white one, then rolls his eyes and keeps walking. But he's fighting not to smile, and he's still wearing my hat, so I win.

When we get to the sidewalk, I spot a sign across the road. *Bam*, we have a destination. Dallas pulls out his phone while we wait for the light to change and squints at the screen, chewing absently on a bit of his hair.

"Are you reading more of that bullshit?" I crane my neck to see, but he grunts and waves me away. "Okay, that's it."

Dallas jumps in surprise when I reach over his shoulder, snatch his phone away, and stuff it in my pocket. “The hell?” He sounds offended, but he has no right to.

“You’re grounded.”

His jaw tightens as he narrows his eyes at me, holding out his hand. “I didn’t agree to this game.”

“I never asked you to.” The light turns, so I walk around him and head across the road.

“I’m serious,” he calls, jogging after me. “I’m an adult. You can’t take away my rights.”

“I guess you’ll have to get it back, then,” I holler over my shoulder, keeping my eyes on the sidewalk in front of me. As soon as the slap of his shoes gets close enough, I dodge and turn around, walking backward so I can enjoy the sight of him stumbling and grabbing at empty air. “Do you need something?”

“Give. me. my. fucking—” He dunks his hand in my pocket, but I easily spin out of his grip and keep walking.

“You’re not even trying, baby.”

“Goddamn you.” I only stagger a little when he body-slams me with his full weight. It’s almost like he enjoys trying to take down someone stronger than him and failing. If I didn’t know better, if this wasn’t perfect, straight-laced Dallas, I’d say it felt a tiny bit kinky.

I stumble into the store with him wrapped around me. When he gets another hand in my pocket, I grab his arm and spin him until he’s trapped in a tight hug from behind. We look like a couple of drunks as he tries to waddle forward with me on his back, then breaks down into giggles. “I give up, you win. Get the fuck off me.”

Pushing my luck, I squeeze him to my chest. “Say it again, louder.”

“You *win*, you filthy turd.”

“That’s right.” I smack his ass, then hook an arm around his shoulders and take off for the back of the store.

“That wasn’t fair,” he protests, trying to smooth his hair back under my hat. “I thought I was the king of your new world order.”

I squeeze his shoulder through his thin, black tee. “Nothing’s fair, baby.”

His sneakers slow to a stop when we get to the aisle I’m looking for. He glances up at me uneasily, then stares at the sea of blue packaging. “What are we doing?”

“We’re picking some Hot Wheels.”

“I—” He takes a step back with that look he gets when he doesn’t know what to think or say. “We can’t afford it.”

Pulling out my wallet, I search through the ripped lining until I find the emergency fiver I’ve been carrying around for many years longer than I’ve known this man. “Here. I promise this didn’t come from the food money.”

He stares longingly at the hundreds of shiny little cars hanging in neat rows, then shakes his head. “You don’t have to do this, Beck. I’m fine.”

“Cut it out.” I grab his ponytail and drag him gently over to the main display. “Which one did your mom get you?”

His eyebrows furrow wistfully as he scans the rows. “I don’t know. It was some kind of street racer, but I don’t see anything like it.”

I get distracted looking at him instead of the cars, remembering how my friends and I would come to this aisle and sit on the floor, trading boxes around like they belonged to us. Sometimes we’d open them and steal the cars, other times we just played. I guess Dal would have been stuck a few aisles over, in the one full of pink stuff. When I imagine his mom bringing him here, to show him that she understood who he really was, it gives me a feeling so big and raw I can’t get my hands around it.

“Hey.” I grab a lifted black and red pickup. “This was the one I had. My mom put it in my Christmas sock. I built a whole track in the dirt with jumps and shit. Then I’d make obstacles and set them on fire.”

He blinks away the moisture in his eyes with a weak smile and takes it out of my hands. “You’re lucky you didn’t burn the whole trailer park down.” Studying it reverently, he brushes his thumb along the plastic. “I like this one,” he says in a small voice, like he’s a kid again.

“Perfect.” I grab a gaudy-as-fuck gold El Camino and nudge him toward the checkout. The cashier narrows her eyes at us, like we probably have the rest of the cars stuffed in our pockets, but she takes my bill and hands back twenty-seven cents. I just blew my whole savings, but nothing in the world matters as much as the look on Dallas’ face as he tears the packaging off his truck because he’s too excited to wait until we’re outside.

“Where are we going?” he asks as I tug him around the corner of the building instead of back toward the street. The scrape of our sneakers on the asphalt is the only sign of life as we weave between sun-faded semi trucks and empty loading bays to a huge undeveloped field full of weeds.

“We still have thirty minutes to spend.” I step out into the dirt and drag the toe of my shoe in a huge oval. “Right here. And they’re both good cars, so we have to make it tough.”

He eyes me with a mixture of *what are you on* and *this sounds awesome*. “We’ll get filthy.”

“Exactly.” After double checking for bindweed, I plop my ass down on the ground to show him I’m serious. “Bonus for whoever makes the best obstacle.”

He stands there for a long time with his hands stuffed in his back pockets and his nose wrinkled, watching me smooth out a hard, packed track wide enough for both cars. “Um.” He pulls in the breath he does when he wants to explain why he’s right and you’re wrong, then points at my work. “There ought to be a jump there.” I just ignore him. Finally, he drops down on his hands and knees and starts pushing dirt around.

I get distracted watching his frown of concentration as he shapes the soil with the same precision he uses for everything. Every time he wipes sweat off his forehead, he unknowingly leaves another streak of dust across his face.

Once I've built enough ditches and ramps, I break off strands of weed and stretch them across the track like tripwires. Dallas is very carefully picking the prickly little bunches of thorns out of the bindweed and scattering them across the track. I whistle in approval. "Damn, I never thought of that one."

He glances up at me with a grin. "Don't steal my ideas."

Once everything else is set, we twist the receipt from the store into a hoop shape and attach it to a stick in the ground so the cars can jump through it. "Lighter," Dallas demands, making grabby fingers at me when I stop to admire our work.

I pass him my rusty, vintage lighter with an eagle on it that belonged to my great grandpa—or at least that's how the story goes. "Don't do it until I tell you. The racers have to line up first." Imitating the nasal growl of a vintage engine, I drive my car into position. "You coming?"

He picks up his car and sets it neatly next to mine, then raises his eyebrows at me.

"Rule one." I sit back on my heels. "Sound effects."

I'm pretty sure he's blushing a little. "No. That's what imaginations are for."

"*Vroooooommmmm.*" Turning my car around, I drive it up the side of his leg, then along his arm with dramatic revving noises, like it's trying to power up a mountain. He holds his deadpan glare until the El Camino ventures across his chest and up the very middle of his face. When it hits his mouth, he splutters and slaps me away, falling over backward.

"*Fine. Jesus.*" With the world's worst and cutest attempt at an engine noise, he drives the truck in a circle and parks it back at the starting line. "Can I light stuff on fire now? That's what manly men say, right?"

"Perfect. Get ready."

He never uses lighters, so it takes him five tries to ignite the paper. As soon as the flame catches, I call "Onetwothreego!" in a rush, before it can go out.

“Shit,” he yelps, pouncing on his car and sending it chasing after mine with a much better revving sound this time.

I flick mine toward the burning ring, but it sails wide and lands in a pile of Dallas’ thorns. The prickles jab into my thumb as I try to free myself. “Aaand Alexander’s car is—fucking ouch—incapacitated, can he turn it around?”

“Not if Santra flips his nitro switch,” Dallas yells, zooming his car around half the track in less than a second to catch up.

“You don’t have a nitro switch!” I try to shove him back, but he shoulder-checks me and lunges toward the finish.

“Then how did I get here? Huh?” The black truck skids across the finish and he rolls onto his back, pumping his fists over his head and imitating the sound of a cheering crowd. “And Santra destroys Alexander in the worst defeat of the season. Fucking bite me.”

“Give me that.” I swipe for his truck, and he holds it out of my reach. “I didn’t spend five bucks just to watch your cheating ass steal my win.”

Breathing hard, his eyes bright, he sits up with that absolute know-it-all quirk to his eyebrow. “Then maybe you should have spent more time on nitro and less time on sound effects.”

“Give it to me.” I grab him around the waist and throw him easily into the dirt, straddling him until I can rip the car out of his fingers.

“That’s supposed to be my memory of my mom, you whore,” he pants, struggling pointlessly. I don’t even have to work to hold him still. Sometimes I forget how much stronger I am, and the feeling does weird things to my head. Instead of easing up I lean on him harder, until he goes still except for his fast breathing.

He’s grinning when our eyes meet, but the longer neither of us look away, the more his smile fades. He swallows, and maybe I imagine his gaze flicking down to my mouth for a fraction of a second. Or maybe I don’t. I can’t quite remember

how we got here, with his wrists pinned in my hands and my legs hooked around his to keep him helpless.

Shaking my head, I let go of him and scramble backward. My dick aches a little as I watch him sit up, and I wonder what his dick looks like, how it feels when he's turned on. I've seen him mostly naked, but never all the way.

I don't know what my damn brain is doing right now.

"Here." I hold the truck out, warm and sharp in my palm, and he takes it carefully. Maybe I didn't know her long enough to be sure, but I think Mom would love him, with his quiet, hippie-ish ways and his wise brain. She'd be happy to see him cradling the same car she gave me such a long time ago.

Dal smiles at me like he can read my mind, but there's a wall behind his eyes that wasn't there two minutes ago. "The guys will be back any minute."

"We can build an even bigger track at home," I offer, getting up and pulling him to his feet. We both take a minute to brush dirt off our clothes, but it's a hopeless task. "Everyone can help. And you're gonna pay a mechanic to take the nitro switch out of your car, because that shit's officially banned."

"Maybe you're the one who needs to take it up a notch, coward." He bangs his shoulder into mine as we walk back toward the road. I don't know which one of us initiates it, but our fingers feel warm and gritty with dirt as they lock together. His shampoo wafting under my nose smells like lilacs and sun. All my dreams are scented with it, the good ones and the nightmares, ever since I first invited him onto my futon.

"Oh," Dal pipes up after a minute. "I called the store. I have an interview on Friday."

My feet slow down until he glances up at me. "No shit, really? Look at you."

He ducks his head a little bashfully. His face is still flushed, and he has a big smear of dirt down his nose. Those deep, dark eyes meet mine again, and we both stare for a moment.

"Thank you, Beck," he says suddenly. "For everything."

He squeezes my hand tighter, then slips his fingers away and jogs toward the road. I'm not a smart guy, and I don't know a lot, but I'll never understand why his mom didn't burn the entire world down to get him back. Because he's the only perfect thing there is.

We can hear Tubbs barking inside the house before we've even pulled into the long driveway. "Uh-oh," Scout murmurs, turning off the *Kidz Bop Ultimate Hits* CD he put in the disc player for a joke two years ago and couldn't get out again. We superglued an old bluetooth speaker to the dashboard so we can play music on our phones, but sometimes when we're feeling lazy we go back to "Party in the USA" sung by twelve year olds.

Scout pulls up to the side of the house and cuts the engine. We don't need to go looking for the disturbance, because there's a person sitting on our back step, staring at us. "What the hell?" Dallas murmurs, glancing at me like I have an answer.

I get out first, wishing I hadn't left my gun inside, and step forward so that I'm between the stranger and my friends. "What's your problem? This is our property."

The figure sits up, and I realize it's just a little kid in black cargo shorts and a hoodie. He can't be more than twelve, with fluffy, uncut brown hair and big ears that stick out too far. His eyes widen a little when he sees my muscles and tattoos, but he stands up and squares his small shoulders aggressively. "Well that's *my* cat." He points past me, and I turn around to see Roman holding the cardboard box with Rambo peeking over the edge. "I came to get him back."

I blink at him, then narrow my eyes. The blind, out-of-control fury from when I saw Dallas bleeding boils up in my gut. "Hold on. Are you the one who—"

"I think you'd better come in for a minute," Scout says smoothly, cutting past me and shooting me a look that says *if*

you can't be cool, stay the fuck outside.

“I need to go,” the kid protests, eyeing us uneasily as his hands curl into fists at his sides. “Give me my kitten back.”

“Maybe you shouldn't have a kitten if you're gonna leave it in the road,” Scout calls over his shoulder as he disappears into the kitchen. Once Dallas, Roman, and the box follow him inside, the boy shoots me a defiant look and runs after them. I really don't know if I can be cool, but there's no way I'm leaving Dallas with someone who attacked him.

By the time I get to the kitchen, Tubbs is pacing and whining at the closed door to the living room. Scout must have decided that a strange child, a kitten, and an agitated two-hundred pound dog was too much at once. “Scuse me, sorry buddy,” I mumble, sliding through the door while he gives me the mother of all dirty looks. We both want to be the top guard dog in this family, so we don't always get along except when I let him into my bed to eat Lucky Charms with me on Saturday mornings.

“I'm Calvin,” the kid announces in a high, clear voice. “Thanks for feeding Hobbes, but I'll take him back now.”

I huff a laugh without meaning to. “That's pretty good.” Roman, perched on the arm of the couch with his box, cocks his head. Scout and Dallas look blank.

“Hobbes.” I wave a hand at the kid's scrawny form. “Calvin and Hobbes. The boy with the tiger and the box that turns them into shit?”

All three guys look at me like I've lost my mind, until Calvin pipes up. “The Transmogri-fier.”

I point at him. “Thank you.” Then I remember I'm supposed to hate him. “Excuse me, you fucking stole from us.”

To my surprise, he tips his chin up and meets my eyes solemnly with his pale brown ones. “I'm sorry. I didn't want to, but I didn't have a choice.”

“You weren't the one that pinned me down,” Dallas muses, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. “He was stronger.”

I close my eyes and grit my teeth as I pull in a slow breath. If I'm supposed to stay calm, he can't say shit like that.

"You're in that old camp by the river, aren't you?" Scout guesses. "Nice spot. Who's your buddy?"

Calvin glances between us with an edge of panic, then zeroes in on Roman. "Please, can I have my cat?" He edges closer to the huge man and scoops up Rambo or Hobbes or whatever from its box. Roman sadly watches the kitten go, but he doesn't stop him. The black and white ball of fur digs claws deep into the kid's hoodie as he hugs it to his chest. "I'm not gonna rat out my bro—my friend. I just want to go."

Scout raises his eyebrows at me, but I shrug irritably. They made it clear I'm supposed to behave myself. Dallas jumps into the silence. "If you guys don't have anywhere to go or anything to eat, maybe we can help you."

I can't bite back the half snort, half growl that bursts out of me. "Come on. If he's old enough to be carjacking people, he's old enough to take care of himself. Tell your fucking *friend* that I shoot any stray vermin I see crawling around my property."

"Please." Dallas rolls his eyes. "You're not Clint Eastwood. Ignore him, Calvin."

Scout clears his throat and shoots us a dirty look, but Calvin just straightens up with as much dignity as someone can have with a cat trying to squirm out of his hands. "We're alright, thank you." And here I go again, accidentally liking him for a second.

When Calvin opens the front door, Roman surprises all of us by snapping his fingers. The kid pauses, looking confused, and I can see Rome searching for words. I don't think they're going to come with a stranger in the house and all of us arguing. "Tell me," Scout murmurs, squeezing his shoulder.

Rome fires off a fast, messy series of signs. I know most of them, like *Tubbs* and *play*, but he and Scout have their own made up shorthand I can't interpret. Calvin watches Roman's hands move in total fascination.

“He says he really likes Rambo—uh, Hobbes—and that he wants the cat and dog to be friends,” Scout explains. “If you’re sticking around the area, he says you should bring Hobbes back to visit.”

Jesus Christ, I live with a bunch of bleeding hearts. Scout’s the only other person in this house with any street smarts. I lean back against the door frame, sulking. When Calvin looks at me, I jerk my head like *fuck off*.

“Thanks!” he calls without answering Roman’s invitation, then cradles the kitten securely and starts running. I cross to the big window and watch him skitter across the fields toward the river. He’s undersized for a kid his age, which makes his fearlessness even more stupid.

Roman clears his throat. “Do you think he’ll come back?” he asks softly.

My friend strokes gentle fingers through his boy’s hair. “I have no idea. But you’d better let the dog in before he dies of a broken heart.”

Dallas comes over to look out the window, his hand resting on my back. “He’s just a little kid. You shouldn’t be mean to him.”

I frown at his wide, chocolate-colored eyes. “Are you serious right now? You still have a giant bruise on your forehead.”

“He said he was sorry.”

I’m trying to come up with a way of saying “I’m gonna have to lock you in my closet until you promise you’ll never leave my sight again” *without* using those words when Scout pops his head back in the room.

“Funny thing, Dallas. We were unpacking the groceries and these must have fallen in the bag somehow.” He chucks a bundle of something across the room, and Dallas scrambles to catch it before it hits the floor. It’s a package of cookies, with a dark-haired little girl on them.

“I—” Dal’s fingers tighten around them, and he hugs them to his chest. His voice sounds soft and a little bewildered, like

in the toy aisle at the store. “You guys didn’t have to do that. None of you...” He glances back at me. “None of you had to do any of this.”

Scout shrugs, his face deadpan. “No idea where they came from. I must have gotten them confused with the Oreos.” He flashes me a smile as Dallas goes rushing to the kitchen to put on some tea.

7

DALLAS

“THANKS AGAIN. I really appreciate the opportunity.”

Head up. Smile. Strong voice. Firm handshake—wait, how firm? Is this too firm? Shit.

Richard, the owner of Copper Creek Fashion, accepts my confused strangling of his hand as we both get to our feet. The forty-something-year-old man intimidates me with his perfectly curly beard, cashmere sweater, and nine-hundred-dollar designer jeans, but his smile is genuine and kind. Right now he’s too busy staring out the office door into the shop behind me to notice if my grip is the appropriate strength.

“No offense, but do you happen to know that man? I don’t, um, recognize him.”

My heart sinks as I spin around and crane my neck over a shelf of perfume. Sure enough, a thatch of blond hair that looks like it lost a fight with a weed whacker is bobbing around between the racks as Beck prowls the shop. Maybe I should feel offended that Richard assumes I’m friends with a sketchy guy in a pink hoodie that says *All Trash, No Trailer*. But he’s not wrong.

“Oh f—” I bite back a profanity. “I’m so sorry.”

Scrambling around my chair, I sprint out of the office. If my friend so much as *breathes* on a Burberry bag, we'll be in debt for the rest of our sorry lives. When he hears my footsteps, Beck's whole face brightens. "Yo." He spins to face me and sashays with the grace of a water buffalo, showing off the handbags dangling from each shoulder. "What should I get, boss? I want the one that makes my ass look bigger."

"No, no, no." I snatch one away and cradle it in my arms. "This is worth three grand, you absolute hunk of baloney."

He goes visibly pale and sets the other bag back on the display like it's a newborn baby. "I didn't touch anything."

"Get the hell out, Beck. What are you doing?"

"I came to pick you up." He sticks out his lower lip, his eyes sulky. "Thought you might want to vent, if it didn't go well."

"Please leave. I'll be out in a minute." When I point to the parking lot, my stomach drops. The dipshit parked our Civic right in front of the huge windows, with the word *CUNT* scratched across the hood in full view. "Don't stand next to the car," I add in a hiss. "Go over by the trees or something."

Holding up his hands in surrender, he takes a step back. "I'm gonna need a damn paper and pen if you keep adding instructions."

I point even more firmly at him, then the door as Richard's shoes click up behind me. With one last bratty eye roll, Beck stomps out.

"Is there a problem?" My potential new boss offers me a worried glance as I set the other handbag back on its stand. Maybe he thinks I have a stalker. I do, but I guess it's consensual.

"No, he's giving me a ride home. I really am sorry; I forgot to tell him to wait elsewhere."

To my surprise, the man smiles teasingly. "We're not homophobic around here, if that's what you're worried about."

My god—he’s known me for twenty minutes and he assumes that’s the kind of man I’d date. I must have really fucked up my interview. My face is burning. “Oh, no. It’s not—I didn’t—” I stammer some random syllables and trail off. I’m so glad Beck isn’t here for this. “He’s...I...um. What were we talking about?”

Richard claps his hands together like he’s releasing me from my misery. “You’re great, Dallas. Making that fashion profile was genius. I’d like to have you come in for a month on probation as an assistant manager—paid, of course. If we’re a good fit for each other, we can take the next step. Talk it over with your, uh, friend and give me a call if you’re interested.”

I gape at him. He was supposed to say *thank you, but no*. Then I say *I understand* and go home and cry while stuffing my face with sugar. I saved some cookies and everything. But instead he’s waiting with a patient smile for me to speak. “Thank you so much, sir,” I manage finally. “So, so much. If it’s alright with you, I’d like to accept right now.” I haven’t quit my grocery store job yet, but I don’t care. I’m the only employee who showed up on time and didn’t shoot drugs in the bathroom, so I’m confident they’ll take me back if this doesn’t work out.

Richard chuckles at my lack of chill. “Alright then. Come back tomorrow after lunch and we’ll start on paperwork and some training.”

I shake his hand, definitely too firmly this time, and make a break for the door before I can make things weird again. Hot, dry air replaces the air conditioning as I step into the late afternoon sun. Beck is sulking over by the trees, his hands jammed into his back pockets as he draws lines in the dirt with his shoe.

When I whistle, he turns around. “I hope that guy gave you something good for all that ass licking.”

I just pump my fists over my head, break into a run, and launch myself at Beck. He manages to catch me with a grunt and only a couple of steps backward. I wrap my arms around his neck as he spins in a circle, letting my feet swing out

behind me before he sets me down. “You got it?” he asks quietly against my ear. When I nod, he squeezes me tighter. “Good boy. I knew you would.”

Gasping for breath, I step back and fix my hair. If Richard saw that, he’ll have a field day with his conspiracy theories. “I’m sorry I threw you out. I was *really* nervous.”

He cocks his head, his searing green eyes puzzled. “Why?”

“Why?” I can’t help snorting. “Because this is my first decent job and I want it to be perfect so we can stop eating beans every day.”

His scruffy jaw tightens, and he glares at the building. “Did that fucker say you weren’t perfect?”

“No, no.” I step between him and the door, just in case. “He’s been incredibly nice to me. He thought we were secretly dating.”

Beck raises his eyebrows, still gazing in the direction of the store, and doesn’t say anything. Finally, his stare returns to assess the maroon skinny jeans and gray turtleneck sweater I spent hours deciding on. “You look good, Dal,” he murmurs. “Like you belong in there.”

I study him, trying to figure out if he’s happy or unhappy or something in between, but he just reaches around and pulls out my hair tie, sending my braid unraveling around my shoulders.

Richard gave me a few bucks to cover gas for my trip. I was going to save it for an emergency, but fuck it. As we head for the car, I hold up the cash between two fingers. “Want to grab ice cream on the way back?”

Beck studies me across the dented roof of the car, the sun catching bright and pale in his hair. The shadows in his face melt back into a genuine smile. “You could twist my arm.”

We drive through a Dairy Queen, then park overlooking the grimy concrete buildings of south Fort Holden, crouched between us and the towering mountains. Kicking off my shoes, I wedge my socked feet up on the dashboard between the trash

and old Happy Meal toys I can't get Beck or Scout to throw away.

I always nibble each side of my cone evenly, watching for drips. Beck inhales the ice cream in two bites, then tears through the cone like a rabid beaver. Sometimes I give him the rest of mine for seconds, but today I feel like I earned it.

Licking his fingers clean with a satisfied sigh, he slides down in his seat and leans over until his heavy head is resting on my shoulder. I rub my cheek idly against his hair, then go back to picking at my cone while Beck dozes in the warmth. In moments like this, everything about our friendship feels like destiny. Like it was written into the universe that a reckless punk from the worst part of town and a spoiled kid from the suburbs would end up here together, eating ice cream in the sun. I'd die for any of my friends, but Beck holds some deeper part of me I can't express. He's the home I thought I'd never have again when Hayden chased me away.

When I'm finished, I join him in napping for ten minutes. I need to make dinner before Roman leaves for work, so I sit up eventually and poke Beck until he's grumpy and awake enough to drive. As we head home, part of me thinks it's weird that he's zoning out instead of turning on his favorite music. I'm too busy daydreaming about my new job to question it until he turns the wrong direction, into a part of town I don't recognize.

"Where are we going?" I ask, watching run-down mechanic shops and bars roll past. This isn't the worst part of town, but it's rough enough to make the back of my neck prickle.

Beck shrugs and pulls into a busy grocery store parking lot. "I just have to meet someone really quick."

"What?" I frown at him.

"You want me to say it again?" There's an edge in his voice that almost never gets directed at me.

"No," I emphasize patiently. "But something marginally less vague would be nice."

He parks in an open spot and sighs. “Quit hounding me. I found some scrap and I’m selling it to a guy.”

My eyes follow his fingers as he fidgets with the keys. I feel sick, and I don’t know why. “Beck. Is this a gang thing?”

“No,” he says loudly, then shakes his head and lowers his voice. “No, it’s not.”

“Because the website for your intervention program said that the most dangerous time to interact with the gang is when you’re trying to get out. There’s retaliation and—”

“I know what the damn program says,” he interrupts hoarsely, not looking at me. “I’m the one at the meetings.”

“Okay.” I hunch my shoulders and stare at my interlaced fingers in my lap. “Promise me it’s going to be fine?”

“I swear, baby.” His fingers squeeze the back of my neck, like an apology for snapping. “Be happy about your new job. This is nothing. I’ll be back in five minutes..”

“Five minutes.” I hold out my pinkie, but it’s too late. He already climbed out of the car and slammed the door behind him.

He grabs a heavy-looking reusable shopping bag from the trunk, then trots away. I pull out my phone to text our group chat about the job, but something makes me pause. That same something makes me unbuckle my seatbelt and lean over until I can see Beck walking toward the store. Halfway there he glances over his shoulder, then turns and jogs the opposite direction. My head feels completely empty as I watch him cross the road to a run-down, abandoned-looking bar and disappear around the back of the building.

But he promised. Beck doesn’t lie to me; he doesn’t lie to anyone. He’s a simple, open guy with no dark secrets.

“Fuck.” I start re-braiding my hair, counting strands to stay calm. After pulling it out and starting over twice, I *know* it’s been five minutes and he hasn’t come back across the road. “Fuck fuck fuck.” I fling my door open so roughly it almost bangs into the car next to me, then scramble out and slam it as

hard as I possibly can. Now my hand hurts and I don't feel any less horrible.

The bar looks shittier and shittier the closer I get, with crumbling pink-painted brick and bars bolted over windows that haven't been cleaned in years. I hesitate in the middle of the parking lot, which contains one SUV, one motorcycle, half of an upside-down pizza being picked apart by birds, and a million weeds. Now that I'm here, I have no idea what to do. When I retrace Beck's steps to the back of the building, I find a rusty door on the rear wall, next to an overflowing dumpster.

"You're overreacting," I tell myself as I wander over to the open field beyond the parking lot. "He'll be out any minute." I squint into the scrubby grass, searching for prairie dogs or coyotes, but nothing moves. Just to distract myself, I unzip my jeans and maneuver the tip of my packer out of the slit in my briefs. Ever since the guys got me this realistic hollow packer for Christmas, I've been able to pee standing up. After six months it still gives me a thrill every single time I take a piss. Today, I just feel queasy and tense as I watch pee splatter into the dry earth.

Once I've shaken off, zipped up, and rearranged my bulge, I check the time. He's been in that scary-ass building for almost twenty minutes. My brain starts to go haywire, imagining Scout and Roman's reactions when I tell them Beck isn't coming home. Picturing myself crawling into his empty bed to smell him and cry for days. Surely the man understands how much we all need him. Surely he wouldn't do that to us.

I march toward the forbidding metal door, then stop and grip my head in my hands. "Think, Dallas. *Shit.*" If something bad is going down in there, Beck could fight it, Scout could talk his way out of it, and Roman could intimidate everyone with his sheer size. I've got nothing.

But if he needs saving, I have to fucking do it. Even if I'm useless.

The door scrapes across the concrete, showering flakes of rust. Holding my breath, I squint until my eyes adjust to the dark. It's exactly what I'd expect in the back of a bar—a

cleaning closet, a toilet, boxes of pretzels, and a hall stretching toward the front. My heart rate kicks up when I hear voices down the corridor, too faint to make out words.

I only sneaked out after bedtime once as a kid, to see a street chess tournament. Mom told me later that she heard me leave but decided not to interfere because I was so pathetically bad at sneaking she felt sorry for me. That doesn't bode well, but I do my best to move silently and keep to the shadows. The hallway opens up into the bar itself, half-lit and unoccupied except for Beck and three other men. Dirty tables with stools leaning against them help block their view of me as I crouch against the wall.

Beck is standing in the middle of the room with his phone to his ear, his body language tense and aggressive. A man with sleek black hair and a nice leather jacket stands at the bar, digging through Beck's grocery bag. My mouth goes dry when I realize the other two men are skulking along the sides of the room, ensuring that Beck stays mostly surrounded. None of them look like people who would buy scrap metal off eBay. I'm used to seeing rough characters from the trailer park, but these guys are like wolves, focused and casually dangerous.

My best friend lied to me, and something tells me he's made a huge fucking mistake.

Slowly, Beck lowers the phone. "He's not picking up. But if you think you're being cheated, take it up with him. I'm going." When he takes a step toward the hall, the man nearest to me blocks his way. Beck tilts his chin up, his nostrils flaring and his jaw tight. "You know there's nothing wrong with the delivery, Ivan. Think about everyone who has tried to fuck with us and lived to talk about it. You can't, because there aren't any." He's talking way too fast, barely making sense.

"I disagree." The guy who must be Ivan pushes away Beck's bag, which I assume contains drugs or money that he's not happy about. "I think Carlos knew I wouldn't appreciate his insult, so he sent a messenger he doesn't give a shit about. He doesn't care what I do to you."

I've never seen anyone from Beck's gang world. It's just a vague place he disappears to sometimes, built in my head from stereotypical scraps of crime movies and books. These men are so solid. I can smell their cigarette smoke and a tang of unfamiliar cologne, and hear the creak of leather boots when they move. My hands are shaking. All I want is to wake up next to Beck, sweaty from my nightmare, then snuggle tighter against him and drift off again.

"Take it up with him," Beck demands. "I'm out." With an explosive movement, he makes a break for the front door. The man behind him moves instantly, going for the gun in the back of Beck's jeans.

"Wait—" I yelp, then clap my hand to my mouth as two pairs of eyes lock onto me. I need to run away, to get help or something, but my body won't move. Everything's happening too fast—in a second, the other man has snatched Beck's gun and thrown him down, sending a chair clattering to the floor. My friend turns toward my voice and tries to stand up, but Ivan steps forward and kicks him hard across the face with his heavy, studded motorcycle boot. I hear the *crack*, mixed with a raw, heartbreaking yelp of pain, and then nothing but ragged panting that might be coming from me or Beck or both of us.

When the hero gets captured by the villain in old movies, I always wondered why the girl stayed by his side and pointlessly begged for mercy, instead of running away and doing something fucking useful to save him. I guess I just learned the answer, because when I snap out of my daze I'm kneeling next to Beck with my hand on his shoulder.

"Please stop." My voice sounds high and shaky. I can't make myself look at the man's eyes, so I fix my stare on his leather jacket. *Must be designer, definitely vintage. Based on the cut, almost looks European.* "I know he fucked up," I croak, even though I have no idea I'm talking about. "But he didn't know. He didn't do anything."

Beck stiffens when I touch him. "Get the fuck out of here," he mumbles thickly, blood dripping between his fingers as he tries to struggle onto his hands and knees.

Ivan swings his boot for Beck's head again, harder this time. Beck flinches against me with a reflexive whimper, trying to shield his face. But the man doesn't follow through, just stops and watches us with an amused expression. His dark, cruel eyes follow my trembling hand brushing it through Beck's hair as he huddles in my lap. I can feel warm blood soaking into my jeans. "It's gonna be okay," I whisper.

A rough hand grabs my shoulder to pull me away, but Ivan shakes his head. The hand lets go of me, but for some reason that makes me feel much, much worse. "You seem like a nice guy," Ivan offers mildly, waving a hand between Beck and me. "How did you end up with this piece of shit?"

I open my mouth, but when my eyes meet his all I can do is say "Uh..." and stare at him like a deer about to be disemboweled by a semi. I'm in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* story with fifty choices, and only one of them leads to getting out of here in one piece. Oh, and I wasn't allowed to read the rest of the book first.

"I need your boss to know that I don't have time to play games with his messenger boys." He nudges Beck's shoulder with the toe of his brutal boot, and my boy just shivers. His fingers, slippery with blood, find mine and grip tight. He knows we're fucked—I can feel it in the pressure of his skin on mine. But I'm not smart enough to give up. My mind is racing and empty at the same time as I fumble for words. "Our friends expected us back like an hour ago. If we don't show up..."

The words trail away as Ivan crouches down right in front of me and smiles. "...they'll call the cops to come looking for you?" he recites with quiet mockery, making the words sound as ridiculous as they really are. This man isn't an abusive thug, like Roman's brother or Beck's dad or Hayden. He's so calm and controlled, and he's enjoying every one of my ragged, shallow breaths.

My fingers curl tight in the back of Beck's hoodie as I start to hyperventilate, my lungs so tight it feels like they got filled with concrete.

He reaches over Beck and rests a comforting hand on my shoulder, the rings on his fingers digging into my skin. I'm too frozen to pull away. "It's okay, sweetheart. Take a deep breath. There's nothing you can do to help him."

Beck whimpers and tries to push himself up, but Ivan grabs his head and shoves his face into the floor. "Shut up." Beck's whole body is shivering now, like he can't control it. I rub my hand on the spot he likes between his shoulder blades and try to fight the hot tears welling up in my eyes.

Reaching back to pull something out of his jeans, Ivan nods to me. "You're allowed to talk. I like you. You know your friend pretty well, right?"

He waits patiently, until I realize he won't give me an inch unless I answer. "Y-yes." I nod jerkily.

"Good. So I want you to tell me something." His hand comes back into sight, holding a heavy, well-oiled pistol that gleams in the dim light. I stare blindly as he checks the magazine and turns off the safety. "Would he rather I ended him, or would he want you to do it?"

My brain can't make sense of the words leaving his mouth. Shaking my head frantically, I pull my hands back, as far away from the gun as possible. "You can't. You can't."

"Let him go," Beck snarls, lashing out with a kick that misses Ivan by a mile. I think the blow earlier might have given him a concussion, because he's struggling to lift his head. My friend has always seemed endlessly strong to me, but compared to these men he looks like a little kid in his ripped jeans and canvas sneakers.

I jump when one of the other thugs steps forward and slams a boot into his gut. He curls in on himself with a wretched gagging sound.

"I told you to shut up," Ivan snaps. Before I can react, he shoves Beck facedown against the floorboards and kneels hard on his back, the gun pressed against the back of his skull. "I don't have time for this. We have places to be." The safety is *off* and his finger is wrapped around the trigger. I panic for

real, lunging forward, but someone grabs me from behind and holds me still. Beck's whole body is rigid, and I can hear him dragging in shallow, choked breaths.

Struggling as hard as I can, I plead a desperate string of nonsense, because this is it. The end of everything.

My face feels wet, and my ears are ringing too much for me to hear anything except the vicious *crack* of the gun going off. It's so much louder than I ever imagined, and I flinch away instinctively. The person holding me lets me fall onto my hands and knees. All I can feel are my fingernails digging painfully into the splintery floorboards. Ivan says some muffled words about sending a message to someone, and then he's gone.

Gasping, I swipe tears out of my eyes until I can see. Beck is perfectly still, curled into a tight ball. But there's no blood on the floor except the scattered remains of his nosebleed, and when I stare at his body long enough, I can see his ribs rising and falling. After a moment of searching, I spot the splintery hole in the hardwood an inch from his head. My heart starts beating again in a strange, sickening rush.

Neither of us moves for a long time. Our ragged breathing mixes together in the dull, stunned silence. The last five minutes were a dream. There's no other explanation. But I'm not waking up, and the bile choking the back of my throat burns too much to be imaginary.

After what feels like an hour, Beck pushes himself in slow motion onto his knees. He gags like he's going to puke, but nothing comes out. "Let's go," he grunts, his voice so hoarse I can barely understand him.

I don't move or say anything, just stare at the floor where he almost died, splattered with his blood. "Are you hurt?" he asks finally, flexing his trembling hands

When I don't answer that either, he glances over at me in quick assessment before looking away. His face, crusted with dark red around his nostrils, has already started to swell and turn purple. I've seen this man in all of his moods, heard all

his hopes and fears and frustrations, but right now I don't recognize him. He's an empty shell shaped like my best friend.

He crawls to his feet painfully, gripping his stomach, and holds out a hand to me. "Let's go." As I stare at his jeans, I realize there's a piss stain down the right leg.

"Dallas," he snaps, making me jump. "Come *on*."

I don't want his help, but when I try to stand up my shaky legs give out. Even in his condition, he easily grabs me under the arm and hoists me to my feet. I have to run to keep up as we push out of the cold building into the dirty, sun-baked parking lot. The sedan and the motorcycle are gone, but I brace myself with every step for a *bang* followed by a spray of blood from Beck's head.

We cross the street in silence, with Beck's fingers still digging into my arm. He pushes me roughly into the car, then strides around to the driver's seat. I want to say *maybe I should drive*, but my words aren't working. All I can do is watch him stare blankly at the wheel for a long time, check his face in the rearview mirror, then aggressively start the engine and tear out of the lot.

BECK

MY FIRST CLEAR childhood memory is from the final day of preschool. My friend Sammy's dad took us out for ice cream to celebrate the start of summer. Sammy got too excited about something, and ended up dropping his strawberry cone right on the floor of their shiny, expensive car. I cowered in my seat, waiting for the explosion and wondering if I'd get punished too.

Sammy's dad just pulled over, wrapped the glob of melting ice cream in a brown paper napkin, and gave him a hug. "Sorry, bud. Do you want to go back and get another one? I won't tell mom." The guy winked at me, then drove back to the ice cream parlor and bought us both a second round of cones.

That's the day I realized beating your family wasn't a mandatory part of being a dad. It blew my mind. At four years old, I had decided I would never have kids because I didn't know what I was supposed to do if I didn't want to hit them.

During the first intervention meeting, before I snuck away, the leaders started talking about how they ended up in a gang. Their stories had a beginning, a before. A version of them that could be saved without losing their entire identity.

I've never had a *before*. Even in my very first memory, I was a twisted up kid in a twisted up world. And it never got better. I didn't make it past fifth grade, and I'm as stupid as a fucking rock. I get nervous looks everywhere I go, and the only thing I'm good at is stealing cars.

Without a before, you can't have an after. Scout, Rome, and Dallas all have a future out there in the big world. I want that for them, because I love them. The only thing I've ever expected from life is to have some fun before I die young and get burned up in some police morgue where people are numbers instead of names.

So I should never have lied to my boys. And I should have told my boss I would make the delivery tomorrow, instead of pulling Dallas into this fucking mess. But I was too selfish, too scared. I wasn't ready to find out what lies beyond the edges of myself. This life sucks, but it's the only thing I have.

I should feel guilt or relief as I drive home from the scariest moment of my life, but I just can't. My ears ache deep inside from the sound of the gun, and my face throbs to the rhythm of *it hurts, it hurts, it hurts*. Dallas has his back to me, his shoulders hunched. Part of me wishes Ivan hadn't decided to miss, because at least I wouldn't be sitting in my own piss knowing I just lost the person I need most in this world.

I clear my throat in the silent car. I'm in too much of a daze to know what's going to come out of my mouth until it does. "Don't tell Scout."

Dallas doesn't react for a long time, then turns toward me. "What?"

"Don't tell him what happened. I'm fucking serious." Scout's been afraid of me dying since we met. I can't break any more people that I love today.

Everything's quiet for a minute as Dallas stares at me. Then he grabs an empty fast food cup out of the center console and throws it against the side of my head as hard as he can. I brake abruptly, skidding on the gravel road, as he pelts me with pieces of trash, wadded up mail, and even my solar powered hula girl from the dashboard.

“What the fuck? Stop!” I slow to a crawl and try to grab his throwing arm.

He yanks his hand away, punches my shoulder—which was the only part of me that didn’t hurt yet—and throws open his door. I slam the brakes again. “Dallas!”

Food wrappers and receipts tumble out around his feet and blow away in the breeze as he stumbles onto the dirt shoulder, almost falling in the ditch. He kicks the door shut, then steps back with his arms wrapped tightly around himself. “Get the fuck away from me,” he yells, his voice cracking in a way that usually makes him self-conscious.

“What’s wrong with you?” Pain jabs through my ribs as I lean over to roll down the passenger window. “Get in the damn car.”

“What’s wrong with *me*?” His bitter laugh sounds like he’s crying. Maybe he is. “I fucking hate you, you fucking liar.” Swiping roughly at his eyes, he turns his back on me and starts limping down the road. “Go away!”

“I’m not gonna leave you out here.”

He flips me off, then picks up a fist-sized rock and hucks it at the car. His throwing arm sucks, but it’s enough to leave another dent in the paint. “Fuck off.” He starts walking again, with his head down and his braid unraveling into messy strands. The clothes he was so proud of are dirty and bloodstained. He was so happy an hour ago, running toward me in the parking lot.

Gunning the engine, I pull forward until my bumper is almost in the ditch. With his way forward blocked, he just stops and stands there blankly. “You can’t walk ten miles before dark,” I point out. He stares over the field, refusing to look at me. “I’ll keep driving in front of you until you get in.”

Our standoff lasts a full minute before he wrenches the door open and drops into the passenger seat. He sits facing away from me as I pull back onto the road, and doesn’t move the rest of the way home.

At the end of the driveway, I reach over and touch his arm to get his attention. He jerks away and presses his forehead to the window. “You can’t tell Scout about this,” I demand. “That’s not a request. It’s between him and me.”

Dal scoffs harshly. “Right.”

“Tell me you won’t.”

His shoulders sag a little. “Whatever. I don’t give a shit anymore.”

I open my mouth to say *thank you*, then change my mind. I’m in enough pain without getting punched again. The back door is open when we pull up to the house, which means Scout and Rome are walking the dog. If I get out and look, I’ll be able to see their tiny figures out across the fields. It’s a relief, because this gives me time to change and make up a story about why my face is smashed in.

Before I can even open my door, Dallas jumps out and sprints inside. As I drag myself to my feet, I almost puke at the fucking nightmare pain in my head, the worst I’ve ever felt in my life. My ribs feel bruised, and my piss-soaked jeans are clinging to my thighs. I don’t think we even have any ibuprofen in the house.

It takes me a couple of minutes to limp up the steps and into the kitchen, bent over like an old man. I fill a plastic bag with ice cubes and stumble toward my room. Despite everything, my heart hopes that Dallas will be there. All I want is for him to let me lie down in the quiet with his cool palm resting against my feverish forehead. But his door is shut tight. There are too many feelings inside me right now, shredding me to pieces, and I’m desperate for anything to fix the pressure. I cope by *doing* things, and I have absolutely no idea what to do now.

Shutting myself in my room, I stretch out in the dark with the ice on my face. My breathing sounds too loud as I reach back and finger the base of my skull, where the barrel of the gun sat. I’ll never in my life forget the sound Dallas made when it fired.

When I jerk awake, it's midnight. Everyone has work tomorrow, so they must be in bed. I'm clutching a half-empty bag of water that leaked into a wet patch on the mattress, and my face hurts so much I want to break down and sob. I change into clean underwear and a fresh t-shirt, then sneak down the dark hall to the bathroom to check on my injuries. My cheek and jaw are swollen up like a balloon, and I'm going to have a wicked black eye, but Scout won't question it much. He knows I can't walk away from a fistfight, and I've lost just as many as I've won.

On my way to the kitchen to look for food, I stop outside Dallas' door. The gap underneath is dark, and I can't hear any noise. My hand is shaking when I reach out and touch the knob. The numbness in my brain is starting to break apart and let through flashes of the helplessness, of choking on blood, of the blind terror right as Ivan pulled the trigger. I'm freaking out.

When I turn the knob, the door doesn't budge. Confused, I push it again, then rattle the handle softly. It's locked for the first time since we moved here. One of the last unbroken pieces of me cracks.

Trying not to wake the other guys, I knock quietly, then louder. Nothing. I know he's awake in there, listening—I can feel it. I shake the door, then rest my head against it. "Please, Dal. I need you." I close my eyes and wait, silently begging for the sound of him crawling out of bed. It doesn't come. "Fuck. *Please*. Come on." Almost getting shot didn't make me feel like crying, but this does.

Silence. I wait there for ages, just in case he changes his mind. But he doesn't.

I don't even want food anymore, so I go down the hall and sneak into Scout and Roman's room. When I squeeze Scout's shoulder, he twitches awake with a confused grunt and gropes my arm until he can identify me. "Beck? What's up?"

"I'm gonna sleep in here." I can hear Roman stirring at my voice.

“What’s wrong?” Scout croaks, rolling over. “Is Dallas okay?” I don’t want him to turn on the light and see my face yet, because I’m too tired to answer questions.

“He’s fine. I’m just cold.” The lie slips out easily. Apparently, even after today, I haven’t learned my lesson.

Scout never wants anyone between him and Roman, but I think Rome can smell grief, like an animal. He pulls me into the middle of the bed and drapes an arm over me, letting me rest my forehead against his bulky chest. Scout grumbles as he huddles up behind me, but he goes back to sleep immediately, his breath warming my neck.

I still can’t drift off. The boys pressed up on either side of me aren’t enough, because the one I need, the one that every atom of my body associates with safety and comfort, isn’t here.

“Are we talking rocky or clay soil? How many hours of direct sunlight a day?”

The garden store employee crosses her arms and snaps her gum as she waits for me to answer. All I did was ask for an outside plant. The fuck am I supposed to say? The thick, black hair falling out of her bun looks exactly like Dallas’. I haven’t seen him since he ran inside yesterday afternoon, and I already miss him so much I want to die.

I hold out a fistful of quarters, like a kid buying candy. “I have two-fifty.” My voice sounds hoarse and exhausted.

“Oh.” Her gaze flicks over my black and blue face, with my left eye swollen shut, and she gives a pitying sigh. “Here.” She disappears behind the counter, then comes back with a half-wilted plant in a tiny pot. “We were going to throw this guy out, but you can have him for free.”

The leaves rustle as I take the pot, because my hands still haven’t stopped shaking from yesterday. I have no idea what species this is, besides that it’s green and grows in dirt. It’s the

saddest looking plant I've ever seen, but I guess that's fitting. "Thank you."

I clear one of the cupholders in the Civic and slot the cracked plastic pot safely inside. The whole drive home I keep an eye on it, trying to drive around the potholes instead of through them.

When I pull up in the driveway, my heart climbs into my throat. Dallas is on the west side of the house, hacking at the rock-hard soil with his trowel. It's taken him a week to break up the flower beds enough that he could plant the marigold seeds he found on the discount rack at King Soopers. He's sprawled in the dirt with filthy clothes, sweat glistening on his skin. Every time he digs up a rock, he throws it as hard as he can against the shitty brick wall of the house.

When I get out of the car he pauses, watching me from a distance and trying to catch his breath. I cradle the plant in both hands and venture toward him. He stands up slowly and looks me over, with his dirt-caked palms held out between us. His eyes meet mine, and for the first time ever I can't read them.

When the silence gets to be completely miserable, I swallow and clear my throat. "I'm sorry, Dal."

He doesn't move or speak. His face stays blank, except for the sweep of his long eyelashes as he blinks away the strands of hair blowing into his eyes. This hurts more than anything Ivan did to me yesterday, and it's all my fault.

I step forward, until our chests are almost touching and our faces are just a few inches apart. His sad eyes widen a little, but he stays frozen with the tips of his filthy fingers brushing my t-shirt.

"I'm so fucking sorry," I croak. "I put you in danger and broke your trust. You could have gotten hurt." And he doesn't even know that I skipped the meetings yet. My throat tightens, and my chest burns. There are words for these feelings, but I don't know them. "I have no idea what to do now, Dal. I wish none of this had happened."

His dark eyebrows pull together, and his lips tighten. “So do I.”

Hearing his voice for the first time today floods me with endorphins and pain at the same time. I awkwardly push the plant against his narrow chest. “I got you a...she said it grows nice outside.”

Dallas doesn't take the pot. Biting his lip, he looks past me over the hazy noon fields like he's searching for answers. “I don't want a plant, Beck,” he murmurs tightly.

Taking a step back, I run a hand through my hair. A restless, panicked energy is building in my chest, like grabbing fistfuls of sand and watching it slip between my fingers. My voice comes out loud and aggressive. “What do you want? I can't fix everything in one day. Am I not allowed to talk to you until then?”

He picks up a rag and wipes his hands clean, ignoring my tantrum. When he's finally done, he glances up at me with regret and determination mixed in his eyes. “I want you to tell Scout what happened yesterday.”

My sore stomach cramps, and I feel a little dizzy. “Please don't.”

He just crosses his arms, refusing to budge.

“Shit.” I sit down hard in the plastic deck chair he left in the shade, set the plant between my feet, and rest my throbbing head in my hands. “I can't fuck him up like that.”

Everything's quiet for a long time. The ground swirls slowly whenever I look at it too hard. I probably should have gone to the hospital or something, but I'm the kind of guy who once stitched up my own stab wound.

A gentle hand catches my jaw and tips my face up to look at him. “You have to believe in your friends, Beck. We don't break that easily. And after twelve fucking years together, you don't have the right to decide if he deserves the truth.”

I search every detail of his face, trying to memorize it before he pushes me away again. There's something profound I should say, but all I can do is lean into him and rest my

forehead against his hip. He runs long, careful fingers through my hair just once, then steps away. He's so focused on what other people need right now, but I can feel raw anger and doubt suffocating him underneath the calm.

"I'm going to work," he says hoarsely, backing away. Shit, I forgot it's his first day of training. I want to tell him he'll ace it, and make a stupid joke so that he'll laugh in surprise and roll his eyes. But I don't think I have the right to say anything to him now.

Once he's disappeared inside to change, I wander into the kitchen. I haven't eaten anything since the ice cream yesterday, except for a few mouthfuls of cold rice from the fridge at three AM which I threw up again. We have a loaf of white bread on the counter, so I take out a piece, drape a slice of American cheese over it, and nuke it in the microwave. When the cheese is bubbling and steaming, I open the microwave door and stare at it for so long it deflates into a rubbery mess.

Finally, I just leave it there and walk down the hall to Scout's room. I push open his door without knocking, so I don't have time to change my mind. Lucky for me, he's not in the middle of filming porn. He lifts his head from where he's sprawled on the bed, editing a video on our single communal laptop, and tries to cover up a package of Oreos with his folded arms. When he realizes it's me and not Dallas, he stops hiding them and rolls over. "Sup, wild man?"

I hesitate. For the first time since we met as feral little kids on the streets of Paradise, I can't meet his eyes. I don't know where to look or what to do with my hands. When I perch awkwardly on the edge of the bed, he sits up with a frown and tousles a hand through his silver hair. "Beck? What's wrong?"

Focusing on a rip in my jeans, I pick at the edges to make it bigger as I stumble through the story of yesterday from start to finish. Because it's for Dallas, I don't leave out a single detail. Once I start, I can't stop, and I end up going back over the last few months until he knows absolutely everything. I can't explain *why* I'm such a mess without rehashing my entire life, but I know Scout will get it. While Roman and Dal

used to have loving homes, Scout and I grew up in the same lonely shithole. Except he stayed out of the gang, because he's always been clever and charismatic enough to know that he had a future somewhere better.

"Dallas is safe. He's okay," I keep repeating. Maybe I'm the one that needs to hear it. When I finally shut up, everything goes quiet enough to hear a crop duster buzzing in the distance.

Scout crawls across the bed and wraps his arms around my shoulders, propping his forehead against my temple. "Fuck you, man," he murmurs, his voice choked up, then hugs me tighter.

I dig my fingernails hard into my palms and lean my head against his. "I'm sorry, Scout. But Dallas is okay."

He sighs, then sits back. "Are *you* okay?"

"Um..." I run a hand through my hair, and my breath hitches painfully. "I...I don't feel okay." I'm too tired to do anything but lie down on the bed and curl up with my arms around my head. "My buddy Pascal called me this morning," I mumble into the comforter. "The boss heard what happened. He was furious that they didn't shoot me; he said giving him an excuse to retaliate would have been the only useful thing I ever did. Now I'm the weak one, and I'll get all the shitty jobs."

The bed squeaks as Scout stretches out next to me. "I told you a million times, dude. You don't matter to them," he offers with his usual brutal bluntness.

I angle my head until I can see his storm-gray eyes staring at me across the wrinkled blanket. "I've given those pricks everything. Ten years. I almost lost Dallas for them."

He raises his eyebrows, his tongue playing with the silver ring in his lip. "That was a bad idea, genius."

A noise bursts out of me that's half a lame-ass sob and half a bark of laughter. "You're gonna be a dick now?"

The corner of his mouth tips up. "I've always been a dick."

“No shit.”

Grabbing his half-empty package of Oreos, he sticks one in his mouth, then flicks one across the bed to me. To him, that’s as generous as giving a dying person his kidney. “I didn’t know,” he muses between crunches, staring at the ceiling, “that you felt so trapped.”

I open my mouth to contradict him, because “trapped” makes me sound weak. But when I think about it, that’s the only right word—an animal in a trap, flopping around and hurting itself as it waits to die. “Those meetings scare the shit out of me. I don’t want to get erased.”

His fingers wrap around my wrist and squeeze. “We’ll figure it out. All of us. No one gets left behind, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling my aching body relax a little. Ever since we moved out of Paradise Peaks, it feels like my boys are running ahead and I’m still back at the start, struggling to breathe air that doesn’t smell like a filthy trailer full of bad memories. I don’t know how to catch up and evolve with them.

I never ate my cookie, so Scout takes it back and stuffs it in his own face. Then he scoots close, so we’re snuggled together like we used to do on my mattress after school, while he finished my homework for me because I could never figure it out.

My eyes drift closed, then pop open again when I hear a familiar chirping tune. “Shit, no way.”

Scout grins and tilts his phone screen toward me to show the pissed-off red bird getting ready to launch himself at the green pigs’ castle. We used to play *Angry Birds* for hours and hours, passing the phone back and forth, arguing, and laughing until our stomachs hurt. All of my elementary school writing exercises were about *Angry Birds* strategies and lore, because I knew fuck-all about anything else. My teacher got so sick of me.

“You’ve lost your skills,” Scout goads, reaching under my arm to try and sabotage me with a jabbing finger.

I slap his hand away. “Hell no.” But when I launch the bird, it flies over the castle without touching it. “Fuck me, I have.”

Cackling, he rests a cheek against my shoulder and watches me struggle. I wish Dallas was here, because I think this is exactly what he wanted. And because I want to see him try *Angry Birds*, suck at it, and go off on a thirty minute rant about game theory and unfair programming. But first, I have to get him to talk to me again.

DALLAS

*THE SHITTY PLASTIC door on Beck's trailer bathroom never latches right, so I try to wedge it shut with my foot. It took me a while to get a new testosterone prescription after Beck saved me from homelessness, so this is the first time I've injected my hormones here. Even though he didn't mind that I was trans, I feel scared to let him see this part—like in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy yanks the curtain back to reveal that everything is cobbled together from smoke and mirrors.*

I'm too busy staring at the needle hovering over my skin to notice the door swing open. Someone clears his throat, and I jerk my head up to see Beck filling the doorway, watching me with his head cocked. God knows what I expect him to say as I gape back at him with a strange sense of guilt, but he never does anything I expect.

"I thought you'd been doing this since you were fifteen." He waves a hand at the syringes and vials scattered around the sink.

"I have!" When he raises his eyebrow, I sigh irritably and look away. "My mom helped me," I admit, trying to hook the door shut with my foot. "But I've got it."

Slowly, like he's waiting to see how I react, he takes a step into the bathroom. Between the two of us, the tiny space feels

crowded. "I just watched you chicken out twenty times in a row. If I leave you alone, you'll be here all night."

I narrow my eyes at him. "What makes you a needle expert? Do you do intravenous drugs or something?"

The corner of his mouth twitches up, his eyes playful as he sounds out the word. "Intravenous? You'll find out soon that I don't do drugs and I don't know any words longer than three syllables." Nodding at the syringe in my hand, he holds out his palm.

I recoil, trying to hide it without stabbing myself. "Absolutely not. This is a delicate process."

"You have no idea how delicate I can be." Smirking, he reaches out and brushes his fingers across the leopard print athletic band holding back my messy hair. The touch reminds me abruptly that I'm sitting here in my underwear with my jeans shoved down around my ankles, in front of a guy I've only known for a month.

I shift my weight, trying to make my lack of a bulge less embarrassing. "That's what he said."

"Nah." Something devilish creeps into his face. "No one I've fucked would ever say that."

My brain stutters to a stop. I've watched out of the corner of my eye as my new roommate changes in the morning. I can't help it. His ink-covered shoulders flex and roll when he pulls off his shirt, and his boxers always ride low on his hips. Now all I can picture is that body slicked in sweat, holding someone down and pounding them mercilessly.

He yelps a laugh, and I realize I'm just gawking at him with my mouth open and my cheeks hot. "Your face, dude. You look like you've never had sex before."

"Don't be a dick." I shove the syringe toward him before he can realize that he stumbled across the truth. "If you're going to help, shut up and do it."

He plucks it out of my hand with a pleased sound. Once Beck decides to do something, the whole world couldn't stop him. "Please be careful," I beg as he crouches in front of me.

“I’m not a science experiment.” More gently than I expected, he brushes two fingers along the top of my hair-dusted thigh. “Pinch the skin, inject straight down, then release. And do it slowly. But not the sticking part, do that fast. Actually, just–”

“Shhh.” He squeezes a strip of flesh, and my whole body tenses. “I got it, baby.”

I fix my eyes on the discolored, peeling floral wallpaper across the hall and grit my teeth as I wait for the jab. I’m such a wuss.

“Did you tell me to buy toilet paper this morning?” Beck asks abruptly.

My gaze jerks to his face. “Did you not pick any up? We’re completely fucking out.”

He wrinkles his nose and shrugs one shoulder. “I spent everything on beer, so we’re gonna have to rip pages out of a book or something until next week.”

“What’s the matter with you?” I flick the top of his head. “Did someone siphon your brains out and replace them with potato salad?” When I glance down, he’s holding an empty syringe in one hand and using the other to press our last square of toilet paper against the drop of blood on my leg. For the first time, I didn’t feel a thing.

“Told you I’d do it better, bitch,” he taunts cheerfully, ruining the moment. I’ve quickly learned that ‘baby’ and ‘bitch’ are this man’s love language. If he speaks to you like a normal person, it means he doesn’t give a shit about you.

When he jumps to his feet and turns to go, I snag two fingers in the back of his jeans. “Wait. Were you kidding about the toilet paper or not?”

He flashes me a crooked grin and walks out.

We did have toilet paper, in the end. And for the last two years, he’s done my shot for me every week.

The bare lightbulb on my ceiling gives off a dull yellow glow that makes it hard to see what I’m doing. I instinctively reach

for the wooden bear lamp Beck stole from the waiting room of a doctor's office, before I remember I'm not in his room.

It all comes back to me in a rush—his face when he promised me everything was going to be okay, then the sound of that gunshot that ripped my soul in half for a second. Ironically, one of Beck's crushing hugs is the only thing that can soothe away this much hurt. I cried a little last night with my hand over my mouth, listening to him beg to come in. Then I fell asleep in a pile of dirty laundry because my body couldn't drift off in bed without him. It's all so fucked up.

If he told Scout the truth, maybe I could start to trust him again. But I don't think he will. He's already proven that maintaining the status quo is more important to him than our friendship. That's the part that hurts so fucking bad.

I slide my jeans further down my thighs and hiss softly at the chill of the alcohol wipe against my skin. My hands won't stop shaking from exhaustion and stress as I try to draw up the testosterone. It takes me four tries to get rid of the bubbles, and I have to triple check what needle I'm using. Beck usually does this part so quickly and easily while he rambles about anything from how many calories Jason Momoa eats in a day to what he would name his pet hamster if he had one.

Gritting my teeth, I pinch a fold of skin and hover the needle over it. "Shit." I'm psyching myself out over nothing. I should know better. But it's not fair. Everyone who helps me with my shots disappears from my life and I end up back here, struggling to be tough enough to do it myself.

The knock on the door is quiet, but I'm so wound up that I jump a foot and almost stab myself. Scout and Roman were fast asleep on the couch when I got in from my first shift at Copper Creek, which means this has to be Beck. Sure enough, the handle rattles softly as he tests it. "Dal," he whispers through the thin wood. "Please."

"Go away," I call back, clenching my muscles to try and stop the syringe from shaking in my hand. "We'll talk tomorrow."

He jerks the door harder. "It's Wednesday."

“So?” I know exactly what he means, but the sting of thinking I’d lost him forever is still too fresh.

“I need to do your shot.”

With a snarl of frustration, I throw the syringe into the metal baking pan I use as a tray. Kicking my jeans off, I storm across the room and open the door an inch. I block it with my body weight to hold it shut and peer out at him. “Shut up and go to bed,” I hiss. “I’ve got it under control.”

In the dim light spilling down the hall from his room, all I can make out is the shadowy hint of his profile and the gleam of piercing, green-gold eyes like a big cat. His strong fingers flex against the frame, slipping into the gap so I can’t slam the door. “It’ll take you all night,” he murmurs in a low voice. “Come on.”

“No, you know what?” I push at his fingers, but I can’t dislodge them. Huffing, I glare up at him. “I am a *man*. I can give myself a fucking shot, Beck.”

He coughs a quiet, dry laugh. “I’ll tell you a secret, Dal. Men are pussies.”

In the moment where I’m distracted trying to figure out if he’s joking or serious, he slides a socked foot into the gap and gently pries the door open wide enough to slip inside. His eyes trail over my messy hair and bare legs as he leans his back against the door and locks it again. Even beyond his injuries he looks like shit, pale and hollow eyed with unshowered hair. “How was your first day of work?”

This man forgets everything useful and important, every reminder I try to give him, but when it comes to me and my life his memory is flawless. “It was fine,” I say stiffly, hugging myself tight. “He taught me how the stockroom works.”

When he realizes I’m not going to elaborate, he straightens up. “Come sit down.”

I perch on the edge of the mattress, pressing the soles of my feet into the dusty, uneven floorboards, and hand him the tray. He checks my work carefully while I look at anything and everything besides him, because I can’t let him win me

back. I swore no one would ever hurt me again the way it hurt to lose my mom, and this man made a liar of me.

“Did you get the seeds planted?” he asks in a subdued voice as he pinches the skin on my thigh.

“The soil’s shit on this property, and I waited too late. None of them are going to grow.”

The pain I’m braced for never comes. Before I know it, he’s capping the needle and unscrewing the empty syringe. “Maybe there’s a tough one. You’ll find a little sprout growing out of a crack in the rocks in a few months.”

“That would be called a weed, Beckham.”

His eyes slide up to mine from where he’s kneeling between my legs, and he shrugs one shoulder. “I like weeds.”

He’s not even supposed to be here, and he’s definitely not allowed to stay. But he just shoves the injection supplies aside and climbs past me into my bed, pulling my orange comforter over him. Now that he’s here, I don’t think I could get him out with a bulldozer.

I cross the room and switch off the overhead bulb, then study his bulk in the moonlight from the window. His face is buried in my pillow so he can pretend not to hear me when I tell him to leave. “I’m so angry at you.”

“Uh-huh,” he grunts wearily, without moving.

“I don’t know how to trust you anymore.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You should go back to your room.”

He props himself up on his elbows, but doesn’t look at me. “I told Scout everything this afternoon.”

“I think— Wait, really?” At best, I thought it would take him weeks.

“Yep,” he enunciates bitterly, playing with the edge of the pillowcase.

“That’s, um, really good,” I fumble out. I haven’t had time to figure out what comes after this part. “Thank you.”

With eyes full of deep, aching exhaustion, he rolls onto his side and silently lifts the blanket. It’s such a visceral relief to crawl in next to him and stretch out on my back with his forehead against my shoulder and his arm slung across my body.

I watch the shadows on the ceiling and listen to the pattern of our breathing, trying to make sense of the ache in my chest. Beck and I have always been easy and fun, not razor sharp feelings in the dark and the faint taste of desperation on my tongue. He must feel it too, because he doesn’t drift off like usual. After twenty minutes, we’re both still wide awake.

When I sigh, Beck fidgets and pushes his face deeper into my shoulder. His fingers wrap loosely around my wrist, brushing the delicate tendons. For some reason, my heart rate picks up. I’m afraid he’ll feel it in my pulse, so I close my eyes and will it to slow down.

My upper arm bumps against his chest. After all the hours we’ve spent cuddling as we watched TV, I know his heartbeat better than my own. It’s fast, too, faster than mine. Squeezing my eyes tighter, I imagine I’m in the kitchen counting beans. *One, two, three, four.*

He grunts and shifts again, like he can’t get comfortable. His face falls into the crook of my neck, and I can feel the tickle of his eyelashes as he blinks. I open my eyes, still picturing the reddish-brown beans that come in two pound bags for just a few dollars.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. His thumb slides down and traces a slow line across my palm, and I lose my place. *Twenty four, twenty five.*

“I’m sorry, Dal,” he whispers, his lips moving against my skin.

I grit my teeth and glare into the dark. “Words don’t fix anything.”

His hushed voice breaks a little. “No one’s gonna give a shit when I die. But I’ll miss you so much.”

“What are you talking about?” I try to pull my hand away, but he tightens his grip. “Scout would lose his mind. Roman, too.”

He doesn’t answer, and suddenly I’m furious. The four of us finally managed to claw some kind of happiness out of this miserable world, and the universe tried to rip it all away for no fucking reason at all. My voice sounds loud in the silence. “I won’t miss you, Beck. I won’t be able to. When you die, I’ll be too ruined to feel anything ever again. Does that make you happy, you selfish dick?”

A soft sound rumbles in his throat, halfway between a growl and a whine, as he rubs his face harder into my neck. “Yeah, it does.”

My body is starting to ache and thrum in ways that are so, so wrong. “Beck...” His name means so many things to me. I yelp it when I’m about to slip and fall in the woods, so he can grab my hand. I mumble it into his chest when I’ve had a terrible day and need to watch TV together in his bed. Sometimes I hum it soothingly when he’s getting too loud and frustrated, so that he’ll look in my eyes and take a deep breath. Right now, I don’t know what I’m saying.

But I do know one thing. I turn my face toward him, my cheek brushing his forehead. “You never fucking leave me again. Understand?”

He doesn’t answer, just tilts his head back so our faces are barely an inch apart. I twitch with a tiny whimper when his broad palm cups the side of my face and the rough pad of his thumb traces my cheekbone. Pushing himself further up the bed, he wraps both hands firmly around my head, his forehead pressed to mine. I can feel that he’s breathing fast. “Pretty boy,” he murmurs. “You ever kissed someone?”

“No.” I’ve never told the guys that I’m a virgin. When they talk about sex, I keep my mouth shut and let them assume things. Now I look like a fool.

But he just sucks in a breath, his fingers tightening. “Good.”

His warm, strong lips capture mine without a second of hesitation. He’s used to tongue-fucking with strangers in gas station bathrooms or back alleys, but here and now he’s infinitely, unbelievably gentle. Even though I’ve never tasted him before, everything about the spice and sweetness of his tongue in my mouth feels like coming home.

Between transitioning, homelessness, and stressing since puberty about how to have sex without a cis dick, I kind of forgot about my first kiss. If I’d known in advance, I would have done research or something. I’ve never been the least prepared person in a room before. But Beck hasn’t pulled away, so I must be making him feel good. That thought sends a rush of fierce arousal through me.

My fingers slide up his arm and squeeze his bicep, anchoring myself in the hard steadiness of his body. When his muscles ripple and tighten, I realize he’s flexing. I break off with a breathless laugh. “Fucking showoff. You think that’s gonna impress me?”

I can sense his cocky grin, even though I can’t see it clearly. He bends his arm until I can barely get my hand around his rock-hard bicep. The heat in my belly slides lower, throbbing dangerously. “You think I don’t see you watching me when I pick up heavy shit?” he teases next to my ear.

“It’s because you don’t lift from your knees and I’m waiting for you to throw your back out.”

“You don’t deserve me,” he growls sulkily. He grunts in surprise when I catch the back of his neck and kiss him hard. I have no skill or finesse, just want. The want of almost losing him, of watching him try to make things right just because I asked him to. The want of every moment since he called me “raccoon boy” and offered me his last box of uncooked macaroni.

My heart is thundering when I finally come up for air. Beck lets out a rush of shaky breath against my cheek as I slide my hand up inside his loose tank top. As soon as I spread

my palm against the hard mound of his pec, I can feel his pulse beating frantically. “You’re scared,” I whisper in awe.

He nuzzles his face roughly into my hair. “I’m never scared.”

Pulling back so I can see his eyes in the moonlight, I curl my fingers into a fist over his heart. “Make it two rules, Beckham. You never fucking leave me, and you never fucking lie to me.”

His thick eyebrows furrow solemnly. “Yes, boss.”

Pulling my hand free of his shirt, I hold out my pinky. “Swear it.”

Eyes fixed on me, he slides his bigger pinky around mine, then tightens his grip until my finger is trapped. The ache between my legs gets stronger, begging for attention, and there’s no way my face is hiding it. “You own me, baby,” he says hoarsely. “I’ll do anything.”

He’s the kind of person who always says shit like that, because his brain is a world of absolutes and towering, pure feelings. Half the time I don’t even process his random declarations anymore. But right now, with the atmosphere pulled so tight it’s hard to breathe, I hear every word. I let them be true as I take his jaw in my hand. “I’m going to forgive you. But next time, I won’t.”

He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, pulling in a slow breath, then opens them again. Instead of answering, he sits up and peels his tank top off over his head. The silvery light traces the hills and valleys of his body, lingering on the snake tattooed around his pecs and the thick knot of scar tissue along his ribs where he got stabbed. He catches me wide-eyed and speechless as he leans over, pressing one hand to the mattress on either side of me, and rests his forehead against mine.

Taking his time, he kisses my chin, then my jaw, then my earlobe, like an animal exploring with all its senses. I hear myself moan as he slides his tongue up the line of my throat, then nips the soft skin under my jaw.

When I get past the shock, my hands reach up to trace the powerful body hovering over mine as he kisses me again, rougher this time. I go straight to the parts of him I've never touched platonically—his hips, the V of soft skin disappearing under the low-hanging waistband of his boxers. My fingertips linger right at the edge of the forbidden, a centimeter under the plaid cotton, but my logical brain tells me to stop before something happens that can't be taken back.

When Beck shifts his weight, my hesitating hand bumps something firm and hot through the worn boxers. Beck twitches, jerking our mouths apart, and I realize what I just touched. Fuck. This is where all that mindfulness I practice comes in handy—the willpower to pull back...

Beck buries his face in my neck and shudders when I press my palm lightly against his bulge. I can feel every detail and contour of his thick, heavy erection—his curved shaft and the pronounced ridge of his head. The fabric against my skin feels wet.

“Dal, I can't—” Beck melts against me with a choking sound when I slide the heel of my hand down the stiff ridge of his shaft, then back up. I can't stop myself from doing it again, and again. He gasps into my neck and spreads his knees, meeting my movement with small, needy twitches of his hips.

This feels so forbidden after two years of friendship, with Scout and Roman sleeping down the hall. I know Beck feels it, too. But I can't stop, because I want to hear this big, powerful man's breath go all to pieces in my ear. I've never jerked off a cock, but I curl my fingers and caress him slowly, inviting him to use my hand like a stroker. He rubs against me gently at first, trembling with the effort to control himself, his sweaty cheek pressed against mine.

After a minute or two of silent thrusting in the dark, he whines and speeds up like he can't help it. Before I can even adjust, he shivers all over and I feel his cock twitch. I freeze, trying to figure out if I just made my best friend come on top of me. He answers my question when he reaches down and laces his fingers through mine, moving my hand from his dick

to the mattress by my head. His body is starting to go slack as his tongue finds mine in a deeper, more complicated kiss.

My awareness starts to return to the throbbing in my cock. The boxers tangled between my thighs feel drenched, and every touch sparks like lightning. I arch my hips, trying to find friction against the fabric, but it's no use.

Feeling me move, Beck goes alert again. "Come on, baby," he murmurs in his throaty rumble. His hand slips under my t-shirt to stroke my chest, but I drop my head back with a little moan of frustration. I want him to shove his knee up hard between my thighs and make me hump it until I come, but I can't make myself say it.

Kissing my throat, he slides his touch down my body to the top of my boxers, then underneath. For a split second, his fingers are splayed warm and strong in my pubic hair.

Then everything falls apart.

10

BECK

“WAIT, NO, PLEASE *BECK*.”

I’ve never moved so fast in my life. Dallas doesn’t even finish the word *no* before I scramble off him and create as much space as I can without falling off the bed. Tangled in half-removed clothes, his perfect body curls up with his back to me and his head in his arms. He’s completely silent, but I can see how fast his ribs are rising and falling.

“Dallas, what’s happening?” I reach toward him, then pull my hand back and curl my fingers into a fist, pressing it against my forehead. “Did I hurt you?” The queasy, headache-y feeling that’s been haunting me ever since yesterday gets worse when I try to think.

Swaying a little, like he’s drunk, he pushes himself upright and swings his legs off the edge of the bed. “You didn’t,” he mumbles thickly. “God, I’m sorry. Just...please go away.”

Before I can even react, he pushes himself to his feet and drags his shirt down to cover the beautiful curve of his hips. Even though I’m the one who’s supposed to leave, he fumbles with the lock on the door and practically sprints down the hall. I hear the bathroom door slam.

My body is on fire, sweaty and shaking with the need to make Dallas come. I wanted to smell and feel him fall apart for me, learn the noises he makes. It’s not gonna happen now. All the forgotten pain in my damaged face starts to come back with a vengeance.

I limp into the hall and study the strip of light under the bathroom door, then go into my room and change my underwear, wiping off the sticky cum. Just in case, I sneak to the living room and check the couch to make sure the other two didn’t wake up. They’re curled around each other in a happy little mountain of blankets, with no sign of stirring.

Maybe it's rude to try the bathroom handle without knocking, but I don't really care. The door swings right open, so I duck inside and squint in the uncomfortable brightness. Dallas is sitting in the stained bathtub with his knees up and his chin on his arms, one bare foot curled on top of the other. His frantic breathing hasn't slowed down. He's just staring blankly at the roll of toilet paper I balanced on top of the empty tube instead of putting it on properly. The fact that he doesn't have anything crabby to say about it means he's really fucked up.

I can't figure out, no matter how hard I think, whether we did something wrong or not. But this aftermath is definitely wrong. "Dal." I frown at my bruised face in the mirror. I look like a brainless meathead who only knows how to break things, not fix them. But I have to try. "Can you breathe slower?"

His long, delicate fingers squeeze into fists as he turns his head toward me. Blinking his teary eyelashes, he grimaces and tries to take longer inhales and exhales. I've always liked that about him—he's a hundred times smarter than any of us, but whenever I have an idea, he gives it a try. Except for the ones with fire, driving fast, skateboards, knives, heights, or explosions. So maybe half my ideas.

"I'm sorry," I offer, even though I'm not sorry for anything we did except whatever hurt him. As he wipes his eyes, I press my hip into the counter to stop myself from barging over, picking him up, and carrying him safely to my bed. "I don't get what's happening right now."

"It's not your fault," he mumbles, hugging his knees tighter. "I don't want you to see me, Beck. You'll never look at me the same, and I can't lose you. I can't."

I stare at him, struggling to work out what he means. Everything in his head is attached to everything else in a tangled web. My head is full of boxes—I open one, take out a single thought, hold it for a while, then pack it away. Sometimes I go for a whole day without opening any boxes. "But I see you all the time. I love seeing you."

That definitely isn't the right answer, because he just buries his face in his hands with a miserable groan. "Please don't make me say it."

Rubbing my forehead to try and ease the ache, I start digging in my brain for parts of him I haven't seen. "Are you talking about your dick? Dallas, I know you're trans."

"No. You think you know, but you don't." His voice gets hard and sad. "All the shit you're attracted to, all the porn you've bookmarked with the massive cocks, the stuff you told me about how you like to play with a guy's balls?" He gestures bitterly to his lower half. "None of that. Zero. You know all the shit you aren't attracted to? That literally turns you off? Congratulations."

"Slow down." It's more of a plea than a demand. By the time I find the words for my feelings, he's gonna talk himself off a cliff. There are thousands of boxes in my head. The guys I've fucked, the porn I've watched, it's all carelessly dumped together into one messy, fun box I open when I'm bored or need to get off. Dallas is in every single box. He's the world around the boxes, he's the boxes, he's everything. I love my best friend, with his hair and his smile and the body that fits against mine. But his soul could be inside anyone or anything and I'd still need him until the day I die. My thoughts are too big, and I don't know how to make him understand, because I don't even understand. The best I can come up with is blurting, "I don't care."

His anger drains away and he curls up in a tighter ball. "That's not true. You're a horndog. You need massive dicks like Scout needs Oreos."

I cross my arms. "That's the stupidest sentence you've ever said in your life."

He blinks, trying to process, then snorts loudly into his knees and starts laugh-crying so hard his narrow shoulders shake.

Hopping over the yellow bath mat, I push the shower curtain aside and slide one foot behind him to rest in the tub by his right hip. He doesn't react as I step all the way in and sit

down behind his back, nudging him forward until there's enough room for me.

His body relaxes a little as I comb his endless midnight-colored hair with my fingers until it's all hanging down his back. A month after he moved in, he taught me how to braid it. I practiced until my thick, clumsy fingers could get it right every time. Then he showed me all this elaborate shit—braids that go along your scalp, braids made of other braids, updos like celebrities wear to galas. He doesn't expect me to learn all that, but I want to, just so I can turn him toward a mirror someday and see his face when he realizes what I did.

Everything gets so still I can hear the chirp of crickets through the cracked-open window and the swish of hair across my fingers. I don't know how long we sit there—long enough for me to have a numb ass and three pretty decent French braids that I want to weave together into a single big one.

“It's crooked, babe,” Dallas murmurs sleepily.

“Nuh-uh.” I cock my head, studying the strands.

“I can feel it.”

He's right; the braid on the right side is smaller than the other two. “Fuck.”

Dal sighs deeply as I try to comb it all out without tugging. “Can we just pretend none of this happened?” he asks without looking at me.

“No.” It comes out so instantly and firmly that it startles both of us. I've never shut him down like that before.

He sits up straighter with a frustrated groan. “What do you think is gonna happen, Beck? A relationship? Friends with benefits? Except without any benefit?”

“I don't know,” I snap, trying not to get pissed. Reaching over his shoulder, I catch his jaw in my fingers. “Turn around and look at me.”

I think he can tell from my voice that I'm upset, because he unfolds his legs and scoots in an awkward circle to face me. He looks scared, and I get it—in Dallas' life, change equals

loss. What he doesn't get is that I'm never going away. When I pinkie promised not to leave him, that shit stands for eternity. The boy couldn't get rid of me if he fucking begged on his knees, if he moved across the world and didn't leave an address. That was just as true before I kissed him as it is now.

Hesitantly, I reach across and rest my hand on the side of his neck. His big, worried eyes latch onto mine, but he doesn't panic again. "Dal, it's me. We don't ever have to kiss again if you don't want, but every single thing that happens between you and me—" I point from my chest to his, "—is fucking sacred. I'm not erasing any of it. And I think we should talk about us later, when we're not feeling like shit."

His jaw tightens and his voice goes all petulant, like he's having a mini tantrum. "Time isn't going to change the answer, Beck. Even if I could afford bottom surgery, I can't turn into what you need."

"How the hell do you know what I need?" It's really hard not to get mad when he keeps putting words in my mouth. "Why wouldn't I want—"

"I can't be the person who traps you in a life of never seeing another body that turns you on." He reaches up and squeezes my wrist tightly. I've heard of people building emotional walls to protect themselves, but this guy just erected an entire fucking maze between us out of sheer panic. "I wish to god I could change, but I'm not right for you."

I'm no good at mazes, but I'll take the whole damn thing apart one brick at a time if I have to. Because I made him a promise, and not even he can make me break it. For the first time tonight, I feel like I know what to do.

He watches me in confusion as I scramble out of the tub and offer him my hand. "Come on, pretty boy."

"Beck..." In bed, he called my name like he wanted me. Now he murmurs it like he's begging me to make sense of everything.

I waggle my fingers a little. "All you have to do is take my hand, okay?"

After a long pause, he reaches out and obeys, letting me pull him to his feet. He must be exhausted, because he follows me down the hall to my room without another word and watches blankly as I kick clothes around on the floor so I don't have to let go of his hand. I snag my smallest pair of flannel pajama pants with my toes and offer them to him. "Put those on," I demand as I search for my favorite sweatpants.

Giving me the side eye like he thinks I'm crazy, he drags them up over his boxers. He stretches out the waistband in an ornery, sulky gesture to show how loose they are. "Why do we need a house? All four of us could take shelter in these." His sass is back, but it's forced. He's trying to rewind time to before we kissed, even though I told him I didn't want that.

"Stop talking." I come over and bat his hands off the drawstring so I can pull it tight around his slim hips and tie it. He shoots me a startled glance, but keeps his mouth shut. There's something about that split second of obedience against all his impulses that helps me understand what Scout sees in the whole dominance and submission thing. Except Dallas would cut off my balls if I told him to wear a collar. "You've talked plenty. It's my turn."

I grin when he arches a warning eyebrow at me. He makes a confused and slightly offended noise when I drag him toward the living room without another word. Roman's low snoring doesn't change as we sneak past them to the kitchen. I silently grab my flip flops and Dal shoves his socked feet into his four dollar Birkenstock knockoffs.

The back door always squeaks, so I have to ease it open one bit at a time until it's wide enough to slip through. When I point into the dark, balmy summer night, Dallas wrinkles his nose like *Seriously?* and shoots a longing glance back toward his room. I wave for him to get his butt moving, and he clomps outside with his dramatic sigh that always makes me smile.

After I've inched the door shut again, I turn around and watch him standing in the driveway with his arms wrapped around himself and a light breeze tugging at his hair.

“What the hell—” he whispers, breaking off with a frustrated huff when I hold up my finger.

“I haven’t talked yet.”

“Will you just—”

I put my hand over his mouth, and he shoots me the stink eye. His irises are pitch black in the dark, but this close I can see that he’s still a little teary and red-eyed, even as he struggles to be tough. I like both versions of him—the soft one and the one who would fight to the death no matter how impossible it is for him to win. Dropping my hand, I wipe it off on his chest. I didn’t mean it to be sexual, but he swallows and I feel my dick twitch.

Before we can start arguing again, I grab the two plastic patio chairs from whoever lived here before us that left this place such a dump. I sling one over each shoulder and hike toward the slope at the back of the property, overlooking the river where Calvin and his “friend” are squatting. If they had a fire we could probably see it from here, but in a Colorado summer that would be a recipe for burning the whole state down. Dallas huffs and grumbles along behind me, his shoes crunching in the gravel.

Once the ground starts to drop, I set the chairs down and throw myself into the one on the left, almost making it tip over. Dallas watches me thoughtfully, like he always does, then sinks into the other seat with his hands folded in his lap, waiting for me to start my lecture. After a few minutes of nothing but the fresh air and an owl hooting in the distance, he settles back and folds one leg over the other.

“Look.” I point up toward the western sky. It’s like a magic trick out here—if you watch the black expanse long enough, stars begin fading into reality. The longer you look, the more of them appear until it’s totally crowded up there. Dallas’ lips part as he stares, fascinated, his eyes darting from one to another like he’s trying to count them.

After watching him for a while, I glance down and fiddle with the worn fabric of my sweatpants, folding it around my fingers. “I never went to any intervention meetings.”

He doesn't say anything, or even look at me. For once, I'm thankful.

"I went into the lobby," I continue slowly, trying to sort my thoughts out. "I listened to them talk about their mission, and the skills we could learn. They said it was about changing your life one day at a time, and I got really fucking scared. I've never been anything but this, and I don't know what would happen to me if I changed." My head is throbbing, and my eyes feel grainy. "Every time you asked about it, I lied to you."

The muscles in his jaw tighten as he stares out into the night. I have no idea what he's thinking, but I've spent the last two days learning how much he hates being lied to. So that's great.

"You can talk now." I shrug miserably and sit back, tipping my face up to the sky. Maybe I've fucked everything up worse. "I'm trying to say that I can't just change myself into what you need, either. We both have hang ups. Your dick isn't a dealbreaker for me, but if my issues are a dealbreaker for you, I'd get it." Pulling in a shaky breath, I try to keep my voice firm. "I don't know how I'd live with you falling in love with some other guy, but if that's what you truly wanted..." No matter how hard I try, I can't make myself finish the sentence.

"Um..." He sniffs, his voice fragile, and tries to brush his hair out of his face. His body tenses like he's going to stand up, then stops, then tries again and stops again. He glances guiltily toward the house. "I just... Can I?"

I nod when he points at me, even though I don't know what he's asking. He struggles out of the wobbly chair, hesitates, then slings his leg over mine and sits on my lap, facing me. His hands cup my face and we just study each other, both of us exhausted and hurting. Finally, he curls up and rests his head on my shoulder, his whole weight pressed against me in a way that soothes both the pain and the panic at once.

Once he's settled, I loop my arms around his waist and feel his body relax as he sighs into my neck. I tuck my nose into

the familiar wildflower scent of his hair and watch the moon over the trees. If we sat like this two days ago, I wouldn't have thought of it as anything besides normal cuddling. Tonight, every touch and breath feels different—more uncertain, more needy, more all consuming.

“I'm just dirt.” The words burst out of me after a long time, because they've been sitting on the tip of my tongue for months and I'm feeling too raw to hold them in anymore. Every time Dallas or the guys asked me about the meetings, I wanted to tell them this. “I made peace with that, and you should too. There's no point in all this rehabilitation crap.”

He shifts, tightening his grip and angling his head so I can hear him. “Everyone is dirt, Beck,” he mumbles, mostly asleep.

I smooth a hand over his hair, stroking it back, and kiss his forehead. “Not you, pretty boy. You're space dust. All the colors in the universe.”

DALLAS

I SHUT my eyes in the light of a billion stars, with Beck's t-shirt soft against my cheek and his fingers combing rhythmically through my hair with a sense of quiet ownership. When I open them, I'm in my own bed with sun pouring through the dented blinds. The room is too hot and quiet. I'm alone, but when I fumble around in the blanket I find a Beck-shaped dent in my mattress. He must have carried me here in his arms last night. I need to stay logical, but that thought makes me swoon a little. Maybe a lot.

My last sleep-addled thought as I sit up and push my hair out of my face is: *How am I going to tell my future partner that Beck will kill them if they try to touch my hair?*

Oh god. Beck and I... We... Things happened last night. I fucking jacked off my best friend where I'm sitting right now. And the ornery turd won't let me take it back.

Groaning, I flop over with my face in my pillow. Beck said he wanted us to think this through, but I know him. He finished thinking after two seconds and now he's waiting for my answer. I know deep down that I could trust him to do right by me and make me feel loved, because he already does those things. And he believes with his whole heart that my body won't be an issue.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. I don't want someone who overlooks my body because they like my personality, or because they're trying not to be transphobic. I don't want to be settled for. Every single person deserves to be desired, wholly and passionately, exactly as they are. At least, that's my dream. I just don't know if it's a pretty fantasy, or something real. It's not possible for me to know until I take the leap and fall far enough that I'll be hurt again if I made the wrong choice.

Why the hell did I have to meet this man? I was wrong when I thought we were meant to find each other. Maybe we were born so differently because the universe wanted to keep us apart. Together, we're too much for this world to contain. That smile, the wild head of golden hair like late summer wheat, the utterly unapologetic soul...he's already ruined me.

I had a happy little pansexual dream of a sensitive, intellectual partner who works as a chef and owns two golden retrievers and a blue bungalow. We meditate together, play chess, maybe join a book club. But whenever I retreat to that safe picture, Beck is standing outside the imaginary bungalow with his arms crossed, waiting for me. He refuses to move, rain or shine, until I climb out of a window at night and go to him. If I close my eyes, I can feel his hands everywhere as he pushes me against the white picket fence and rubs his scent all over me until I promise I'll never go back.

My head hurts. First I watch Beck almost get a bullet through his brain, then I find out he's been lying for months, then we're kissing frantically in the dark. I'm scared to leave my room. God knows what will happen today.

As I reluctantly crawl into a standing position and stretch out my sore back, the ratty beach towel I used as a yoga mat catches my eye. I've been neglecting my mindfulness practice right when I need it the most. The rest of the world can wait a few minutes.

I pull up the blinds and unroll my towel right in the dusty patch of sunlight. The heat on my skin and the faint drone of a lawnmower in the distance anchor me as I sit with my eyes closed and my mind clear for fifteen minutes. I used to be able to meditate for an hour at a time, but my anxiety has chipped away at the foundation I built. When I'm finished, I run through my favorite yoga stretching routine, and end with five minutes splayed out on my back in Savasana.

When I finally put my mat away and dig in my dresser for some clothes, I don't have any more answers, but I do feel better. Since I don't need to dress for work until this afternoon, I go for comfort with a vintage red and orange flannel and some frayed jean shorts. I saved up for a month and drove all

the way to a clearance sale in Denver for these, so I'd better look cute.

The guys' voices drift down the hall as I open my door, followed by Roman's laugh. Part of me wants to hide from Beck forever, but I'm a mature adult and I need my tea, so I head for the kitchen.

"Morning." Scout waves a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich in my direction as I step over Tubbs' massive body stretched out in the doorway. He's sitting on the counter with Roman between his thighs, while Beck balances on the back of one of our rickety kitchen chairs. These people are allergic to eating at tables.

"PB&J for breakfast? That's a bold choice." I fill our dented kettle with water, then set it to boil on the only burner that works.

"Want one?" Beck offers indistinctly through a mouthful of bread.

"Not really." I shake my head without looking at him and grab the half empty bag of cereal we're *supposed* to be eating for breakfast. Lavender chamomile tea and stale Cheerios aren't a match made in heaven, but I need to make sure these hooligans have enough bread to last the week.

"Roman's being problematic," Scout complains, flicking his crusts onto the floor. Tubbs lurches to his feet and lumbers as fast as he can across the room, body-checking me out of the way so he can slurp them up.

"I don't think that's possible." I look up from putting tea leaves in my *You can't scare me, I have three sons* mug Beck and Scout found at a garage sale.

"The kid said it was okay to visit," Roman protests in his mild, slightly rusty voice. "Tubbs misses his brother."

"His brother. The one-pound kitten." Scout sounds annoyed, but he rubs the back of Roman's neck and gazes at him with that helpless adoration that always betrays him when he tries to say no to his boyfriend. Rome could announce that

he wanted to set our house on fire and Scout would just nod along, all googly-eyed.

Beck clears his throat. “Didn’t you say he could bring the cat back here, big guy? Not that we’d go hunt them down.”

Roman doesn’t get stubborn often, but when he does it’s like trying to argue with a brick wall. He catches my eye and offers me one of his small, determined smiles. “I’m going. Wanna come, Dal? It’s nice out; it’ll be a pretty walk.”

It’s impossible not to grin back at him. “Sure, Rome.” I’m probably supposed to stay neutral in this argument, but I desperately need fresh air and a chance to clear my head in a place that Beck hasn’t held my hand, or kissed me, or pinned me to the fridge.

“Fine,” Scout grumbles. “I’ll get my shoes.”

At the word *shoes*, the dog’s tail starts whipping back and forth so fast it could leave welts. “That’s right,” Roman croons, ruffling Tubbs’ floppy cheeks as drool splatters on his forearms. “Walk time.”

Tubbs manages a single, earth-shaking bounce and a loud “ruff”, then capers over to the back door where his leash hangs. He’s filled out so much in the last six months, and his glossy coat makes him look years younger than when we found him. It’s all thanks to Roman—meals skipped to afford his food, endless research about dog care on a low budget, daily brushing, hours of walks, and long, cuddly naps together in his dog bed.

I grab Scout’s old enamel mug from the cupboard and transfer my tea into it. When I turn around, Beck is still sitting on the back of the chair, elbows propped easily on his knees. His sinful white tee is gauzy enough to reveal hints of his ink and loose enough to show off his biceps and the light brown hair under his arms. His black jeans grip his thighs, and his mane of hair has been cleaned and brushed back from his face, glowing in a shaft of sunlight.

When his hazy, intent green eyes meet mine, all the breath in my lungs disappears. I don’t know how I ever looked at him

without drowning in want. Maybe I didn't. Maybe I've been lying to myself. Now I can't get away from it, not with the memory of my first kiss, tasting of whiskey and absolute longing and forgiveness. Of his thick, hot dick filling my hand with only a paper-thin layer of cloth between us. I need to know how he feels about last night now that we're in the daylight.

Scout hops back into the room on one leg, dragging on his second sneaker. "Are we ready to go sic the world's biggest dog on an innocent child and his kitten?"

Roman shoots him a warning look as he clips Tubbs' leash on his collar. A dog that powerful needs something sturdier than a simple nylon lead, but he walks like an angel for Roman. I've seen a squirrel run two inches from his face, and he just looks back adoringly to see what his master thought of it. If one of us tried to walk him on our own, I think it would be mayhem.

Beck slides off the chair, his eyes dropping to take in my oversized flannel. The man wouldn't know fashion if it hit him in the face with a frying pan, but he's the only person who takes a moment to appreciate my outfit every day, without fail. He offers me a hesitant smile that looks even more crooked than usual with his black eye. "I'm in."

Before I can find any kind of normal human response, Scout grabs his arm and pulls him toward the door. "Good. I'm stuck in *Angry Birds* and I need you to dig up the eleven-year-old-Beck elite strategies for me." Then they're gone, with Roman and Tubbs behind them, and I'm alone in the kitchen. I close my eyes and take a deep inhale of the steam off my tea, trying to grasp the tatters of the centered calm that fell apart the second I walked into the noisy kitchen.

We never bother to lock up during the day, so I just let the screen door slam behind me as I sprint to catch up with Roman. Beck and Scout are fifty yards ahead of us, gesturing animatedly and bumping shoulders as they follow the hard-packed dirt track between irrigation ditches that carry fast-moving water out to the corn. Calvin didn't tell us where he's squatting, but based on our knowledge of the woods by the

river, there's only one option—a sheltered clearing that always has someone illegally camped there.

Roman moves unhurriedly, pausing to let Tubbs look at the water and sniff every footprint in the dirt. I enjoy keeping pace with him; his sweet, steady energy always grounds me when I'm overthinking. I look up from kicking a rock into the ditch and realize he's studying me thoughtfully with his tawny gold eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Totally." I nod too aggressively. "I'm just a little overwhelmed."

His face falls. "Scout told me what happened. You were really fucking brave."

"Right," I mumble when I realize he's talking about the bar. "Freezing up and crying made me a hero."

He shakes his head firmly. "Crying doesn't make you less brave."

I huff out a skeptical breath. "I'll try to internalize that, but it might take a while."

With a quiet chuckle, he starts walking again. "That's fine. It's still true."

Scout laughs loudly enough for the sound to carry back to us. I watch the silver and gold heads bobbing together as they goof around and push each other. Their lifelong friendship forms the core of this little family, while Roman and I were both dirty strays they adopted in the last few years. Now we're a unit, unbreakable, and it's impossible to imagine how any of us lived without the others.

"I have a question," I blurt out. "A hypothetical one." Roman eyes me curiously as I fumble for words. "You know the saying about a bird falling in love with a fish, and they don't have anywhere to live?"

His right eyebrow creeps up as I keep babbling. "But imagine instead that a bird falls in love with another bird, but that bird doesn't have wings. And the first bird's favorite thing to do is fly, but he's like 'It's okay, bird friend, I don't mind sitting on the ground with you.' Then the second bird doesn't

know if he's actually saying that because he means it, or just because he's trying to...I've lost you, haven't I?"

Roman points a thumb over his shoulder. "You lost me so far back you hadn't even started talking yet."

"This is ridiculous." I almost trip on Tubbs, who stopped to lick a weed. "Just try to imagine a hypothetical where someone is missing something really important to the other person. How do they know if it's going to work out?" I scrunch up my forehead and dig the toe of my sneaker into the dirt, trying to hide the emotions clogging up my throat. "How can they trust it, when the other person says it will be okay? Because that person can't know, can they? How could anyone know?"

When I stop, there's such a long silence that I glance back to make sure Roman's still there. He's watching me with a perplexed expression. Just when I think I've lost him again, he sighs and rubs his forehead. "You're kidding, right?"

"Huh?" I blink at him.

He exhales a faint, incredulous laugh. "Dallas, I can't talk. Not when Scout needs to have an important conversation. Not when we're doing a kink that requires communication, or when I know he desperately wants to hear me call him *sir*. Not when we're filming porn that would make more money if I could speak. It doesn't pick and choose convenient times. Usually it happens right when he needs me the most." Falling silent, he shrugs. He doesn't look ashamed or sad, just wistful.

"I'm sorry," I offer meekly. "That was insensitive of me. You're just you, and you're perfect, so we forget what you're dealing with."

He waves off my apologies with a slightly impatient hand. "Whatever that shit was with the birds, the answer is that I can't know. If it weren't for me, maybe Scout could have ended up with someone better, who wasn't missing parts. But every word out of his mouth and everything he's ever done tells me I'm what he wants. And the fact that it doesn't make sense, that it goes against logic? That's his problem, not mine. My job is just to believe him."

“Oh.” I stare at him, trying to let the words sink in. They contradict everything I know about how to make good choices and keep my heart safe. In a way, it sounds like that moment when you’re meditating and your brain finally lets go of its last grip. You trust the earth to hold you and the air to feed your lungs as you wait, open enough to be hurt, but truly alive for the first time.

Forgetting to be subtle, I glance over to where Beck and Scout have stopped to wait for us. Beck’s shirt is already dirty, and his hair immediately reverted to its usual wild state. When I turn back to Roman, he raises his eyebrows at me. “Scout won’t be upset,” he says quietly. “But I’m good at keeping secrets. For a little while.”

“Thank you.” I reach over and squeeze his thick forearm. “You’re an amazing friend, Rome.”

Beaming, he clicks his tongue at Tubbs to coax him into a reluctant trot so we can catch up. Beck leads us down through the tall grass, over a fallen trunk that Tubbs glares at and insists on walking around, and past a copse of dense aspen trees that shield the clearing from the view of anyone who isn’t walking along the river.

I’m so lost in my head that I don’t process what’s happening until I hear the urgent snapping of twigs underfoot. Beck barks “Hey, hey, hey” in a loud, warning tone, followed by an unfamiliar voice yelling “Get the fuck out!”

When Roman and I break out of the trees a few steps later, Beck has his hands up in a halting gesture, locked in a face-off with a man around our age. The man’s cropped brown hair and dark-rimmed glasses don’t look intimidating, but he’s gripping a splintery piece of wood with nails sticking out of it like he’s a baseball player who wants to hit a home run with Beck’s head.

I’ve watched this man die once already, and I have no interest in doing it again. But before I can think of a plan, Tubbs barrels between us, ripping the leash out of Roman’s hand, and squares up next to Beck with all his hair bristling. I’ve never heard him make a sound like the thundering, furious

barking that jolts through his whole body. The boy stumbles backwards with a terrified yelp and trips on a clump of grass. His makeshift weapon flies out of his hand when his ass hits the dirt, and Beck pounces on it.

Trembling so hard I can see it from where I'm standing, the boy scoots away from us. His wide eyes and upturned nose look exactly like Calvin's. "Get out," he croaks. "Please, we don't have anything. I swear."

"Theo!" Grass rustles as a small figure in a familiar giant hoodie comes bounding up from the river, clutching his kitten to his chest. "Theo, stop. Those are my friends!" Calvin comes to a panting stop and glares at his companion accusingly, like he's the one bullying us instead of the other way around.

A thick, awkward silence falls, only broken by a few noisy crows fighting in the distance. Roman clears his throat to get the kid's attention, then points from Tubbs to the kitten. Tubbs just pants heavily, like the effort of being angry for ten seconds tired him out.

"Awesome!" Calvin brightens up. "Come sit in the living room." I have no idea what he's talking about until I notice the careful lines of sticks and rocks laid out in an irregular grid across the clearing, like the floorplan for a house. Calvin waves Roman over to the biggest square, which is decorated with some thoughtfully-arranged log seating.

"Cal," the older boy snaps, scrambling to his feet and wiping dirt off his hands onto his equally filthy jeans. "What did I tell you? We don't make friends." But the kid is already chattering away to Roman, who just nods and shakes his head while they let the two animals sniff each other. Now that he's neutralized the threat, Beck ventures away to go help Roman communicate.

The man whose name must be Theo wraps his arms around himself and glares at us with a heartbreaking look I recognize on a visceral level. Mistrust, fear, hunger, and exhaustion, all wrapped up in a savage need to survive and a deep desire to just give up. Everything from his unmuscled body to the tatters

of his expensive-looking cardigan suggests that he got thrown into this life from something very different.

“Who the hell are you?” He can’t hide the shaking in his voice.

“We live up the road. You stole our groceries,” Scout says coldly.

Theo’s eyes darken. “We needed to eat.”

“So do we.”

“But you have a house.” He meets Scout’s glare with one of his own. “So we needed it more.”

“You’re Calvin’s older brother, aren’t you?” I cut in. It’s not just his face, but the way he talks and moves. They couldn’t be more identical, except for his distinct lack of his brother’s charisma.

He squares his shoulders, his hands curling into fists. “If any of you fuck with him, I’ll kill you.” He’s facing four to one odds with no weapon, but something tells me he’d rip our throats out with his teeth if it would save his brother.

“We’re not going to hurt anyone,” I soothe, nodding toward the other guys. Roman has been abandoned to play with the animals while Calvin gives Beck a tour of his imaginary house. “I’m Dallas, and this is Scout.”

I offer my hand, but he just stares warily and refuses to come closer.

“Where are you two from?” Scout asks, finally picking up on my hints that we should be nice.

Theo’s shoulders sag, and his gaze wanders toward the mountains. “New Mexico.” I expect him to stop, but he keeps spilling out more words, faster and faster in a breathless rush like he hasn’t talked to another adult in who knows how long. “I found out CPS was gonna take Calvin away from our parents and put him in the system, and they said I wasn’t a fit guardian. So we ran away. We took a Grayhound from Albuquerque to Denver a month ago. This guy on the bus said he had an empty apartment we could live in, but I didn’t

realize he wanted..." His face stiffens, and he hangs his head. "I did everything he asked, but then he tried to touch Calvin. I hit him with a chair. I don't know if he's dead or not, and I don't care, either. We took any bus we could afford, and ran out of money in Fort Holden. Please let us stay here tonight, and I promise we'll move on tomorrow."

A high pitched, childish laugh catches our attention. Calvin and Beck appear to be building a dirt ramp so they can jump Beck's Hot Wheels car over a log. My hand slides into my pocket and squeezes my own tiny black truck.

Theo's tired face softens a little, but it just makes him look even more sad. He can't be older than twenty, and he seems even more naive than I was when Hayden threw me out. The thought of someone taking advantage of their innocence makes me want to puke.

"Right," Scout speaks up suddenly. "You two are gonna get yourselves assaulted and murdered with your body parts thrown in a dumpster if you don't screw your head on straight and make a plan."

Theo's eyes widen. "I—"

"We have a camper in the trees a few miles down river; you can walk there before dark if you start soon. Just, uh, don't let Calvin look under the bed. Stay there until Dallas gets you a job at the King Soopers."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "Sorry, I think I misplaced my pile of free jobs."

He just waves his hand dismissively. Once Scout gets an idea in his head, he'll bend fucking reality until everything happens exactly the way he wants, through sheer force of will.

Theo's pale cheeks flush as his eyes flick between us. "No, we can't." At least he learned from his mistakes.

"Look." I take a careful step toward him. "This isn't like the apartment. You'll be safely tucked away in the woods by yourselves, and if you want to leave, we won't be able to stop you." It doesn't seem wise to mention the fact that it's Scout and Roman's porn trailer, where they go to film shit that's too

loud or intense to do at home. Scout wasn't kidding when he said not to look under the bed.

Swallowing, Theo glances over to where Roman is letting the kitten sleep on Tubbs's back, then to Beck playing a hectic game of keepaway with the toy car as a screeching Calvin tries to climb him. "But what do you want from us?"

"You're gonna get three answers to that," Scout offers drily. "I'm going to say that I don't want my food stolen from my own driveway anymore. My boyfriend thinks his dog needs a kitten to play with. And this one—" he nods at me "—will say that we don't want your brother getting hurt after you fought so hard to keep him safe." He pauses for a beat, and his voice softens. "All three of them are true."

He and Theo start talking logistics—the location of the trailer, how to work the gas generator, what food they can eat from the cupboards. I don't hear any of it, because I get distracted watching Beck and Calvin wrestle and chase each other in the grass like they're best friends. The man's clean clothes have already gotten ruined with dirt and sweat that I'm going to have to try and wash out. His wild grin is too goofy and his laugh is obnoxiously loud and he's so, so perfect.

Too many feelings swirl around in my chest when I look at him. Thinking about last night still turns me on, but the lust is consumed by something so much bigger it feels like a force of nature. I love him, desperately and utterly. I always have, even before it had a name. Maybe this feels so confusing because moving from love to lust is backwards from how it's done in stories. Lust brings so many complications—my body, my virginity, learning a new language with each other. That's the scary part, where we don't have a road map or any assurance we won't ruin everything. But nothing could ever stop me from loving him.

Beck dumps a giggling Calvin on the ground, and the kid listens curiously with one eye on his brother as Scout updates everyone on the plan. We all glance at Roman when he clears his throat, looking nervous. This time he signs carefully, so Beck can translate.

“He says that Hobbes seems kind of tired and hungry. We have formula, so we could keep him up at the house for a few nights.”

Calvin’s mouth flies open, ready to protest, but he hesitates when he meets Beck’s eyes. The kid clearly worships him already. “Do you think he’d be happier that way?”

I’m surprised when Theo speaks up. “It might help him get stronger.” Now that I think about it, trying to keep a boy and a kitten alive at the same time must be wearing him out.

“Alright,” Calvin murmurs reluctantly. “But you have to promise to give him back.”

Roman draws an x over his heart, a gesture Beck doesn’t need to translate.

“We’ll check on you tomorrow,” Scout concludes, offering Theo his hand. “You have my number, so call if you can’t find it or it’s full of rabid prairie dogs.”

Even though Theo’s wound up body hasn’t relaxed, he hesitantly accepts the handshake. “Thank you.” Behind the wounded pride in his voice, he sounds relieved. It feels weird to leave them out here and go back to our comfortable house, but they’re already gathering the last of their stolen food into backpacks so they can hike to the trailer.

I expect Beck and Scout to walk together again, but Scout falls in next to Roman so he can help wrangle the two animals. As Tubbs leads them off down the road from one interesting spot to another, a warm hand locks fingers with mine and Beck tugs me to a stop. I shoot him a bewildered look.

“I need to talk to you.” He’s not smiling anymore, and his eyes look concerned.

My heart drops in a nauseous surge of panic. “No. I know it’s not fair to make you wait for an answer, but please don’t—”

He drops my hand and catches my chin in his fingers. “Woah. Breathe, baby. This isn’t about us.”

“Thank fuck. Don’t scare me like that.” I throw my arms around him without thinking and bury my face in his chest.

He hesitates, then wraps me in his strong arms and tugs me against him. We've done this a million times, but he's never rubbed his face into the crook of my neck and inhaled slowly, sending a shiver down my spine. His lips graze the soft skin under my ear, then he pulls away and steps back. His eyes look glassy as he shakes his head with an unusually shy smile. "That outfit is dangerous, pretty boy. I can't stay away from you."

As we start walking again, I slip my hand into his even though the guys might see. "What did you want to talk about?" He shoots me another cautious look, like he's worried about my reaction. "You're freaking me out, Beck."

"I..." He frowns, his thumb brushing back and forth across the back of my hand. "When I was wrestling with Calvin, his big-ass hoodie kept slipping around. I'm not totally sure, except...no, fuck that. I'm positive he was wearing a sports bra. I saw the straps."

My mind refuses to process his words into something helpful. I walk slower and slower, diverting brain power from my body to my head, until I'm just standing there staring at the ground. "There are a million reasons..." My voice fades out.

He raises an eyebrow at me. "There are million reasons a twelve-year-old boy would be wearing a sports bra?"

"Jesus." I massage the bridge of my nose. "That doesn't mean he's trans. If he is assigned female at birth, maybe he's dressing as a boy for safety while they travel."

"Maybe." He stuffs his hands in his pockets and waits expectantly. Every interaction we've had with Calvin comes back to me. It's dangerous to assume someone's identity, but I can't get past his proud confidence in his male name and appearance, his pure joy at befriending and hanging out with older boys, and Theo's frantic, homicidal level of protectiveness. If I had figured out my true gender sooner, I would have been exactly like Calvin at his age.

My chest feels like it's being squeezed in a giant fist. "Um, okay. I don't know what to do about it."

“You could talk to him,” Beck prompts, like the answer is so obvious in his head.

A deep sense of helplessness I haven’t felt in a long time rises up to choke me. The kid has no access to care, no resources, and he’s about to go through a puberty that will shatter his sense of self and make his life hell. I can’t fix any of it. “I’m not some kind of role model, Beck. I don’t even have my own dysphoria under control, and I was so privileged to get hormones and surgery early. I’ve never been a homeless trans child. You can’t just expect me to go back there and give him a life-changing blessing like I’m the Mother-Fucking-Theresa of men without dicks.”

This time he takes my face in both hands, his thumbs gently holding my head still so I have to look at him. “No one’s asking you to do any of that shit, okay?”

“You just did,” I protest in a small, pathetic voice.

He gives a quiet snort. “You hear a lot of things no one actually says.”

“Yeah. Call it a gift,” I murmur ruefully.

“I just think...” One of his hands slides down to rest comfortably at the base of my neck, fingers brushing along my skin. I can’t look away from the earnest light in his eyes that gives away just how much he bonded with the kid. “I think it would make his day to realize one of the four coolest guys in town is just like him. If you and I brainstorm, we could think of some ways to support him. But we don’t have to do any of that today.”

He doesn’t demand an answer, just reluctantly lets go of me and slips an arm around my shoulder, keeping me close to him as we start walking again.

“Speaking of things no one actually says,” I comment finally, “we are not the four coolest guys in town.”

My friend smiles to himself without answering. I’m pretty sure he’s lost in his own head, dreaming up ways to make a little trans kid feel all the love and support Beck never

experienced. I can't tear my eyes away from his face as we walk, because it's one of the purest things I've ever seen.

12

BECK

PISSING in a hot shower is better than sex.

I close my eyes and let the water flow through my hair and down over my sore shoulders, while basking in the total relief of an empty bladder. Showers are me-time, where I can do and think about anything I want. I *want* to jack off thinking about Dallas, but that seems like a sick thing to do when he hasn't agreed to a physical relationship yet. So instead, I rock out to The Killers on my phone. When it hits a chorus, I strum chords on my wet abs and headbang along, flinging droplets all over the walls.

As I dance around the shower, I can't stop thinking about Calvin. I wanted to hate him for attacking Dallas, but I can't stay mad when his sweet, smart, ornery nature reminds me so much of my favorite person in the world. Dallas doesn't need to have all the answers, but I know first-hand how much it can matter for a lost boy to meet a strong older guy who understands what he's going through. Pascal and Alex pulled me into gang life, but I wouldn't have lived through my teens if they hadn't been my two big brothers who loved me the best they could and kicked my ass into line when I messed up. Dallas had to go to work when we got back from the river, so I'm trying to figure out how to explain all this when he comes home.

I never heard the bathroom door, but my music cuts off right in the middle of the last chorus, leaving nothing but the sound of dripping water. Before my brain can react, the shower curtain flings open. Dallas is panting and flushed, like he just ran from somewhere. He stands there holding the curtain open, staring at my fully naked self and trying to catch his breath.

"Uh, hi?" I scrunch my face up and wipe the last remnants of shampoo out of my eyes. "You're letting in the cold." The

longer he waits, the more droplets bounce out of the tub, spraying a wet pattern on his gray chinos.

He blinks, like he's waking up, and gives me a strange, reckless look. Instead of shutting the curtain, he climbs into the tub on bare feet and pulls it closed behind him. I watch blankly, my mouth half open, as water starts to darken and drench the fabric of his clothes. "Dallas?"

His nostrils flare as he tips his chin up firmly and takes another step toward me. The spray soaks through his lavender button down until it's plastered to the shape of his body and so transparent I can see every detail of his scars. If Dal ever steps in a puddle or splashes dishwater on himself, he whines and yowls like a fussy little cat. Tonight, he doesn't even react when water drops scatter across his face, making his eyelashes flutter and his light brown skin sparkle.

When he pulls in a deep breath, I wait for a rush of words. They never come. He just stumbles forward two slippery steps and crashes into me. My back hits the dirty tub surround as his hands catch the sides of my face, then slide up to fist in my wet hair. I make a drowning noise when he lunges up on his toes and kisses me hard, his teeth digging into my lower lip.

After a stunned second, I kiss him back. I want to go easy and let him set the pace, but when he moans like he's been thinking about this all day, I can't stop myself. My grip on his neck tightens and I start really tongue fucking him. He lets out a series of the most gorgeous, hungry whimpers, one with each stroke of my tongue. His leg hooks behind mine as his arms tighten around my neck and he rocks his clothed hips against my naked ones.

Without breaking the kiss, I grab his thigh and help him jump up to wrap his legs around my waist. Lucky for him, I have enough balance and strength to hold him against my chest without slipping and killing us both. His whole body shivers in my arms as he drops slow, careful kisses against my lips that make my head spin.

Every inch of him is drenched now, but he just rests his forehead against mine and runs his fingers through my hair.

“You’re a good man, Beckham Alexander,” he whispers breathlessly.

A hard knot in my chest tightens. All I’ve done lately is lie and hurt people. “I’m not—”

“No, stop.” He rests two wet fingers against my mouth. “You are a good, good man. I haven’t found answers for the parts of this that scare me, but I’ve decided I don’t care anymore.” A smile pulls at the corner of his mouth as his eyes fill with a warmth that takes my breath away. “I want whatever answer means I get to have you.”

His thighs tighten around my hips, and he ducks his head to lightly rub the tips of our noses together. My heart claimed him the second he wandered into my trailer, smelling like he hadn’t showered in a week, and asked me why I didn’t have paprika. *Mine, Dallas. Dallas, mine.* Like a heartbeat in my brain that never shuts up.

But I think he just claimed me back. For good. Forever. Because nothing about us has ever been casual.

He stopped *worrying* for me. To him, that’s a bigger ask than dying for someone.

He got his clothes wet for me. His perfect hair.

This boy is my soul.

Then the hot water runs out all at once. Dallas gives a muffled scream into my shoulder as an ice-cold waterfall douses us. Cussing up a storm, I try to scramble past the curtain without falling. My foot slips on the linoleum, but I catch us by dumping his ass on the bathroom counter and crash-landing on top of him. He falls back against the mirror, hugging himself and laughing so hard he can’t breathe. “Oh my god,” is all he can gasp out before he chokes on another fit of giggles.

We have four towels on the rack—red for Scout, blue for Roman, tan for Dal, and black for me. I grab the tan and black ones and come back to where he’s shivering in his drenched clothes, half from laughter and half from cold. “Did they have

an open vodka bar or something at your shift today?" I've never seen sober Dal act like this.

"Nope." When I drop the towel on his head, he wraps it around his face like a little old lady's bonnet and grins at me. "I'm just really, really happy. Give me another five minutes before I crash violently back to reality."

I prop my hand against the mirror next to his head and lean in, my dick brushing his leg. He had his first kiss last night and his second one like thirty seconds ago, but he's already a hungry little thing for it, tilting his head and parting his lips eagerly. I stop an inch away, studying his face, then pull back a little. "You're mine now," I whisper. "And I can make you wait."

When I straighten up, his cheeks have gone bright red. "You're such a massive shit sandwich," he growls, snatching his towel off his head and burying his face in it. "Don't look at me."

"I did some research this afternoon," I offer once I've scrubbed myself down and pulled on my sweats. "For a way to make the sex thing less...awkward."

He lifts his face from the towel and raises a confused eyebrow at me. "You did what?"

There's no normal way to start this conversation. "I'm gonna go smoke. You should come out when you're dry."

Like he just noticed them for the first time, he looks down at his soaked clothes, then back at me. I want to help him strip, to lick water off every inch of him while he grips my hair so hard it hurts. I'm trying to control myself, but his kiss ripped the lid off a tightly sealed box in my brain that's chock-full of Dallas porn. Every part of him I could touch with every part of me, what would make him beg the hardest, how many times I could make him come in a row.

Squeezing his hand, I take a step back so I can cool off. Things are gonna get weird tonight, and I don't want to make it even more confusing. "See you in a sec."

When I get to the kitchen, Roman and Scout are playing cards at the table with an open box of cold pizza next to them. “Where the hell did you get this?” I reach around the lid and grab the last slice—pepperoni and sausage. It’s the thick kind with plenty of cheese and little crunchy bits on the bottom of the crust.

“Dallas brought it home,” Scout muses, studying his cards. “He stayed late to help his boss do inventory, and the man bought pizza *and* let him keep the leftovers.

“That’s the best fucking job ever,” I say with my mouth full, savoring the explosion of salt and grease. Roman grunts in agreement as he picks up the box and dumps the extra bits of sausage straight into his mouth. The only pizza we can ever afford, if we splurge, is as thick as a piece of paper and comes with about five pepperonis.

“Want me to deal you in?” Scout asks. “Dallas too, if he hurries up.”

I shake my head. “It’s nice out. Dal and I were gonna stargaze a little.”

Scout shrugs me off, but Roman tilts his head and studies me with a searching look that makes me pretty sure Dallas told him something. Whatever he sees in my face, he grins and signs *good luck*. I punch his shoulder, then take my pizza outside to sit on the hood of the Civic, which is still a little warm from Dallas’ drive home. The flick of my lighter sounds loud in the hushed quiet as I light up my once-a-week cigarette and alternate pulls with finishing my pizza.

My head shoots up when I hear the back door shut. Dallas picks his way over in his floppy sandals, with a towel wrapped around his hair. My dick perks up when I realize he’s wearing my black NASCAR hoodie over a pair of skimpy shorts. The suspension squeaks as he hops his butt up next to mine.

Silences between us have never been awkward, but this one feels unsure. Everything we relied on is shifting and changing, and neither of us knows how to navigate in the direction we want to go. Dallas holds out his hand abruptly for

my cigarette. When I give it to him, he studies it on all sides like he's never seen one before, then tries to take a pull.

“Oh *fuck* that's vile.” He flaps his hands in distress, and I have to snag the cig back to stop him from setting himself on fire. Trying to hold in the coughing, he buries his face in his sleeve. “Why do you do that?”

I shrug. “Habit, I guess. It seems like I have a lot of bad habits.” I study the half-finished cigarette, then put it out and flick it into the gravel.

His hand finds my back and rubs gently up and down my spine. “We should never have dropped you off at the curb and told you to change your whole life around by yourself. From now on, we'll figure things out together.”

I don't say anything, just lean back on my hands and rest my cheek against his shoulder. “So what was this idea you had?” he asks, kissing my hair.

Oh, boy. I squint out at the dark fields. “I...” Taking a deep breath, I try again. “I read about a game.”

“Huh?”

I sit up so I can see his face. “Scout and Roman play bondage games, right, to help Rome get out of his head? But this isn't like that at all. I pulled up a website Scout told me about and I saw it.” I'm flubbing this, hard. With every word, I realize how much I want this thing, this crazy insane thing, and it scares me because I'm going to have a hard time getting it out of my head when he says *no*.

“Babe.” He turns toward me, folding his leg up, and studies me like he's worried that I'm having a breakdown. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“You run,” I blurt desperately. “And I chase you.”

It feels like the whole world goes quiet—us, the bugs and birds, the hum of cars, Scout and Roman's voices through the window.

“That's a real thing?” he asks, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “Like a sex kink? You run me down and fuck me in

the dirt?”

I just nod, trying to gauge his expression and not finding anything. “I thought it might take the focus off the getting naked part, and help you not overthink. And I need to run and be wild. That’s who I am. If I’m leaving the gang, I need some way to let it out.” My pointless explanation dies, because he’s not moving or speaking. “I’m sorry, Dal.” I drop my forehead against his shoulder again. “Damn it. You’re scared of getting assaulted and I just pulled out this fucking load of bullshit.”

His fingers start stroking my back again, and I can feel him take a deep breath. “There was this winter, I think I was nine, and it snowed like two feet in one night.” A smile warms his hesitant voice. “My mommy was this petite lady with her hair always done and perfect clothes, but she bought this massive, state-of-the-art snowblower because ‘it looks like a lot more fun and a lot less complaining than having a husband to shovel the driveway’.” I snort, and he chuckles quietly. “Anyway, she took it out when it snowed to help the old lady next door clear her car. I wanted to watch cartoons, so I turned on the TV. It was showing some scary movie; I never did figure out which one. Something I shouldn’t have been watching. So of course, I was riveted.”

The nostalgia in his voice fades into something more awkward, like he’s scared of what I’m going to think. “There was this guy getting kidnapped or something. He was tied up, but he got loose and went running out into the forest. The kidnapers, these big, strong guys, chased him down and stalked him like a wounded animal until he was cornered. They pinned him down and tied him up again while he fought as hard as he could.”

I fidget, trying to adjust myself without being obvious. It feels wrong to get aroused right now, but I can’t help it when I’m trapped between the velvet softness of his skin and the words of that story.

“Mom came home,” he continues, “so I turned it off before she could see. But that night I kept thinking about it, and it gave me this weird, good feeling. When I rubbed myself down there, it felt even better. That’s how I started jerking off to

getting chased and captured, a full year before my mom even told me what sex was. And I never stopped. So I don't know how kinks work exactly, but that one is deep inside me."

When I lift my head, he's the one looking ashamed. "Deep inside you, huh?" I murmur. "Nice."

He snorts and almost shoves me off the car. "Fuck off."

"Does that mean you'd be into it?" I sound so incredulous, as if I'm not the one who came up with the idea in the first place. "I'd read up on everything, make sure we did it right. And we'd talk about how to make it good and safe for you."

He covers his cheeks with his hands, like he's trying to hide his excitement from me. "I will never in a billion years be able to guess what shit you're going to come up with next. But I love that about you."

"I'll remind you of that next time I wanna build a flamethrower skateboard."

"Oh damn," he murmurs with a mocking little grin. "You already found the one thing in the world that would make me break up with you."

He squawks when I grab him and dump him easily on his back on the graffitied hood, pinning him under my body weight. The towel falls off his hair, letting the damp strands tumble free as he rests his head against the *U* of *CUNT*.

"It's cute that you think you could leave after you just gave me permission to hunt you," I murmur, brushing my thumb through the hollow of his throat as he goes still underneath me. I can't feel his erection through his jeans like other guys, but I can sense it in every other part of his body—a hitch in his breathing, the heat of his cheeks, and the needy squirm of his hips, like he wants something to rub against. It's fucking killing me that I can't make him come right here on the hood of the car, as he whimpers into his elbow to stop Scout and Roman from hearing.

"Beck?" he breathes, sliding his hands under my shirt just far enough to rest against my bare skin. "There's one other thing. I felt how big you were last night, and I've only taken a

toy half that size before. I don't think tearing my virgin ass open is part of the game."

Now I'm the one that shivers. I suspected he was a virgin if he'd never been kissed, but to hear the word out of his mouth makes me feel feral. He's mine and only mine, exactly like it should be. "Your ass will survive, I promise." I stick out my pinkie, and he melts into a sheepish smile as he hooks it with his.

"But, um..." Something innocent creeps into his voice. "Do you know how to make it not hurt?"

I'm not a patient person. I fuck fast and messy without foreplay and I like guys who can take it. But right now, I want to push inside him so slow in the moonlight and show him how good I can make it. I want to stay inside him forever, warming my cock in his body and my face in his neck while he holds me and talks to me, until all the fight in me goes quiet. "Yeah," I whisper, kissing his earlobe. "I know how."

DALLAS

CRASH. The slippery white mannequin slithers out of my hands and falls, sending arms and legs rolling in every direction. I close my eyes and try to center myself with a deep breath. It doesn't particularly work.

Richard sticks his head out of the back room. He's been listening to me fumble around and chase plastic body parts across the floor for twenty minutes. "Doing okay out here, Dallas? Need some help?"

"I'm fine," I chirp with a tight smile, digging my fingernails into my palms and hoping he won't notice the sweat glistening on my forehead.

"You haven't taken lunch yet, have you? Go get a drink at the gas station and cool off." He waves away my protests. "Go on. Sally will still be here when you get back."

"You're a bitch, Sally," I mutter, shoving her body into the corner and fishing her head out from under a rack of coats. Richard is watching, so I turn toward the convenience store down the block even though I can't afford to waste money on a drink. Fat brown grasshoppers scatter from under my feet as I trudge through the relentless heat. Shaving my head would probably cool me off by five or ten degrees, but I think Beck would die of grief.

It only takes me a couple of minutes to use the restroom and gulp down lukewarm water from the nearby drinking fountain. I wet my palm and wipe the back of my neck, then sit on the sidewalk with my back against a shady wall so I can deal with the text that came in an hour ago. Ever since I read those nine words, I've been fumbling around and messing up basic tasks like a fool. Part of me hopes I hallucinated it and it won't be there.

No such luck. One message from *The Pain In Your Ass*, the contact name Beck gave himself a year ago. Now it feels like a

double entendre.

Scout and Roman are going to bed early tonight.

I shiver, even though the air is sweltering. My fingers feel clumsy as I pick out a hesitating response. *We only talked about this three days ago. Is it too soon?*

It takes him ages to answer as I bounce my leg nervously and pick pebbles out of the crack in the concrete. I jump when my phone buzzes. *What are you waiting for, baby?*

Closing my eyes, I rest my head back against the rough brick wall. I'm waiting to feel ready, I guess. And I'm feeling less ready every day. What if our idea backfires? What if the sex sucks? What if he sees my body and changes his mind? This whole thing was supposed to clear my head of hangups, but inventing bigger and better hangups is my ultimate skill in life.

The phone starts playing the brassy opening notes of my ringtone—"High High Hopes" by Panic! At The Disco. I snatch it up. "Can't talk. I have to be back at work in like ninety seconds."

Beck ignores me. "You know what a safe word is, right?"

"Yeah..." My already queasy stomach clenches. This feels so real I can't breathe. You don't need a safeword when you're fantasizing alone at night.

"Pick one," he orders.

As I scramble to my feet and start making the return trip, I can't tell if I'm lightheaded from this conversation or from the heat rippling off the asphalt. "I need to go."

"Then pick one while you walk."

I've never tested who's more stubborn, Beck or myself, because the heat death of the universe would come before either of us gave in. But today I'm too flustered and off-kilter to put up a fight. "Papaya," I blurt, grabbing the first word in my head.

I can *hear* the snarky look on his face. "Um, okay."

“Don’t be a dick,” I snap. “Have you ever eaten papaya?”

“Dude, what do you think?”

“And neither have I. Safewords are supposed to be things you’d never talk about otherwise, so it’s a flawless choice.”

His hoarse chuckle fills my ear. “Whatever floats your boat, Dal.”

“Fine, so what was the point of that?”

He hesitates for a second, and I catch a hint of the same nerves boiling in my chest. “I think we should do it tonight. No more freaking ourselves out. But if you really, truly can’t, just text me *papaya*. Deal?”

No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to answer him directly. “I’m at the shop. I’ll talk to you later. I—” Pausing with my hand on the door, I consider the words waiting on the tip of my tongue. Society tells us to save them for a dramatic, rainy night when the star-struck couple fixes all their problems and runs into each other’s arms. It comes at the end of every romantic story, not the beginning. But fuck it. It’s been true for two years, regardless of what label we put on ourselves. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” he rumbles happily.

Once I manage to get Sally in her fucking clothes, I spend the afternoon ringing up customers, making inventory sheets, and tidying displays while turning over the shape of the word *papaya* on my tongue. I even type it into my phone. But I don’t send it, and as the sun sinks into twilight outside the shop and I help Richard lock up, arousal claims my body until my boxers are shamefully wet and I can’t bring myself to meet my boss’s eyes.

When I drive home, Scout and Rome are already in their room with the sound of an action movie blasting through the wall. Beck’s door is shut, so I rap on the stained wood. I’m the only person in this house who knocks. My mom taught me perfect manners, and her voice in my head is the only part of her I haven’t lost yet.

He grunts, so I push the door open and duck inside, closing it behind me. Beck is sprawled shirtless on the bed, watching sneaker review videos on his phone. “Hey.”

I can’t take my eyes off the swell and dip of his muscles under the intricate artistry of his tattoos. Following my stare, he smirks and stretches his arms over his head. “C’mere. I don’t bite.”

I perch my ass on the edge of the bed. “What if I want you to?” That was meant to be a joke, but it sure doesn’t sound like one.

Beck’s lips curl in a dangerous grin. “Then watch out.”

His thick pecs rise and fall as he breathes, and his abs flow into the mouth-watering V that points down into his gym shorts like an arrow. I don’t realize how long I’ve been ogling him until he speaks again. “You can touch if you want. It’s all yours.”

I glance up at him, my mouth going dry, then tentatively brush my fingers across his tight, inked skin. When I trace the waistline of his shorts, crossing his happy trail, he twitches and makes a small sound in his throat. The soft fabric has no hope of hiding his half-erection.

It’s been an overwhelming day, and I think it’s about to get even stranger. I curl up and rest my head on his chest, savoring the thump of his heart against my ear. “How are you feeling?” he asks, lacing his fingers in my hair. “Do you want papaya for dinner?”

I shake my head. “It’s too late. I’m so horny I can barely move.”

His low hum goes straight through his body into my ear, and his grip in my hair tightens a little. “So first of all, I always wrap up my dick, and I’ve been getting PrEP from the local community clinic. So can I fuck my cum into you or no?”

I close my eyes and groan as my cock throbs. “God. You’re welcome to try, if you can catch me.”

He just laughs, low and easy. “So tell me about this wet dream of yours. I want details.”

Even now, I feel sheepish and flustered as I do my best to describe the dark figure who calls me “little rabbit”, who stalks me until I’m gasping and desperate on the ground. Beck listens in silence, playing with the collar of my shirt. When I look down, I realize his erection has thickened until it’s straining his shorts. I’m so hard that I have to fight not to touch myself.

When we’ve exhausted every other topic, Beck props himself on his elbows so he can meet my eyes. From the look on his face, I already know what he’s going to say. “I get that it’s hard, Dal, but I need you to tell me about what you have going on down there, so I can do this right. I don’t give a fuck what it is or isn’t, but I have to know.”

It doesn’t matter what I do or who I date—if I want to have sex, this part will always come. At least I’m safe here, snuggled against my best friend with the smell of his summery deodorant in the sheets. “I have a dick, but it’s small. Maybe an inch and a half? Then there’s my ass, and a hole in between. I don’t want to use it. I don’t want to touch it. I don’t want to know it’s there. I’m sorry—tons of trans guys use it, and it’s a lot easier to come that way, but I just can’t.”

“Dal.” He strokes my hair back from my forehead. “I don’t care. You can use any part of your body any fucking way you want. It’s your body.”

“But it makes things complicated. Putting a dildo in my ass felt good, but I can’t come just from that. And I can’t jack my cock like a cis guy, so I…” I grimace and look away. “I can’t come without a vibrator.”

His thumb presses against my jaw, turning my face back to his. Something wild is prowling just behind his green eyes. “That’s hot, pretty boy,” he murmurs, his smile widening. “You’re gonna wish you didn’t give me that power.” He slaps my ass lightly. “Go grab it.”

An arousing kind of shame trickles down my spine as I creep through the house past my friends’ room, untape it from

the drawer, and tiptoe back with it hidden up my sleeve. Beck watches curiously as I hold it out. He's probably never seen one before. It's about seven inches long and an inch in diameter, made of blue plastic with a battery compartment and a twist knob. This piece of junk has taken good care of me the past two years.

"Here." Beck holds out his hand and crooks his fingers.

"If you're not sure how it works," I babble nonsensically, "ask away." The sight of his big, rough hands turning the flimsy thing over and over makes my cock ache even more. He twists the knob, and it hums and buzzes against the pad of his thumb as his eyes flick up to mine. My heart speeds up, like the prey I'm about to become. I can feel myself helplessly leaking precum, because I'm the fucked-up rabbit that wants to be caught.

"No questions," he says with a small grin that promises so much. Then he turns it off and slides it casually in his pocket, like it belongs to him now. And with that simple gesture, I'm pretty sure the game has begun.

DALLAS

I CRACK the door so we can hear when Scout and Rome's movie finishes. While we wait, we lie on Beck's bed with our fingers laced together, talking about any details we might have forgotten. The realization that we almost took off into the forest without any lube spirals me into a panic, but Beck gets up and digs around the house until he finds a travel bottle in Scout's bathroom drawer. Once everything's settled, we speculate about whether Theo and Calvin have settled into the camper. Beck says they probably found all the spare homemade bondage gear and fled, convinced we're a bunch of serial killers.

After a while, Beck falls silent. He squeezes my hand tighter, rests his stubby cheek against it, and stares into space with lidded eyes that don't hint at what's going on in his head. The deeper the night gets outside the window, the more our bond slips into something more fundamental than words—scent, heat, instinct. I'm aware of his faster, stronger body next to me, the hint of his sweat, and the realization that he won't let me leave this night as a virgin unless I safeword.

At last the sound of explosions and yelling from Scout's room changes to dramatic end credits music, and I sit up abruptly, glancing at Beck. "Easy," he warns. "We should wait twenty minutes for them to fall asleep."

I don't know what to do with a world where I'm the antsy one and Beck tells me to be patient, so I stand up and start pacing. "I'm hungry," I lie, desperate for something to do with my hands.

"Eating right now sounds like a bad idea."

"Fuck, you're right." I prop my forehead against the paneled wall, wondering when I last changed the batteries in the vibrator, whether Beck has a plan or not. I'm going to trip and break my ankle and have my foot amputated and lose my

job and become homeless and die alone, all because I can't have sex in bed like a normal person. "I'll get changed," I fumble out before I can spiral deeper into a hole. "Can you get us some water?"

My hands feel numb as I dig through my closet, trying to figure out the dress code for losing your virginity in a pile of pine needles. After a lot of thought, I grab a tattered *Mile High City* t-shirt, paired with boxer briefs, the slightly slutty running shorts I use for yoga, and canvas sneakers I can lace up securely. My hair presents a problem, so I twist it into a bun and pull a beanie over it. All of this feels excessive and more than a little foolish, like when you realize you're the only one who dressed up for the work Halloween party.

Beck studies me up and down when I enter the kitchen, his eyes gleaming like a wolf. I know the kind version of him best, but I've glimpsed the feral, uncontrollably possessive parts, too. That's what I need tonight.

I chug a glass of water, then pick up the black aluminum flashlight he set on the table for me. It's bigger than the ones that hang on a keychain, but lighter than the full-sized monsters you could kill someone with. After testing the light, I slide it into my waistband and take a deep breath. "Well then." I have nothing else to prepare, no more distractions or delays. By the time we get back here, nothing's going to be the same.

"You get a head start, baby," Beck says hoarsely, tipping his head toward the door. I notice that he doesn't tell me how long it will be. "Don't trip and break your pretty nose any more than it already is."

"I'll break *your* nose," I mumble, clunking my water glass down in the sink. He just smiles with a promise that sends a chill down my spine.

When I step past him and grab the handle on the screen door, he catches my arm firmly and pulls me to a stop. "Hey." I gasp with a small, needy sound when he leans in and kisses me hard. "I love you so much," he murmurs, his forehead against mine. "Promise me you'll say the safe word if you're not okay."

“I will.” I brush my thumb along his stubbled cheek, feeling him lean into my touch. “You too. I’m not the only person who can use it.”

Instead of saying goodbye, I just catch his hand in mine and kiss his scarred knuckles. Then I’m outside, with gravel crunching under my sneakers and my lungs full of crisp night air. It makes sense to head for the river, toward Theo and Calvin’s old camp. I know the area better, and the sound of the river will mask my movements. It’s a safe, obvious plan. But that’s not good enough—tonight, I want Beck to fucking work for his orgasm, harder than he’s ever worked in his life.

Switching on the flashlight, I turn away from the river and glance back at the house. Beck’s silhouette has disappeared from the kitchen window. He could be anywhere, doing anything. The first prickle of fear trails down my spine and seeps into my body like a drug, until my skin is on fire.

Asphalt slaps against my feet as I run across the empty road. It feels like the only sound in the world, until I hop the irrigation ditch and strike out between two fields of sugar beets. The night creeps in to surround me, just like my dream: crickets, the hoot of an owl, my panting breaths.

It’s too exposed out here; I need cover. Remembering a grove of mature oak and maple trees about half a mile away, I take off in their general direction at a steady jog. I’m not exactly fit, so I have to stop every few hundred yards to catch my breath and listen for Beck. Absolutely nothing. In some ways, that scares me more than the sound of pursuit. *He’s coming, right? This isn’t some kind of elaborate prank?*

Wiping my face off on my t-shirt, I start running again. The longer I watch the flashlight beam bobbing around, announcing my location, the more I wonder if it was a trick. When I switch it off, the darkness rushes in so fast that the world becomes nothing but black cut through with even blacker shapes. I’ll break my neck if I run like this. Shivering at the feeling of eyes on my back, I switch the light on again and try to cover up the hot glass with my fingers to cut the brightness.

By the time I stagger up to the first huge oak tree and rest my hand on the rough bark, I'm genuinely freaking out. Beck could be anywhere—in front of me, behind me, back in the house jacking off to the thought of me scared and alone out here.

I switch off the light, then lean back against the trunk to think. Soft bark scrapes along my bare, sweaty skin as I shiver and gasp. My legs ache with the knowledge that I can't stop, no matter how tired I get. It's only a matter of time until they give out, leaving me to be caught and played with and fucked.

Biting back a whimper, I slide one hand down the front of my shorts and tease my cock through my underwear. It's already erect and so fucking sensitive. Even though I need to run, I can't stop myself from spreading my thighs and rubbing it harder, arching my back against the tree. If the man hunting me saw this, I'd be in so much trouble.

A twig snaps heavily in the trees. I yank my hand out of my shorts and crouch down. My mouth goes dry when the sound solidifies into steady footsteps that sound like they're coming from every direction at once. What if it's not Beck at all? What if a stranger comes across a defenseless, horny boy in the forest? Right now, that thought just makes me even hotter.

The sliver of new moon overhead can't filter through the trees. If I want to find a path, I'll have to use the light even though there's someone nearby. Sliding my fingers up the chilly metal, I flick the switch and swipe the beam over the forest as quickly as I can before fumbling it off again. I keep in a half crouch and head for the safest-looking gap in the trees, focusing on speed over silence. The footsteps are still out there, sporadic and disorienting, like he's playing with me.

The air around me opens up suddenly, and I find myself staring at the starry sky. I must have stumbled into a clearing. Searching for signs of movement, I look over my shoulder at the trees.

When I turn back around, Beck is standing about ten feet away from me, shirtless and oh so patient with his hands in his

pockets. He's not even breathing hard. He smiles, teeth flashing in the dark. "Hey, little rabbit. You sound tired."

My heart climbs up into my throat. Earlier, I wondered if this game would even work when the hunter is my best friend and safe space. Right now, I barely recognize him. He's all danger, and every neuron in my prey brain screams at me to run. Before it's too late.

I glance around the clearing. To my left, I can make out a snarl of tree limbs, fallen trunks, and tall grass that might be able to hide me, if I can get there fast enough. Just like I learned from movies, I look in the opposite direction I'm going to run before throwing my body toward the nearest log.

Beck catches me so fast it's like he's reading my thoughts before I even have them. He crashes into me and shoves me face first against a gnarled tree trunk that jabs into my ribs and leaves me winded. An arm across my shoulder blades pins me in place as his breath tickles the back of my neck. I always knew Beck was strong, but I had no idea how much he holds back. It's the overwhelming kind of power that makes you realize you're nothing, that humiliates you and turns you on at the same time.

I grab a fistful of my shorts, so he can't pull them down, and try to kick his legs out from under him. My sneaker bounces pointlessly off his shin. With a low chuckle, he shoves a knee up between my thighs like a warning. His hands are everywhere at once as he manhandles me so quickly I can't react. Instead of going for my pants, he yanks my shirt off over my head. I grab at the soft cotton with a yelp of panic, but he tosses it away as the breeze wraps around my bare skin. The tussle knocks my beanie off, and my bun starts to unravel.

Our skin slides together as Beck's hard body presses mine tighter against the tree. I can feel his thick erection nudging against my ass. My fingertips scrape and burn as I scabble at the bark, trying to get space so I can find my footing. Hard fingers work through my hair, tugging at the elastic band until the dark strands tumble loose around my shoulders. Beck plays with my hair all the time, but tonight I shudder as he

brushes it to the side in a possessive, taunting gesture, baring the back of my neck.

“Mmmm.” It’s a half growl, half moan as he drags his tongue up my nape. “Better.”

“Fuck you,” I groan, throwing my weight backward. It’s pointless; he’s so big. As if to punish me, he grabs my wrists and pins them against the rough bark over my head with one hand. “No.” I struggle with all my strength, but he just tightens his grip until it feels like my wrist is going to break.

I go still, my face pressed into the tree as I twitch and shiver, trying to get control of my panicking rabbit brain for just a second. His free hand slides down my spine to the back of my shorts, then dips underneath. The skin of his fingertips feels rough against the softest parts of my body as he traces my ass cheeks, then the inside of my thigh. Fighting his grip on my arms, I instinctively jerk my hips forward. But I have no idea if I’m trying to escape or rut against the tree for relief.

His knee pushes my thighs further apart, and his fingers slip free of my shorts. For a second, I think he’s going to let me go, give me another chance. I cry out when he bites the back of my neck so hard it could have drawn blood and slides his hand down the front of my underwear. I pull back, pressing harder against his erection, but he chases me down until his fingertips find my cock. Both of us freeze for a second, then he growls low in his chest and starts to explore. Without any hint of uncertainty, he plays with the tip and probes relentlessly through the extra folds of skin so he can get at the full length.

“Oh fuck,” I whimper, pressing my forehead against the tree and squeezing my eyes shut. I’m vaguely aware that he let go of my hands, but all I can do is dig my fingernails into the bark as my knees go weak. He’s taunting me, showing me that even when he gives me a chance, I’m too much of a slut to run from something that feels this good.

As he rubs slow circles around the hot, damp head, he kisses the side of my neck, then my jaw, then the corner of my mouth, enjoying how helpless he’s made me. His arm slips

around my neck and tightens, not enough to choke me but enough to make me think about it.

“You’re already wet and hard,” he says right in my ear. “Were you jacking off while you crawled through the forest?” I claw at his forearm, but he just tightens his hold. “Hey. I asked you a question.”

“Yes,” I mumble thickly against the tree as he works his thumb and forefinger up and down my length. “Fuck you. Yes.”

“What were you thinking about?” Like he can read my mind, he tightens his grip right when I start to struggle again.

I’m sliding into a haze where I lose the will to fight and my body begs for anything he wants to do. “You were fucking me,” I force out through clenched teeth.

He nips at the sore spot where his teeth marked me. “Fast or slow?”

In a burst of frustration, I slam my elbow into his ribs, but it’s like hitting a rock wall. He spins me around to face him and grabs both my wrists, pinning them against the tree. My cock presses right against the swell of his erection, and I stiffen as he grins. His forehead bumps against mine, and I don’t recognize these wild, dark eyes an inch from mine. “Fast or slow?” he repeats.

My mouth is so dry I have to swallow to make my tongue work. “F-fast.”

“Where?” he asks relentlessly.

“On my...” I close my eyes with a whimper, pressing my lips together.

Gripping my wrists hard enough to bruise, he noses up under my jaw and licks the line of my throat as he rubs the hot curve of his bulge against my cock, through thin layers of fabric. “Where, pretty boy?”

“On my face in the dirt,” I whisper.

“That’s right. Like a good little rabbit.” I stare at him, frozen, as he frees my wrists and presses two fingers to my

lips. “This is how bad you want it,” he murmurs. When I try to twist my face away, he catches my chin firmly. “Come on.”

Breathing hard through my nose, I let his big fingers into my mouth, slick with the sharp, musky taste of my own precum. As a trans man, I’ve lived a life of dissociation from every aspect of my body. The intimacy of tasting myself for the first time is like an electric shock.

I bite him hard enough to earn a genuine yelp of pain as he pulls back in surprise. My instincts scream at me to kick him straight in the nuts, but I’m not that cruel. I jam the heel of my sneaker into his stomach instead. For a chaotic second, I gain the upper hand. I tear away as fast as I possibly can, even though I can’t see a damn thing beyond vague shapes.

A sharp, animal howl sounds behind me. Less than twenty seconds after I taste freedom, Beck takes me down in a full-on tackle. He twists in the air so that his shoulder hits the ground first, taking the weight of our bodies. The collision breaks his hold around my waist for a second, but as I scramble away his hand snags my ankle and jerks me backward.

With a scream of raw frustration, I thrash and kick at his dark shape as he yanks my shorts and underwear down in one go. I hear something tear, and then I’m completely naked on the rough ground except for my shoes. He flips me over easily and pushes my face into the dirt with my ass in the air and my knees spread. Night air stirs against my exposed cock and hole, but there’s no way to cover myself with his body weight pinning me down.

“I’m gonna rut you into the ground, rabbit,” he murmurs. The man still sounds relaxed, like he’s barely trying. “But you can choose—take it dry, with nothing on your dick, or earn something better.

“What do you want?” I snarl into the rocks pressing against my cheek. “What do I have to do?” My arousal is burning so hot I can’t distinguish it from fury. I don’t know which is worse—the knowledge that I can’t fight unless he lets me, or the realization that my body no longer wants to fight.

His fingers curl tight in my hair, and I hear the sound of his shorts being unzipped. “Turn around.”

“Fuck no.” I dig my fingernails into his wrist, but he just tightens his grip on my hair and drags me upright. Even drowning in adrenaline, I can feel Beck carefully walking the line of causing enough pain to satisfy both of us without actually hurting me. And nothing in the world could make him cross that line.

I turn around to see his shorts open, with his thick cockhead just showing over the waistband of his boxers. “Wait,” I protest, twisting out of his grip. “Let go. I’ll do it myself.”

His eyes take apart every detail of my naked body. “Good.”

My hands feel bruised and shaky as I reach out and hook my fingers in his boxers. I pull them down and his cock springs free, hard and intimidating, with precum glistening on the head. The first cock I’ve ever seen in real life. “I don’t know how,” I whisper, caught halfway between the game and reality. If I slip out of the headspace now, I don’t think I’ll be able to get it back.

“Look at me,” he orders, sharply enough to jerk my gaze to his. “Do it like you lick your ice cream cones—slow and sweet, all the way around. Show me how bad you want to be fucked.”

Face burning, I drop down on my knees and elbows and press my mouth to the tip of his cock. Parting my lips to let it in, I drag my tongue across the slick.

A shocked, vulnerable sound bursts out of him, not a predator but just a boy who felt the person he loves lick his cock for the first time. It startles me so much that I tense up with his head in my mouth, leaking on my tongue.

After a moment, he recovers and slaps my flank lightly. “Come on. I have hours to make you do this, if you don’t try.” A warning hand cups the back of my neck to keep me from pulling off.

I only have an inch, but it already feels utterly, impossibly huge. Whimpering around him, I tug back against his hand just so I can have the security of feeling him tighten his hold. It's too thick now for me to lick; all I can do is stretch my jaw and try not to bite it.

"You're alright," he growls softly. "Suck it."

I obey as best I can, utterly stripped down and subdued, and he strokes his fingers down my spine. When he slips into my crack and touches my hole, I jolt deeper onto his cock with a groan. My whole body starts to warm up and soften, all my fight turning into a pathetic need to come. I haven't orgasmed since before Beck almost got shot, something my very active libido does not appreciate.

Beck's hand leaves my ass just as his cockhead starts to prod the back of my throat, and I grunt in frustration. He laughs, sounding pleased. "You made it sound like you were gonna be a challenge, but you're not a rabbit. You're a little kitten that purrs when someone plays with you."

I'm about to pull off and ask how much of a challenge I'd be if I bit his dick in half, but suddenly his finger's back, slick with lube. He's careful but not slow, working in one knuckle, then another, circling and stretching. My cock aches as I swallow around his erection and try to bob my head, like they do in porn. The pressure in my ass tightens as I start to feel lightheaded. It hurts a little as he scissors two fingers, but that's exactly how it should be—the wolf subdued its prey, and now I trade my pain for his pleasure.

Just when I start to feel delirious, he pulls his fingers out and slides me off his cock. It juts out obscenely, hard and wet, with strings of my drool trailing from it.

All he says is one word. "Run."

DALLAS

I BLINK at him dazedly through the tangled strands of my hair. I'm tottering on my hands and knees like a newborn calf, my mouth smeared with spit and my sore ass open. "W-what?"

"Run for me." He slides his cock back into his shorts and shifts onto his haunches, waiting, his eyes bright.

I'm so far gone that I want to kneel and beg him to keep finger-fucking me while I suck him off. But I'm the rabbit, and I'm not allowed to give up until his cock is inside me. My thighs feel wet and shaky as I stumble to my feet. I'm furious at him for turning me into this, but the anger just makes me hotter.

On impulse, I kick a shower of dirt at him so that he throws up an arm and turns his face away. In that moment, I dart into the darkest part of the trees. My limbs aren't working right as I blunder through rough, scratchy bushes, shielding my dick with one hand. I can't breathe or think.

He's playing with me, following at a distance and listening to me crash around in a panic. My mouth on his cock didn't break him the way he broke me. Sucking in breaths that sound more like sobs, I stumble to a stop at the edge of the trees. If I could get back to the house before he caught me, I'd win. But I have no idea what direction I'm facing anymore, and I can't see the glow of lights anywhere. A branch cracks right behind me, and I bolt forward.

My foot catches on a root, and I slam jarringly onto my hands and knees. Because I *won't* be outdone, I start to crawl.

Beck is right here; I can sense him keeping pace with me as I fumble and feel my way along the ground. "You look really good like this," he comments. I swipe my arm in the direction of his voice, trying to trip him, but all I find is empty air. Utterly overwhelmed and exhausted, I stop and just wait on all fours with my head hanging.

A knee nudges me in the ribs. “Did you earn your reward?”

“I– I don’t know,” I stammer, shivering. “You win.”

“Ask for it, rabbit.”

I’m too worn out to talk, so I sink into the delicious heat of shame and just spread my knees, offering up my ass. He makes me stay that way in silence for a long time. Beck is so good at this game that I’m a little afraid of him. I jump when a hand comes to rest on my lower back, followed by the rustle and zip of his shorts. His heavy body presses close to mine as his fingers slip right back into my loosened hole. I don’t have a prostate, but the relentless flex of his fingers invading and spreading me makes my cock ache wretchedly.

Something cold and hard nestles against the base of my dick. Before I can identify the sensation, a deep, familiar vibration hits the perfect spot at the exact same time he pumps his fingers deeper.

After days of being constantly turned on and left wanting, after a night of desperation and fantasy that has broken me down into nothing but want, I come instantly with a choked scream. I’ve never felt anything like it, all my muscles shuddering and tightening as I claw at the dirt and try to thrash away from the vibrator torturing my overstimulated dick. Beck digs his powerful grip into my thigh and holds me still until I’m limp and twitching with soft, pleading whines.

The night feels so much quieter when he switches it off, just the sound of two boys gasping. Still sprawled on my face with my ass in the air, I reach back and squeeze his knee. “But why didn’t you–” I break off with a gasp, my body going rigid as he spreads his fingers roughly in my ass, shoving me back to that sharp edge where he hurts me and I like it.

“You can be a selfish little thing,” he says calmly. I can hear the quick slap of him jerking himself with his free hand. “You think I ran all over creation just so you could get off?” When I don’t answer, he stops stroking himself and squeezes my hip warningly. “Is that what you thought, rabbit? That if you came fast, we’d be done?”

“No,” I breathe into my arm, my voice weak. “I’m sorry.” My body usually takes a long time to reset after an orgasm, but his hard voice and rough hands are already turning me on again. He won’t let me come a second time, though, because I had no self control and now my punishment is letting him use me to get off.

He lets go of me, knowing I’m too ruined to sit up, let alone run. I listen to the slick of lube, the way his breathing starts to go ragged. “Please fuck me,” I beg in a pathetic voice, spreading my legs obediently as something firm presses at my hole.

One of his hands slides down and grips my hair, pulling my head back just enough to make me feel used. “Be quiet.”

He prepped me well, but it fucking *hurts* so much when he pushes in that I can’t keep my mouth shut. Stopping halfway, he rocks his hips slowly with a low groan. His free hand searches underneath my shivering body until he finds my cock again. He presses one lube-wet finger on either side of it and strokes slowly, firmly, until he feels me ease up.

When he’s worked deep enough for me to feel the press of his balls against my body, he wraps both hands tight around my hips. “You lose,” he grates out quietly. “So be good and take it.”

He pulls out all the way, until I can feel the breeze tickling between my legs. The whole world holds its breath for a moment. Then the predator that ran me down until I couldn’t even crawl fulfills his promise—he fucks me into the ground. His hips slap my ass brutally fast, jolting me forward as I fumble for something, anything, to brace myself against. But there’s nothing except his bruising grip and the sound of his breath as it slowly starts to fracture, until he’s gasping out soft, moaning sobs with each stroke. Until he breaks and starts saying my name, again and again. What started as pain and degradation becomes my helpless body surrendering until I’m seconds from coming again without any stimulation on my dick, just from hearing him beg for me like that.

Folding his body over mine, he buries his face in the back of my neck and speeds up until he's blindly rutting me like an animal in heat. I can feel when he starts to come, but he doesn't stop jerking his hips, fucking his cum deeper into me until his body finally gives out.

Both of us are trembling and drenched in sweat. When he pulls out reluctantly, I gasp at the feeling of warm cum trailing down my thighs and dripping in the dirt. His body disappears from on top of me, and I'm suddenly so cold, even though the night is balmy. "Beck," I whimper, reaching out blindly for him.

"It's okay." The same terrifyingly strong grip that was pinning me down a few seconds ago picks me up and pulls me into his arms. My face falls into the crook of his neck as he squeezes me against his panting chest and combs my tangled hair back. I can feel how much he's shivering, so I wrap my legs around his hips and hug him as tightly as I can.

"I love you so much," he says at the exact same time I say, "How on earth are we going to find my clothes? I needed those."

We pull back and look at each other. Beck grins, brushing his thumb down the side of my face. "I kept track of them for you, baby. I know better than that. You might need to mend your shorts though."

"For the record," I mumble sheepishly. "I love you too."

His tired, cocky smile widens. "I know."

BECK

I'm a little bit unhinged. Everyone thinks so. What they don't know is how much I hold back to try and seem normal. Maybe it started the day my mom died, or maybe I was born this way. I need adrenaline the way I need water. If I can't find a fight, I start one, because I need to taste blood in my mouth. I don't care if it's someone else's or mine. If I can't release the pressure, my head gets even weirder.

But right now, back in Dallas' bed after our first unforgettable fuck, I'm satisfied. Finally. I'm tired, like when my mom would tuck me in and read from this little book of fairy tales that she loved. So I just rest my head on my arm and watch him sleep. I've memorized every tiny detail of his face a hundred times, but I never get bored of it.

After who knows how long, his eyes flutter open and blink slowly. They widen when he sees me staring at him. "Hi," he grunts, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Hey." I savor the way his nose scrunches up as he yawns. He always wakes up first, so I never get to catch him like this. "How are you feeling?"

He stretches, then grimaces. "Filthy. A hot shower is in order."

When he starts to push himself up, I grab his arm. "Wait. I need to say something." I've been thinking about this for hours, since I watched the sun rise through the blinds. No part of me wants to say it, but I won't be able to rest easy if I don't.

Dropping his head back against the pillow, he frowns me in confusion. "What's going on?"

"I know you said you were all in, that you love me." Worry flickers across his face, but I keep going before he can interrupt and make me lose my nerve. "The way we've been the last two years? That was me trying really hard to give you space. I held back. I couldn't stand the idea of you dating

someone, but I promised myself I'd try not to kill them. Dal, you have to understand that if you give yourself to me for real, I'm done holding back. Last night will feel like a kid's game, because at least you had a tiny chance of getting away from me. And if that doesn't scare you, it should. So I want you to take thirty seconds, right now, and decide if you want to back out. Because if we go, I'm not gonna be able to stop again."

"I—" He breaks off when I shake my head.

"I'm dead serious, Dallas."

His thoughtful eyes search mine. I expect him to start chattering nervously, but he doesn't look away or say a word. I start counting in my head. Maybe thirty seconds isn't enough time for a choice like this, but it's longer than it took me to fall in love with him. And it's the limit of how long I can hold myself together.

When I get to *twenty*, he grabs the edge of the blanket and drags it slowly down his body, his eyes still on mine. It slides across his belly, then his hips, then off his legs so he's stretched out completely naked. For the first time, there's nothing hiding him from me—not clothes, or darkness, or games.

His ass and hips are curvier than mine, and covered in the same flawless, gold-brown skin as the rest of him, with curly dark hair trailing from his belly button down between his thighs. I can just see the tip of his stiff cock peeking out. Goosebumps perk up along his skin as the cool air teases it, but he doesn't move to cover himself.

Even though he's watching me, he jumps a little when I rest my hand on the stretch of tight skin just above his pubic hair. No one has ever touched him here before. I stroke my thumb down the ridge of his hip. "You have one more second," I whisper.

Everything in my head comes unglued when he silently lifts his arms to rest on the pillow above his head and spreads his thighs until I can see all the pieces of his past and present and future, the body he came from and the body he built, all at once. It makes me so fucking happy I want to cry.

He pulls in a deep breath when I climb up and straddle his hips. His gaze slides from my half-hard dick resting on his ribs up to my face, but he still doesn't say anything. I wrap one hand around both his wrists and press them deeper into the mattress above his head, so he can feel how easy it is for me to hold him down. He shivers between my thighs, his eyes going glassy. The boy fucking loves it.

We both moan when I wrap my fingers around my cock and start jerking off, my wet slit rubbing his belly. Everything's breathlessly silent except for the fast, rough slap of my hand. Dallas arches his back unconsciously, like his body's begging for my cum. It barely takes a minute before I whimper and come hard. Both of us watch as it pools in his belly button and trails down along his hipbones, his ribs rising and falling fast.

Letting go of his wrists, I plant both hands in my cum and smear it in a long, glistening streak up his chest. He stays perfectly still and good, letting me swipe cum across his pecs and up his throat. I gather it thick on my fingers and rub it into his still-hard cock until he's slick with me. Until I'm satisfied deep down that if anyone came near him, they'd smell only me and know who he belongs to.

When I snap out of it, my arms are shaking, exhausted from last night. I'm flying so high on adrenaline and instinct that I'm not sure how to come down. Panting, I lift my gaze to his face. His eyes are darker than I've ever seen them before. "Dallas, I—"

He shakes his head, and I trail off. Spreading his fingers, he reaches one hand up and presses it to the very center of my chest, where the infinite snake looped around my pecs crosses over itself. Slowly, his hand curls into a fist, like he's holding my heart in his palm. His face looks calm and open, the way it does when he's just finished meditating. "The only thing I'm scared of," he murmurs, "is just how much I love you."

We make out for a long time, slow at first, then rough and deep, then gentle again. He lets me curl up on top of him and rest my face in his shoulder, then rubs my back until my head

quiets down. “I really do need a shower, love,” he murmurs after a while, playing with my hair. “Urgently.”

But as I roll off of him, I realize there’s one more thing that needs to happen before everything’s one-hundred-percent official and the whole world is in its rightful place. I’m not willing to wait another second. “Hold on.”

“I can’t,” he complains, lifting up a strand of his tangled hair and squinting at it. “This is a life or death situation.”

Jumping to my feet, I drag on my shorts and throw my wadded-up blanket in his face. “Then hurry up.”

“Hurry up what?” He squawks in protest when I drag him across the room so I can open the door. “Everything I just said, I take it back. You were put on this earth to annoy me.”

Scout looks up from his book when I march into the living room, and Roman pauses brushing Tubbs’ haunches. Dallas has stopped fighting my hand wrapped around his. He stumbles to a stop next to me, with his red face and sex hair and my blanket clutched around his body. I’m gonna get yelled at so much later.

“Dallas and I are together,” I announce to the silent room. “Boyfriends, except not. More like we’re married. Technically not yet, but we could be. It’s the same—”

“Beck,” Dallas cuts in, his voice still hoarse from sleep. “You get three more words before I maim you and go take my shower.”

That’s easy. I lace my sweaty fingers through his. “I love him.”

“Good,” Roman says, smiling warmly at Dallas. Then he goes back to picking hair off his brush and piling it on the floor.

My oldest friend sticks out his lower lip. “Wait, you weren’t together already? I need to return your one-year anniversary present.”

“*Scout.*” Roman throws his brush across the room with terrifying precision, nailing his boyfriend in the shoulder while

Scout curls up in a laughing ball.

“That was easier than I expected,” Dallas murmurs.

“I told you so.”

He pries his fingers out of mine and pokes me in the chest.
“I’m still going to hurt you. But I’m going to do it with clean hair.”

DALLAS

“WHOSE IDEA WAS THIS?” I mutter, eyeing Beck as he circles the packed parking lot in search of an open space. It was mine, but I never claimed all my ideas were good. I got so excited about having a real boyfriend that I never stopped to consider whether going on an actual date was more fun than just watching NASCAR naked in bed and eating cookies.

“Your shirt is giving me an anxiety attack,” I add. “It has *buttons* down the front.” I thought the suit he’d buy for our wedding someday would be the only collared shirt to ever touch his body, but he pulled this one out of his ass and sprung it on me.

“Oh, I’m very fucking aware.” He cuts the engine, then slumps back in his seat and admires me. “You look hot, though.” Reaching across, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear that must have escaped from my braid. His rough fingers linger along the shell of my ear, then slide down to hook behind the top button of my pale blue shirt and tug gently. He tilts his head, eyes glinting in the twilight as he drinks me in like I’m a brand new miracle every single day. A smile curls the corner of his mouth. “My pretty boy asks for a date, he gets a date.” The grin widens. “And he doesn’t complain about it.”

Craning my neck, I peer across the lot to where dozens of classic sports cars are lined up with their hoods open. It was the most interesting free event with food that we could find. I feel weirdly fidgety and bashful tonight, and I can’t get Mom out of my head. She would have acted like I was going to prom or something, fussing with my clothes and taking a photo of Beck and I in the foyer. Her little boy’s first date is something neither of us knew I could have, not like this. At the end of the night, she’d be waiting up in her robe with two cups of tea to hear every detail of how it went.

“Hey.” I blink at Beck’s voice. He came around the car to open my door, and his puzzled stare makes me realize my eyes are all wet. I huff a breath and swipe my arm across them.

“Sorry. I’m fine.”

He steps back to let me stand up, but keeps his arms on the car so that I’m hemmed in by his body, protected from the busy crowds. “Your mom?”

I nod, then study the uncharacteristically quiet, shadowy depths of his eyes. “Yours too, huh?”

He tilts his chin up in assent. “I think she would have been okay with me being gay. And I know she would have liked you.”

“She would have said you look handsome.” He smiles hesitantly when I tug at the front of his black dress shirt. “She also would have told you your buttons are mismatched and fixed them for you.”

“Fucking hell.” He spreads his hands and glares down at himself. “Who invented these damn things?”

A sappy giggle bubbles up in my chest before I can stop it. It’s been almost a week since our night in the forest, and I’m still utterly giddy that this man who has been the center of my world for two years *belongs* to me now. Beck waits with his hands on his hips as I quickly slip open the buttons. By the time I do them all up again, his hands have shifted to my waist, and his nose is brushing through my hair. I tip my head back and let his mouth find mine. Kissing is so new that each one feels like my first. Or maybe every kiss with Beckham Alexander, for our entire lives, will feel as fiery and curious and tender as the first.

“Start with food?” I ask hopefully. Beck and Roman are made of muscle and Scout is just greedy, so I always let them eat the most. Now that we’re here, I fully plan on having two or three of the free burgers promised on the flier.

“How is that even a question?” He slides his arm around my shoulders and steers us toward the smell of charred meat. Neither of us wants trouble, especially when I’m stealth, so we

break apart as we approach the buffet tent and walk side by side. But I can feel him right there, as strong and possessive as if he were gripping my hand.

He's so busy watching me that he almost crashes into the couple in front of us in the food line and has to apologize. "Shut up," he mumbles, grinning as he watches me try not to laugh.

This show has more classics than muscle cars, so everyone is at least ten years older than us. Some of them eye Beck, whose rolled-up sleeves and open collar do nothing to hide the tattoos and scars. Gang violence has impacted most people in this area, leading to a general sense of mistrust and resentment. Yet another reason I want him out, before some misunderstanding ends in disaster.

Right when we get to the buffet table, Beck's phone rings. "Hey, Scout?" Cradling it to his ear, he grabs two blue plastic plates. A moment later, his eyebrows furrow and he hands them both to me, mouthing *sorry*. Worry stirs in my gut as I watch him step out of line and walk a few paces away, but my boyfriend and my stomach will both hate me if I leave without any food. Scooting both plates down the table, I heap them with beans and macaroni salad as quickly as I can. Once I've secured two burgers, I balance everything in my arms and search for Beck. He waves me over from the edge of the lot, and the look on his face tells me our date just got canceled.

"Are the guys okay?"

He nods, squeezing the back of my neck since no one is watching. "It's Theo and Calvin."

I couldn't get Theo in at the grocery store, but based on his sporadic updates he's been taking odd jobs for the last week while they live in the trailer. When Calvin came up one evening to visit Hobbes, he gave the impression that sleeping under a roof, even a shitty one, has made his brother a lot less grouchy. Even so, they've been weighing on the back of my mind. They can't stay in a rickety sex camper forever, but no one has any answers about where they should go next. "What happened?"

“Theo called Scout. Apparently Calvin broke his arm and got taken to an ER downtown, but he’s alone. Someone needs to go get him, and we have the car.”

“How did he break his arm and why was he by himself?” I hand Beck his plate, and he shovels in macaroni salad with a fork as we walk back to the Civic.

“I don’t know,” he mumbles indistinctly. I steal the keys out of his pocket with my free hand so I can drive while he eats, because I’m such a generous boyfriend. “I was getting third-hand information.”

It takes us twenty minutes to navigate through the tail end of rush hour to the busy hospital downtown. At the stoplights, Beck obligingly feeds me bites of fruit salad and burger. We’re so distracted that we let *Kidz Bop* play on repeat the whole way. It takes several loops around the hospital and some arguing before we find the parking garage several blocks away from the emergency entrance. “Go on,” Beck offers, throwing his empty plate behind him where it will never be seen again. “Hop out and I’ll park.”

I hesitate, searching for an excuse to go together. Beck is the person Calvin needs, not someone who has been avoiding him because I don’t know what to say. Besides, medical facilities are not happy places for trans people. I’m not even a patient, but those big sliding doors trigger my fight or flight instinct. In the end, it’s that fear which pushes me to get out of the car. The trans patient stuck in there is alone and probably a hundred times more scared than me right now.

Before I can turn away, Beck grabs the M&M cookie off my plate and holds it out. “You should take him that,” he says so earnestly I can’t gripe about how unfair it is that he gobbled up his own cookie ten minutes ago. Before I can answer, I’m left standing in the cobalt dusk with the yellow lights of the emergency room lobby spilling out over the sidewalk. “Goddamn it,” I sigh.

As I walk inside, I distract myself by wrapping the cookie in a napkin from my pocket so I look like less of a fool. The receptionist, an older man, watches me expectantly as I

approach. I realize, as I fumble for words, how much I've come to rely on Scout, Roman, and Beck to back me up in new situations. "I'm looking for..." I don't even know if Calvin is a real name. "A kid around twelve who came in with a broken arm a few hours ago?"

He nods, checking his computer, and gestures down the hall. "Third bed on the left. A nurse will help you check out."

The ER seems quiet tonight, with most of the curtains open on empty beds. I don't have to count medical bays to find the only one with a closed curtain and voices inside. "Hello?" I call uneasily, since I can't knock.

"Come in," a clipped female voice instructs. I slide the mint green fabric aside and slip through. Calvin is sitting on the bed, while a nurse in blue scrubs enters data on a rolling computer stand. She barely glances at me. "Are you here to pick her up, sir?"

My brain stutters, confused, before my heart sinks. Over her shoulder, Calvin huddles in on himself with his head hanging and his small fist clenched in his lap. His *Star Wars* t-shirt has been pushed up over one shoulder to accommodate the cast on his arm, exposing the black athletic bra underneath. I drag my eyes back to the nurse. "Sorry?"

"She's ready for discharge; she said a friend was coming to pick her up."

A slow warmth and lightheadedness creeps into the back of my mind, the faint edge of panic and a visceral sense of *it*. Dysphoria. The need to claw all your skin off. I want to do what I always have—break eye contact, mumble something awkward, and rush away. But when Calvin's teary eyes find mine over the nurse's shoulder, the deep shame in them breaks my heart.

My voice sounds much calmer and more measured than I feel. "I'm here to pick *him* up. Does he need anything else?" Shock flickers across Calvin's round face. I try to offer him a small smile, but I'm not sure it comes out.

The nurse sighs deeply, her face hardening. "*She—*"

“He.” Mom taught me never to interrupt people, but this time it comes out before I can think. “Did you introduce yourself as *he*?” I ask Calvin, just in case. He nods hesitantly, shooting a frightened glance at the nurse.

“Okay.” She slaps a sheaf of papers on the desk and levels a glare at me. “I’m very busy. Do you people think I have time to remember two thousand made up genders?”

“I think you had time to learn his pronouns, decide you didn’t like them, and choose to use different ones,” I say evenly. “So you must not be that busy.” My heart is thumping in my ears.

She blinks at me, her nostrils flaring. “I don’t know what your problem is, sir, but when you’re done enabling mental illness you can sign that form and take it to the front desk.” With that, she pushes past me and out the curtain.

“Shit.” I feel like I’m going to puke as I run my hands down my face. The worst part is knowing that if I submit a complaint about her, there’s only a small chance the hospital administration would care. Trying to slow my heart rate, I turn to the kid on the bed. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“I, uh, fell.” He hunches his shoulders and watches as I pull off my jacket. “An old lady walking by took me to the hospital.”

Every word out of his mouth sounds like a lie, but I decide to let Beck tackle that problem. When I drape the jacket around his shoulders to hide his exposed body from the world, he huddles into it gratefully. “Beck’s coming,” I offer. “We’re gonna get you home to your brother.” Except they don’t have a home, I guess. I don’t know what else to say.

His face crumples a little. “I’m really sorry the nurse yelled at you. I shouldn’t say I’m a boy when I’m not, but I just...” He stops and grasps for words he doesn’t have, that none of us really have, to explain the feeling that makes us willing to go through hell for a chance at peace. “Please, please don’t tell Beck about me,” he begs softly. “He thinks I’m cool.”

Maybe there aren't any right times or inspiring speeches in this life—just everyone doing their best to take care of each other. “Can I show you something?”

The kid cocks his head, instantly brightening up with curiosity. I can see dried tear tracks in the dirt on his cheeks, but he's a tough little guy. If I had broken my arm at his age without my mom there, I would have been sobbing.

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure we're alone, I quickly unbutton the top half of my shirt and pull it open to expose my chest. The moment feels strangely fragile—my friends have all seen my scars, but I've never displayed them to someone before.

Calvin stares uncomprehendingly for a moment before his eyes widen. “Wait, Theo and I read about this on a trans forum. Is it real?”

I huff a surprised laugh. “Yeah, it's real. I had surgery about five years ago.”

“Can I touch it?”

“Sure.”

He frees his unbroken arm from the jacket and hesitantly brushes his fingers along the faint, shiny ridges of my scars. For the first time, I'm glad they didn't heal invisibly. “Dude. It's actually really real.”

I chuckle and flick his forehead. “You goofball. Did you think I was bullshitting you?”

He pulls a silly face and shrugs, then flinches at the pull on his arm. “That's so fucking—sorry, *freaking*—cool.” Tucking the jacket back around himself, he studies me with open awe. “But you're exactly like a real guy.”

“I am a real guy,” I say, buttoning up my shirt again. “So are you, if that's what you want. We just have to put in more work than some people.”

Frowning into space, he deflates a little. “The nurse didn't think so. She was mad at me.”

“I know.” I sit on the edge of the bed and work on unwrapping the cookie. “That wasn’t your fault. It’s scary when people notice us, and I always end up hiding instead of standing up for myself.” The cookie drops crumbs on his jeans as I offer it to him. “Beck brought this for you. He said it makes bones heal extra fast.”

Calvin scoffs, rolling his eyes at me, but it doesn’t stop him from hungrily snatching the cookie. “Does Beck know that you’re... That you were—”

“That I’m transgender?”

He nods sheepishly, nibbling at the corner of the cookie like he can’t help himself, even in the middle of a serious conversation.

“Beck knows everything about me. He always has.”

“And he still wants to be your friend?”

“Of course.” I reach over and brush back his uncut mop of hair. “He’s actually my boyfriend.”

He stops eating abruptly, eyes wide with shock. “You can have a boyfriend?” After a long hesitation, he drops his voice and stares at his lap. Something tells me he’s thought about this a long time. “I want to have a girlfriend someday, but that’s not possible, right?”

Why the hell does Beck always have to be right about everything? I felt like I had nothing to offer, but here I am.

“You can have any kind of partner you want; you just have to keep looking and not settle until you find the person who loves you for everything you are.” Okay, now I just sound like a self-help book. Calvin looks a little overwhelmed as he returns to the last of his cookie.

Fortunately, footsteps approach the curtain and a certain tall blond flings it aside. The kid’s face brightens as Beck ruffles his hair. “I finally found you. There’s one grumpy fucking nurse out there.”

I jump up and grab the paperwork off the tray. “I’ll tell you later. Can you sign this and take it up to the desk?” If he hears

what happened, we'll have a crime scene on our hands.

“Hospitals cost a lot, right?” Calvin murmurs, eyeing the papers. “We can't pay for it.”

“What are they gonna do to us?” Beck comments cheerfully as he signs all the pages without reading them. “Foreclose on our couch?”

The boy giggles. “Totally.” Every time he's around Beck he squares his shoulders, tries to make his voice gruffer, and picks up on his mannerisms. Neither of them are aware of it, and it's fucking adorable.

My jacket is big enough to button all the way around Calvin with his arm still inside. Once I tug it into place, he hops off the bed and follows me toward the door while Beck heads for the front desk. When we get into the hall, he sees his nurse at her station and stops abruptly, taking a step back and flinching deeper into my coat. His eyes meet mine, pleading for us to find another way out.

“Here.” Catching the back of his neck, I steer him past the woman as her eyes burn a hole in the side of my head. Everything feels surreal as the bright, cold interior gives way to velvety-warm darkness and the sound of traffic. Some days I look at my trans body, everything it is and isn't, and I don't know what it's for. What it even means. Today, it's for walking between this kid and the things he's afraid of, his fist gripping the back of my shirt like a lifeline, and that's more than enough for me.

BECK

AFTER WE TREK BACK through the dark, echoey parking garage to where I left the Civic, Dallas buckles Calvin into the passenger seat. On his way to the back, he hooks his arms around my waist and steals a quick hug. When I rest my cheek on the top of his head, he sighs deeply and presses closer. Something happened in that ER, but I know he'll tell me when he's ready. I kiss his neck, and he glances up at me with that startled smile, like he never expects to be loved. I'm gonna fucking change that, even if it takes me fifty years.

I put my phone on Calvin's knee, so he can figure out which diner Theo's working at and start the navigation. The pledge drive on the radio is boring as hell, but I'm too deep in my head to notice. Dallas falls asleep with his head tipped sideways and his mouth open, while Calvin sits perfectly still, picking at the edge of his cast.

Finally, I glance over at him. "You gonna tell me what happened to you?"

He stiffens and lifts his head slowly, his eyes fixed on the road. I can smell guilt pouring off him. "I fell down."

"Where?"

"While Theo works at the diner, the convenience store across the parking lot lets me clean and organize stuff for a few bucks in cash." He finishes the sentence decisively, like he's answered my question, and concentrates on watching headlights rush by.

So..." I purse my lips, eyeing the back of his head. "You fell down while you were cleaning a convenience store."

"Yep."

I pull into the parking lot of the Black Bear Diner, but I don't turn the car off. Theo can wait until I'm done. "You must be really clumsy."

“I’m not!” His small body bristles with indignation. “The wire on the fence was bent; you would have fallen too.” Flopping back in his seat, he glares at his sneakers. I can’t tell if he’s more pissed at me or himself.

“I get it. I hate when they put a fence in the middle of the convenience store I’m trying to clean.”

His thin jaw tightens, and he rubs his tired eyes roughly with his good hand. “Shut up.”

“Look at me.” The poor kid bites his lip to stop it from quivering as his pale brown eyes find mine. “Do you want to keep playing games with me, little dude? I promise I’m gonna win eventually.”

After a long, tense silence, he shoves the car door open and scrambles out, rushing toward the diner. Dallas doesn’t wake up, so I get out and watch over the roof of the car as Calvin stops halfway across the parking lot and stands there with his shoulders sagging. I let him stew for a minute, then go after him. At the scuff of my shoes on concrete, he turns around. The warm light from the diner windows catches the glisten of tears on his cheeks. “I just wanted to help Theo,” he chokes out as I crouch down in front of him. “He thinks I don’t know, but sometimes he lets guys...do stuff to him for money, and it’s all my fault. I don’t want him to do that anymore.” Shivering, he coughs out another snotty sob. When I spread my arms, he falls into the hug and sniffles against my shoulder.

“Okay, take it easy.” I rub his back as he fights to get himself under control. “Deep breaths. Then tell me what you did for money.”

He pulls back a little, so he can see my face. “Promise you won’t tell Theo?”

Blowing out a slow breath, I study him. “I can’t promise that. But I can promise not to tell him tonight, and I’ll help you figure out the best way to tell him. Deal?” I spit on my palm and hold it out.

His eyes light up, and he enthusiastically hucks a ball of spit into his hand like it's the most awesome thing he's ever done. Since his right arm is broken, he has to reach across awkwardly with his left and plop our palms together.

My legs are cramping, but I focus on staying still and not interrupting the words I worked so hard to get out of him. He starts slow, hesitating after every sentence, then speeds up into a rush. "These boys come into the store every day to get beer, and they ask me how I'm doing and stuff." His face lights up with the same pride I see in Dallas' eyes when he gets treated like a man. "Today they said I could have fifty bucks if I climbed into the backyard of this house down the block."

The sickness doesn't come all at once, but slowly as he keeps talking until I feel like I'm going to hurl on the grimy asphalt.

"I just had to look and see if there were cameras, and take a picture of the lock on the back door. I heard someone coming, so I panicked and fell off the fence when I was climbing back over. The guys told me it was okay and took me to the hospital." He stops, watching me with big, wary eyes.

It doesn't start with pissing yourself on the floor in a puddle of your own blood.

It's a pile of bikes, the smell of smoke, the endless longing for someone who would be good to me. I would have done anything.

I glance over my shoulder, toward the shape of Dallas sleeping in the car. I need him, because I'm about to panic. Another part of me wants him to stay asleep, so he never hears Calvin's story. I didn't cause this, but shame lodges so deep in my throat that I can't breathe.

"It's okay," I fumble out when I realize I need to say something. There's no point in telling him not to talk to those guys again. When you've never been wanted, it's too addicting. "Let's get your brother, and we'll talk about this later."

He nods uneasily, trying to read my mind through my eyes. “Thanks for not yelling at me. Theo’s gonna yell at me.”

I chuckle humorlessly as I stand up. “I think he should yell at both of us.”

Before we can go looking, the door of the diner slams open and Theo comes running out with his apron gripped in one hand. I’ve only seen the guy once, and I forgot how thin and pale he looks. “What the hell happened? Are you alright? Why the fuck did you go to the hospital without me?” If this is pre-yelling, I’m scared to see the real deal. He grabs his brother’s shoulders, looking him up and down.

“I’m sorry,” Calvin whimpers.

Theo throws his arms around him and holds on tight, rocking slowly back and forth. “I was so scared,” he mumbles into the kid’s hair. “I love you.”

I shift my weight and look away, trying to give them space, but Theo clears his throat to get my attention. He’s half my weight, with dorky glasses, but there’s something savage about the fearless way he looks at us. The guys who don’t know when to be afraid are the ones you need to stay away from. “I’m sorry we’ve caused you trouble,” he says carefully. “I’m afraid we’ve missed the last bus. Could we impose on you for a ride back to the trailer?”

“Impose?” He talks even fancier than Dallas. I don’t have to think hard to know what my friends would say. “You guys should spend the night at our place. Get some real sleep.”

“I don’t—” Theo starts to shake his head, but Calvin bounces excitedly.

“Please, please? Their house is so cool, and we can visit Hobbes. He misses you.”

Theo pulls a skeptical face at the last part, then shrugs wearily. “I guess so. Thank you.”

Dallas wakes up as Calvin climbs in the front. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, he watches cautiously as Theo slides in next to him. “Hi.”

The man nods abruptly, not looking at anyone. He seems like a total dick, but if Calvin's telling the truth, he might be selling his body to keep the kid safe and fed. I don't know what to make of him.

I have my fingers crossed that Calvin will fill the silence, but the kiddo falls asleep in two blocks. When I check the rearview mirror, Theo is sitting too deep in the shadows for me to see his face. No one says a word until I pull up to the house and the three of us climb out. Scout and Rome left the back light on, and I can see their silhouettes through the living room window, waiting.

Theo circles the car and opens Calvin's door, shaking his unhurt shoulder impatiently. It takes a few tries to make the kid stir. "What's happening?" he whimpers, his voice slurred.

"I can't lift you, buddy." Theo's voice sounds strained, like he's past the limits of exhaustion. "You need to get up."

Calvin looks around disorientedly, struggling to understand. "Where are we? My arm hurts."

I clear my throat carefully. "Can I?" For the first time, Theo glances up and meets my eyes directly. After a long moment, he nods and steps out of the way. "Come here," I murmur, crouching down next to Calvin. He wraps all his unhurt limbs around me, and I stagger a little as I drag myself to my feet. A twelve year old is no joke, even though Calvin's small for his age and skinny after months on the run. He tightens his legs around my waist and drops his head on my shoulder as I follow Dallas and Theo to the door.

Scout and Rome are smart enough not to crowd us. Roman just gets off the couch and leads me down the hall to Dallas' room. The man is a fucking saint—he made the bed up with clean sheets, as neat as a hotel. The floor lamp he brought from his own room casts a warm glow over everything, and he even managed to find a spare blanket, two cups for water, and two fresh toothbrushes. A certain black and white kitten is curled up asleep in the middle of the bed.

"Hobbes!" Calvin squirms around to try and see, forcing me to drop him gently on the mattress before I lose my grip.

He curls up on his unhurt side and lets the purring kitten nuzzle his fingers. When I look over my shoulder, Theo's standing in the doorway, drinking everything in. Instead of relaxing, his face closes off even more and he turns away abruptly, walking down the hall. Roman and I exchange glances when the bathroom door slams.

“Okay, dude. Get your shoes off.” I untie Calvin's sneakers and chuck them on the floor. Brushing teeth seems complicated, so I just fold down the blanket. Moving carefully, in case he wants me to stop, I unbuckle his dirty shorts and pull them off, then hold the cat while he climbs into bed. Not sure what else to do, I unfasten his sling and rest his cast on top of a pillow. By the time I've pulled the blanket to his chin and tucked Hobbes next to his cheek, he's out. I'll tell Roman to grab the kitten in ten minutes so it doesn't get smushed.

I stand and watch his soft, childish face for a minute as his breathing deepens. Did I look this innocent when Alex and Pascal found me? I was even younger than him. It seems so fucking unfair. Something inside me hurts so much, something I can't touch, and I hate it.

I turn off the overhead light, but leave the lamp on in case he wakes up confused. Theo should be with him, so I head for the living room. Everyone's there except the man I'm looking for. I gesture irritably at Dallas, who puffs his cheeks out in a sigh and shrugs, gesturing toward the bathroom.

“He's a damn coward.” For the first time, I understand how Dallas feels. My emotions are all getting stuck together, and I can't touch one without yanking painfully on the others. I feel like I'm slipping out of control, and my voice gets all loud and harsh. “It's his fault Calvin's hurt. Maybe he should get over himself and take fucking care of the kid before something happens he can never come back from.”

Dallas stares at me, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It's been a long day,” Roman murmurs soothingly, his head tucked against Scout's shoulder.

“Yeah.” Running rough fingers through my hair, I stare at the floor and try to calm down. “Let’s talk in the morning.” It’s not fair to Dallas, but I just can’t tonight.

As I head for my room, hoping to fall asleep before Dal gets there, I pull out my phone and send off a message. I won’t be able to rest tonight if I don’t do something to try and keep this fucking town from devouring another kid who never did anything wrong besides wanting someone to love him.

BECK

EVERYONE WANTS to be a doctor or lawyer or engineer, but the one perk of working in a gang is that I never have to get up early. Sunrises, morning dew, peaceful silence—all that shit is overrated. The orangey-gold light spilling over the driveway just makes me mad as I huddle deeper into my hoodie. Dallas would be holding my hand and looking like a god with the sun in his hair as he chatters about how pretty the mountains are and makes me guess what bird I think is tweeting in the tree by the house. But he's happily snoring inside. I'm supposed to be sneaking out, but I couldn't resist kissing his shoulder before I went.

Alex's lifted red Ford pickup rumbles to a stop in a cloud of dust. Pascal scoots to the middle seat so I can get in. I don't want the gang to know where I live, but I've trusted these two with my life so many times I've lost count. Pascal hands me a Styrofoam cup of coffee that's already half cold from the long drive. I don't mind, because it lets me chug the caffeine as fast as humanly possible.

"You've never once in your sorry life volunteered for a morning delivery," Alex points out, turning down the classic rock radio station. I gulp the rest of my coffee, because I'm nowhere near awake enough for this conversation. Last night I jerked awake over and over from nightmares that immediately vanished when I tried to remember them. I have the desperate urge to fix, but no idea what I'm supposed to be fixing.

"I came for the snacks," I joke, "but I don't see any." We're back on the main road now, and I don't even know where we're going or what we're delivering. Just doing what I'm told, like always.

"What's on your mind, dude?" Pascal asks, eyeing me. Apparently I'm not good at faking anything.

“Um...” I rake fingers through my messy hair, then pull my hood back up. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

They exchange glances. Everyone knows Beck Alexander doesn't ask for favors. Even when I was ten, I insisted on helping out with everything we did. They had to make up fake jobs to get me to shut up.

I fidget with the door lock next to my leg, feeling more vulnerable than I have in a long time. “There's this little kid I know, and he's getting recruited in our territory. It needs to stop.”

No one says anything for a long time. I don't know what I thought would happen, but the longer the silence stretches, the more I want to punch something.

“Come on, Beck,” Alex says gently. “There are thousands of guys out there. We can't control what they do.”

I stare out at the empty road, digging my fingernails into my palm. Scout would point out that I've always been powerless. But this is the first time I've really felt it. My voice comes out weird and desperate. “Can't you ask around? His name is Calvin, and he hangs out by the Black Bear—”

“Stop.” Pascal rests his hand on my knee, but I push it away. “Get real, man. Even if we could somehow find out which guys he's talking to, none of us have any say in whether or not someone gets recruited.”

“Except you fucking did with me, didn't you?” I blurt, too loudly. The stupidity of everything feels so painfully clear I can't stand to look at it. Leaning forward, I rest my aching head in my hands. “Why the fuck did you have to do that?”

The whole truck fills with thick, confused silence. “The kid's gonna be fine,” Alex ventures, like he's trying to talk someone off a ledge. He thinks for a minute. “We could all build him a bike.”

“Alex,” Pascal warns.

“Pull over.” I pull off my seatbelt and grab the door handle.

“Beck, I—”

“Pull over, ‘Lex, before I punch you in the face.”

He bumps the truck onto the gravel shoulder, braking abruptly. I shove the door open and jump down, almost slipping and falling into the empty irrigation ditch.

“Where are you going?” Alex calls after me as I start to walk back the way we came, but I don’t turn around. I can hear Pascal calling him a string of names as the door closes and they pull away.

When I can’t hear the engine anymore, I sit down on the edge of the ditch and rest my head on my knees, trying not to hyperventilate. I have no idea how much time passes as the sun blasts my back and flies buzz around my head.

Calvin’s such a good fucking kid. He deserves the world. Dallas can be his incredible trans role model, while Scout and Rome show him what it means to rise above poverty and abuse. I’m just the boy who was stupid enough to let himself be lured in by a fucking bike, who can’t do anything but watch it happens all over again because I was never brave enough to save myself.

I fumble my phone out of my pocket and call Dallas on instinct.

“Where’d you go?” he mumbles sleepily. I can picture him splayed out on his yoga towel, fighting not to drift off again in the middle of some pose.

“Where’s Calvin?”

“Huh?” His voice gets clearer. “Are you okay?”

“Please tell me what he’s doing right now.”

He sighs, followed by clunking as he moves around. “He just got up. It looks like he and Rome are in the yard playing fetch with the dog.”

“Good,” I mumble, closing my eyes. “That’s all. I’ll walk home now.”

“What on earth is wrong with you?” he murmurs, his voice full of worry.

“I...” Forcing myself to sit up, I blink at the blue sky that emerged from the crystal clear sunrise. “I’m really fucking sad.”

He pauses a moment. “Okay. I want you to let Scout track your phone and wait for him to come pick you up. I have the world’s most romantic hug for you; if you can’t wait, I’ll give it to Scout and let him deliver it.”

I crack up in spite of myself, exactly like he knew I would. “You’re a brat.” Despite everything, I feel a little less like I’m suffocating. I have a home, and the people there love me, even if I don’t deserve it. It’s small, in the face of how fucked up this world is, but it’s real.

Scout doesn’t pressure me to talk about it. He just cranks up “Call Me Maybe”, my favorite Kidz Bop track, and does all the motions while he sings along and I stare wearily at the road. He knows that I find his obnoxiousness comforting; it’s been my anchor for over ten years.

When we hit the driveway, he turns the music off. “We managed to lure Theo into the kitchen with coffee. Dallas told me to pass on the message that if you can’t go in there without yelling at him, you should use the front door.”

“I’m not mad,” I sigh, slumping back in my seat. When I search for my anger, all I find is creeping weight in my chest that makes me want to crawl into bed and never get out. “But I need to talk to him.”

He scrunches up his face in thought. “That wasn’t covered in my instructions, so I officially wash my hands of this responsibility. Fair warning,” he adds, watching me carefully. “Both of our boyfriends think we should ask Cal and Theo to live with us, at least until they get on their feet. They’ve been hinting at it all morning.”

Just like my anger, the part of me that should care seems to be gone, buried under that crushing sadness. “What about you?”

Shrugging, he digs out a cigarette and lights it. “I adopted Roman, you adopted Dallas. Maybe it’s their turn to adopt someone. Like little birdies leaving the nest. Except no one leaves our nest because we’re too codependent to function apart. Someone should probably warn the new kids about that.” He wants me to laugh, but I just shake my head.

As we get out of the car, I pause at the corner of the house to watch Roman and Calvin play. Everyone has a clear job: Roman throws the rubber ball, Tubbs lazily watches it fly past with no attempt to give chase, and Calvin does all the legwork of finding it and bringing it back. He seems to be having the time of his life, with no clue that this isn’t how fetch is supposed to work. Maybe he’s never had a dog.

Theo lifts his head warily when I come through the door. He’s huddled in a chair against the wall, gripping a steaming mug in both hands. Based on the shadows under his eyes, he slept even less than I did last night.

Trying to act casual and get my thoughts in order, I open the fridge and study the contents. Except there aren’t any contents, because we’re poor as shit. So I just close it again and stare out the window.

“Your bathroom isn’t soundproof,” he says finally. His serious, refined voice sounds ragged but emotionless. “I heard what you said last night.”

“Dallas thinks I shouldn’t have said it.” That’s as close to an apology as he’s going to get, and based on the wry tilt of his mouth, he understands.

“I am a coward.” He sips the coffee, staring at the floor. “And it was my fault.”

“It’s not anyone’s fault, but that doesn’t mean shit.” I prop my hands on the table and wait until our eyes meet. “He’s getting recruited by a gang, and if you don’t watch him and keep him busy, you’re gonna lose him.”

When I look up, Dallas is leaning on the doorframe, listening. This wasn't how I wanted to have this conversation with him, but he doesn't look upset, just thoughtful. His bright eyes give me the only jolt of emotion I've felt since I jumped out of Alex's truck.

Theo glances between us, then sets his mug down on the table and stands up with a bitter smile. "Right. It's all so easy, isn't it? Give him some clean sheets and play with his kitten, and you're all fucking heroes."

He takes a step toward the back door, but I cross my arms instead of moving. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Just like every time, he squares his shoulders and glares up at me with reckless defiance. Part of me suspects he killed the pervert with the chair on purpose, not in an accidental panic. Some piece of the madness in me recognizes the same savagery in him, and I can't help but respect it. I just never expected to find it in such a scrawny nerd.

The sound of Calvin's loud, goofy laugh echoes through the open door. Just as suddenly as he stood up, Theo drops back into his chair and rests his face in his hands. "He only told me he was a boy six months ago," he says in a muffled voice. "Before we left home. I still don't understand what it means, or what he needs. All he does is ask questions, all day every day, and I don't have the answers to any of them." His brown eyes look dark with frustration when he lifts them to mine. "So if you think I'm lazy and weak, tell me how I'm supposed to keep him warm and fed, take care of his damn cat, steer him away from trouble, help him transition, and make sure he doesn't get raped or murdered all at the same time."

I glance guiltily at Dallas. His hopeful face makes it so obvious—he wants me to speak up and invite them to stay. It's my job to protect people, because I'm the strongest and I know the worst dangers out there. But I can't protect these two, because of mistakes I made so long ago I had no idea what I was doing. Theo needs to get Calvin out of here and go somewhere safer, somewhere far away from me and my world, before he loses that sweet kid.

“Hey,” Dallas murmurs as I walk past him out of the room without saying anything, but he doesn’t make any move to stop me.

DALLAS

“THAT’S a lot of bird’s nests.”

“Huh?” I look up from sweeping fluffy brown hair off the back step.

Calvin waves his unhurt arm vaguely toward the distant trees, sparkling green in the sun. He looks like one of those before and after pictures of sheep that hide in the hills for three years and then get shorn. It’s a hack job of a haircut, but it’s not my fault I only had kitchen scissors to work with. “Birds make nests from the hair,” he explains. “My friend from before we ran away had purple hair, so we scattered the trimmings around the yard. We looked everywhere for purple nests, but we never found any.”

“That’s pretty cool, actually.” As I slide the broom back into its place behind the door, I’m ambushed by the mental image of trekking around the yard with Calvin, hunting for nests and keeping track of each one in a notebook based on the materials we laid out. I used to love shit like that when I was his age.

The incessant banging of metal on metal drifts in from the TV in the living room. Beck hasn’t moved from the couch in two days except to go to the bathroom. He just huddles under a blanket and stares at constant reruns of his favorite show, where a bunch of sweaty dudes compete to forge knives and swords. I’ve been drifting off next to him at night, then waking up in the morning to find him still watching with the sound muted so it doesn’t disturb me.

The man isn’t doing okay, not since the broken arm incident. I know the shape of what’s hurting him, the way Calvin’s run-in with the gang reminds him of his past, but he’s holding the rest deep inside where he’s the only one who gets hurt. For the first time, I don’t think it matters what I say. He has to find the answers for himself if he’s going to truly

believe them. All I can do is be here when he needs me, distract Calvin, and try to ignore my body's increasingly frequent reminders that we haven't had sex or even made out in too long.

I bake when I'm stressed, when I'm uncertain, and when I'm horny and I can't do anything about it. So pretty much all the time. Mentally running through my small store of ingredients, I bend over and grab my trusty cookie sheet from the drawer next to the oven. The warped metal rattles as I set it on the counter. Calvin's watching me curiously from the doorway, his broken arm hugged protectively to his chest.

"I'm making cookies. Want to help?"

To my surprise he wrinkles his nose, pressing closer to the door frame. "No thanks."

I turn around with a bowl in one hand and a half empty bag of cheap flour in the other to study him. It's so incredibly obvious when he's being cagey; the kid can't lie for shit. "Why not?"

"I don't wanna be rude," he mumbles, avoiding my eyes.

Now I'm just curious. "You have my permission to be rude for the next thirty seconds. Go."

"I just..." A familiar helpless frustration flashes in his eyes, one I feel in my very core. "Baking is for girls, isn't it? My aunt used to invite all the girl cousins over to make cupcakes. She gave us these matching pink aprons with flowers..." He shudders and gags emphatically.

"Well." I gesture around the kitchen, demonstrating the lack of aprons in any color. "I'm sorry she made you feel like you weren't a boy when you were baking. I know how much that sucks. But baking can be a very manly activity."

He purses his lips, clearly unconvinced, and glances over his shoulder toward Beck's position on the couch.

"Ah." I grin at him. "You want to know why Beck isn't baking? Because he's scared of the oven and thinks recipes are witchcraft."

A startled giggle bursts out of him before he can hold it back. “Really?”

“One hundred percent. You can ask him.” Pulling a wooden spoon out of the drawer, I brandish it at him. “I also haven’t told him that you can eat the dough.”

His grin widens. “Because you want it all for yourself.”

“Don’t judge me. I’m the one who does all the work.”

Roman helps me bake sometimes, but usually I’m alone in here. When the sun comes through the window just right and the air smells of fresh cookies, this shitty little kitchen turns into my favorite place in the house. The cozy sunlight catches Calvin as he gingerly crosses the room and studies my ingredients, poking at each bag and box so he can read the label. “What kind are you making?”

“Oatmeal chocolate chip, I think.”

He looks over his shoulder again, this time with a deep wistfulness, then lowers his voice. “Does Beck like those? Could I give him one?”

My heart breaks a little. The way he and Beck always look at each other, like they’re both seeing something they’ve never had before, destroys me. “They’re his favorite.”

I thought I’d spend most of my time cleaning up after him, but Calvin is a shockingly proficient baker, even with only one arm. He lines everything up in order, asks a lot of questions I’ve never considered about how the liquids and flours work together, and drops a perfect arrangement of dough onto each baking tray. Instead of running off to play with the animals, he plops himself cross-legged on the floor with his back against the oven and waits, checking the grimy little window every thirty seconds. I feel sorry for him after a while and offer him a beat up old book of dessert recipes the guys got me for Christmas. He spends the rest of the twenty minutes poring over each page with his lip between his teeth and his leg bouncing impatiently.

As soon as the timer on my phone goes off, he scrambles to his feet and throws open the oven door. “They’re done,

right?”

“Looking good. Now we have to let them—” Before I can even set the trays down, Calvin has somehow whisked two melty cookies onto a paper towel and walked away with it balanced in his palm.

Normally I take the time to scrape the cookies up with a fork and drop them onto a plate to cool, but today I just snag one with my fingers and follow the kid, hanging back to give him space.

Beck hasn't moved for hours, still slouched down with his arms around himself, letting the TV bombard him with colors and sounds. He doesn't lift his head until Calvin stops a foot away and clears his throat. “Hey.” Straightening up, he grimaces and stretches out his back. “What do you need?” Underneath the forced friendliness, I catch the miserable hint of *please go away*. Based on Calvin's expression, he can hear it too.

The boy tilts his chin up and holds out his hand. “We made you a cookie.” The molten treat is about to disintegrate in his palm.

Beck's eyes flick to me, then back to Calvin. “Thanks.” He gingerly accepts the napkin, then stares at it like he's not sure what to do. When Calvin just waits expectantly, he pulls off a steaming corner and tastes it. “They're good. Nice work.” Never has the man sounded less enthusiastic about food. Avoiding eye contact with the kid, he sets the cookie down and turns back to the TV.

“Dallas said you're scared of baking.”

Beck glances at me again, with the ghost of a tired smile. “He's right. The directions are weird, and everything's made of powder and goop.”

After a long, uncertain pause, Calvin snatches the remote off the arm of the couch and mutes the TV. I don't think he even remembers I'm in the room as he drops to his knees on the cushion next to Beck. “I don't know what I did,” he blurts, “but I'm so sorry. It's because I hung out with those guys, isn't

it?” His voice breaks. “Please don’t hate me anymore. I’ll try to do better.”

My throat tightens. I want to hug both of them, but I stay where I am. From here, I can’t see Beck’s expression as he slowly lifts his head. His voice sounds tight and hurt. “I don’t hate you. I hate myself.”

Instead of protesting, Calvin just sits there with a thoughtful expression, looking much older than twelve. I guess he knows a thing or two about self-hatred—just like Beck, just like me.

“I want to do better,” Beck ventures finally. “There’s more out there for us than climbing fences and stealing shit. But I don’t know what it is. I usually make bad decisions.”

Calvin frowns like he’s working out the secrets of the universe. “If you tell me the options,” he ventures, “I could help pick sometimes. I had to decide I was a boy, and that was a really big choice.”

“Sure,” Beck says gently. He still sounds tired, but less like despair and more like someone facing a long path with an end they can’t see yet. “You can help me figure out something new to try together.” His eyes slide over to mine, and *fuck* he really means it. Like he never has before.

Calvin pokes him in the ribs, his eyes on the TV. “What are they doing?”

Beck flashes me a wry smile, then grabs Calvin’s head and pulls him down to lean against him. “Making knives.”

“You can *make* a knife? With a hammer?”

“You bet.” Beck grabs the remote and turns on the sound. “Check it out.” He’s probably thrilled—when he showed me an episode, all I said was *do these people not know you can just drive to the store and buy a knife?*

Neither of them moves for the rest of the afternoon. I have better things to do, but I keep baking more and more cookies so I have an excuse to stay in the kitchen and listen to them talk. Calvin curls up against Beck’s shoulder, asking a nonstop stream of muffled questions about tools, techniques, and the

properties of metal. He stumps the man within five minutes, just like he did to me in the kitchen. A kid this smart really needs to be in school, if we could figure out some kind of documentation.

When I'm pulling a batch of chai cookies out of the oven and realizing I have nowhere to put them, the floor creaks behind me. Beck stands a little stiffly in the doorway, his hair a mess, and stares at me like I'm a lifeline in a storm.

"Hey, love." I toss the cookie tray on top of a different cookie tray and hurry over to twine my fingers through his.

He angles his head toward the living room. "Kiddo fell asleep."

When I rest my palm against his cheek, he closes his eyes and leans into it. "I love you so much," I murmur. "And I'm so proud of you. You're still the best man I know."

Shaking his head, he drops his gaze to the floor between us. "I want..." He sets his jaw and tries again slowly. "I want to go to a meeting. For real."

My breath catches. "Are you sure? If that doesn't feel right for you, we'll find something else."

I break off when he slings his heavy arms around me and suffocates me against his broad chest, burying his face in my neck. "I want it," he whispers, "but I need you to come with me, please."

"I'll do anything for you." The muscles of his back twitch as I brush my fingers up and down his spine soothingly. "It's gonna be okay."

"I'm so tired, Dal."

"You're brave," I murmur in his ear. "That's what matters. Calvin's going to see you be brave, and that's what he's going to remember."

"Really?"

"I promise."

BECK

I DON'T UNDERSTAND my boyfriend. Ever since Calvin cheered me up this afternoon, Dallas has been flitting around shooting me looks that definitely have some secret message behind them. When Scout, Roman, and Theo pulled up in the Civic after work, Dal started insisting we need to take Tubbs to the big park in town. Dal doesn't even like that park. Then, by the time everyone got changed and ready to leave again, he was perched on the couch with his head in his hand, giving pathetic little coughs.

“Are you coming, Dallas?” Scout calls from the kitchen, shooting me *what the hell* face.

Dal coughs again and sort of collapses in slow motion onto the couch like he's a fainting lady in an old movie. “I think I might be getting sick. You should go without me.”

“Wasn't this his idea?” Theo murmurs, perplexed. Roman just shrugs.

“Bye then.” I wave at him, then turn to follow everyone outside.

“Uggghhh,” he groans, and starts coughing even harder. I don't think this is how coughs work. He stops hacking very abruptly and eyes me, like he's waiting to see what I'll do.

I cross my arms and lean on the door frame. “You want me to stay.”

“You don't *have* to,” he sighs mournfully, grabbing a blanket and pulling it all the way up to his nose. “I can die alone, it's fine.”

“Jesus. One second.”

I wave everyone else off and watch the car pull down the drive. Then I return to the living room and stare down at the lump in the blankets. “If you're so sick, you should quarantine in bed with no snacks or cuddles.”

He flips the top of the blanket down with a *fwump* and peers up at me, his face flushed and his hair frizzy with static. “I need care.” His cough has magically disappeared.

Crouching down, I rest the back of my hand against his forehead. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

“I do.” He raises his eyebrows, a grin tugging at his lips. “A fever only you can satisfy.”

“Quarantine it is.”

Huffing indignantly, he rolls over so his face is just an inch from mine. “I got us ninety minutes alone in this house, Beckham. Do with that what you will. And you’d better fucking do something, because you have kept. me. waiting.”

I’ve been so numb the last few days, under the crushing weight, that the rush of heat and want and love is almost too overwhelming. As it fills my brain and lights up my body, I feel the most incredible relief.

Dallas sits up and peels off his t-shirt in one quick, eager movement, exposing the planes of his body and sensitive skin that live rent free in my head all the time. He’s so desperate that he moans when I push him back against the couch and crawl on top of him. I bet he’s been imagining this for days.

We haven’t kissed this way since the forest, rough and too deep, shoving him down into the cushions. He wraps his thighs tight around my waist, arching his body, and digs his fingers into my hair.

When my lips feel sore, I pull back and put a hand over his mouth. He goes still, his pupils dilating as he watches me intently, then gasps against my palm when I kiss down his throat to the point where his clavicles come together. I can feel the vibration of his needy whimpers through his chest and against my hand at the same time as I lick a line between his pecs to his bellybutton. When I stop at the waistband of his jeans, he shudders and whines softly.

I know what I want, more than anything, but he has to want it too. I let go of his mouth and hold his stare. It takes me

two tries to get my voice to work properly. “Can I suck you off?”

He comes up on his elbows and blinks at me. “Um...” I can see the fight going on behind his eyes.

“Don’t start thinking.” I rest a hand flat against his chest. “Tell me if you *want* to get sucked off or not. That’s all I’m asking.”

“I do.” The words tumble out of his mouth so fast I know he’s telling the truth. “I really fucking do. I just don’t know how it works.”

I slide my thumb under the edge of his jeans and stroke the softer skin there, feeling it shiver as his breath catches. “Then let’s find out. Remember how hard you came in the forest?” I could feel it roll through his body in the dark, the clench and collapse of muscles as he sobbed under me. Dallas just swallows. Oh, he definitely remembers. “Think I can beat that?”

His bare chest rises and falls with a shallow, unsteady breath. “I think you should try. For science.”

The last of his nerves slips away as we grin at each other. He lifts his hips to help me tug his jeans down his thighs and off his feet, leaving him stripped naked while I’m fully clothed. I know how much trust this takes for him, every time. I worship him for it.

Kissing the inside of his thigh, I sit back and wrap my fingers around the bulge of my erection straining against my jeans. “Go get the vibrator. You’re so horny I’m surprised you weren’t using it under the blanket as they walked out the fucking door.”

When he comes stumbling back from the bathroom, I admire the hint of his cock as he moves, flushed and glistening with precum. It makes my mouth water.

He lies back on the couch, his eyes never leaving my face, and presses the vibrator to his erection. Immediately, his eyes drift half closed and his whole body shivers. Spreading his

thighs, he rubs his hips slowly into the toy with an incoherent sound.

Grinding my palm along my bulge, enjoying the frustration of making myself wait, I watch his skin flush as he gets more and more turned on. “How good does that feel, pretty boy?”

“So good,” he moans softly. “But I need you, Beck.”

“I know.” If there is a heaven, it’s the way his smooth, soft body feels against my rough skin as I run my hands all over him and kiss along his scars.

When I drag my tongue across the places where his nipples would be, he sobs “*Fuck*” and throws the vibrator somewhere across the room. “Please suck me,” he begs. “I’m dying.”

“Tell me when I find the right place,” I order, sliding down and brushing my nose through the curly hair around his dick. I like giving head, because every cock has a sweet spot and I enjoy the challenge of finding them. Taking my time, I explore the shape of him with my tongue. His precum tastes special like him, sweet and rich.

“Further up?” he murmurs. The tone of his voice reminds me that he has no idea either, that he’s never had his cock sucked because I’m his first everything. I could come in my pants just thinking about that. When I try a different position, he gives a breathless, nervous laugh. “Babe, I’m not sure you’re even close—” His whole body jerks and his thighs clamp tight around my head as I take a guess and pull his thick, hard little cock onto my tongue.

Moaning softly to the rhythm of my slow, deep sucking, he bucks his hips into my mouth. “Please, oh god Beck, fuck you. Fuck you so fucking hard.”

Trying not to laugh, I tease my tongue up and down his length until he can’t form words anymore. His erection swells and firms up even more as I play with it. Based on the noises coming out of his mouth, it’s getting more sensitive, too. I let him rut along my tongue as he gets closer to the edge, then grab his hips firmly and hold him still as I suck hard.

Dallas chokes out my name, drawing out the “e” as his whole body arches and he wraps both arms around his head. Even though cum doesn’t shoot out of his dick, I can feel the pulse and heat.

In the forest, I noticed that he curled up around his orgasm, trying to protect his sensitive cock and not lose too much control. So I grab his thighs and force his legs to stay spread as he comes hard, his sweaty body shivering and his muscles fighting my grip. I don’t stop sucking him until he’s completely limp and breathing shallowly.

As I sit back and wipe my mouth, he cracks one eye open and peers at me. “You killed me. I’m dead,” he complains hoarsely. When he tries to move, he grimaces and goes limp again. “You’ll have blue balls forever because you’re not allowed to sleep with anyone else for the rest of your life. Sorry.”

“Hm.” I prop my chin on my hand and study him intently. I have an idea, something else I’ve fantasized about, but I’m not sure how to ask for it. “So the part where you said *fuck you so hard* was a lie?”

DALLAS

My eyes jolt open, and the haze clears from my vision. Beck is kneeling between my legs, his eager green eyes waiting...for something. My mouth suddenly feels dry. “What exactly are you saying, Beckham Alexander?”

He searches my face, trying to read my mind before he answers. “What do you think I’m saying?”

“Okay, don’t get all coy with me.” I flick his chest with my foot. “I think that what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense.”

His expression collapses into a sulky frown. “Just because I top doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy taking it sometimes.”

When I try to push myself up, I realize just how shaky and sweaty I am. “That’s not the park of this equation that doesn’t make sense, and you know it. What, you want me to say it?”

Reaching out quickly, he presses two fingers against my lips. “You’re not thinking big enough.”

I narrow my eyes at him. My heart flips in my chest when he flashes that reckless, hot-as-hell grin and grabs my hand. “Come with me.”

Groaning, I swing my weak legs off the couch. Before he can walk away, I click my tongue and beckon him with one finger. “You’re about to rip out of your jeans. That looks painful.”

He exhales sharply when I kiss his belly just above the button of his jeans, then hums in his chest as I undo it and drag the zipper down to expose his green plaid boxer briefs. His muscled, scarred body is so untameable, but when I touch him he’ll do absolutely anything for me. That thought makes me feel dizzy.

His erection fills out his underwear when I help him tug his jeans off and kick them aside. I study the outline of his

cock, trying to figure out how we fit that whole thing balls deep in me the other night.

“Come on.” Wrapping fingers in my hair, he tugs me gently to my feet. He lets me get my bearings for a second, then leads me down the hall. I dig in my heels when he shoves open the door to Scout and Roman’s room and strolls inside. Their space alternates between messy and tidy, depending on whether Scout or Roman has used it most recently. Today, it’s neat as a pin. Beck whistles like a detective spotting a clue and points triumphantly at a length of rope dangling from the fastener drilled into the wall.

“I don’t think we can tease them about kinks anymore,” I remark drily. When Beck drops to his knees and sticks an arm under the bed, I groan. “Oh god, don’t do it.”

With a scraping sound, he drags out two cardboard shoe boxes, full to the brim with bits of rope, gleaming metal, and—

“Fucking score.” Beck hoists aloft a Ziploc baggie stuffed with a giant rainbow dildo and beams happily at me. “I found you a dick. You’re very well hung.”

I can’t gawk with my mouth open forever, so I grab the first excuse I can find. “What if it’s dirty?”

Cocking an eyebrow, he flips the bag around to reveal *clean* scrawled across it in Sharpie. One of the boxes has an empty bag on top that says *used*. Apparently the only time Scout gives a shit about cleanliness is when it comes to his sex toys. It must have taken him a year to save up for that thing.

“Any more complaints?” Beck asks, straightening up. I can’t take my eyes off the dildo.

“No.” My voice comes out kind of squeaky. “A lot of questions, but no complaints.”

He prowls back across the room and props one hand on the door frame, putting his mouth next to my ear. “Sometimes I don’t want to do all the work. Sometimes I like to play.” He catches me in a small, teasing, unsatisfying kiss, the kind that’s only meant to wind the other person up. “I think you wanna

see my face when you make me come like this. Tell me I'm wrong."

I press my lips together and bite down, trying not to smile. "You're so wrong."

"Am I?" He tilts his head until I'm forced to see his shit-eating grin.

"I think I'd rather go weed the driveway—" My last word turns into a yelp when he scoops me up and slings me over his shoulder on his way back to the couch. "Let me go, you fucking caveman."

He drops me unceremoniously onto the saggy cushions. I can't stop laughing, but when he strips off his shirt and boxers I shut up really fast. I've only seen him naked in confused glimpses, but now it's all right here in my face—his tight ass tattooed with the swooping curves of the dragon's body, a thick, slightly crooked cock glistening with precum, and huge, heavy balls. "Wow."

"I know," he declares proudly as he flops down next to me. "You're taking a work of art off the market. Never forget that, even when I'm too old to get it up anymore."

"Never." I brush my fingers along his cheek, then down the wide bridge of his nose. He always watches me like I'm his god and he's the zealot who's going to burn down the whole world and lay the ashes at my feet. It should probably scare me, but it's such a fucking high.

Beck waves a bottle of lube he must have found in Scout's terrifying box of fun. "Get your fingers ready, and I'll do your dick." Once he's drizzled the cold liquid along my skin, he takes the dildo out of its bag.

Watching my reaction carefully in case I object, he butts the balls end of the dildo against my pubic bone, where it might sit if I had been born with the blessing of a magnum rainbow dong. "There it is." He leans in close enough for his breath to stir against my lips as he slowly works a palm full of lube along the silicone shaft. I can't feel his touch, but an unexpected shiver of euphoria rushes over me when I look

down and see my boyfriend's big hand jerking me off like that. My heart rate kicks up until it's hard to breathe.

Plenty of trans men without bottom surgery top their partners, but I've always wondered why someone would want to fumble around with toys and trigger crushing dysphoria, all for something they can't even feel. Now I get it. It's not about me. It's about the man I love more than anything in the world watching me with bright, excited eyes, asking me to make him feel amazing.

I lean in and close the kiss between us, nipping at his lip as I feel his cock against my thigh getting harder. Beck jerks back, his face flushed. "Touch me," he groans. "Please."

His cock twitches and leaks precum as I skim my lubed fingers down the shaft, cradle his balls, then caress his taint until I find his hole. He spreads his legs for me, leaning back, and he's so hungry for my finger that it almost slips straight in. "Jesus, Beck," I moan, feeling him clench around me as I push deeper.

"You've played with your ass, right?" he pants, moving a little against my hand like he wants more. "You know how?"

"Kind of. I don't know where the spot is."

"Your dick is huge," he murmurs, nipping along the side of my neck. "You'll fucking find it."

I like to do things methodically, but he offers almost no resistance to my second finger, either. By the time I get to three, his cock is straining and dripping and he's so consumed with want that I think he'll push me down and sit on my dick if I don't hurry up. He gives his body to me just as fiercely as he does everything else, completely untamed.

Once I figure out how to hold the dildo against my body, he lies back until I'm kneeling over him. There's absolutely no self-consciousness in the way he opens his legs for me. Panic flares through me as I rest the thick head of the dildo against his hole, but even that feels like a strange kind of joy.

I must have done a good job, because the head goes in easy even though it's big. I can't feel his heat gripping me, and I

wish to god I could, but when I move I can feel the tight, squeezing drag, the way he spasms around the length. Each time I push deeper, I get to enjoy the give as he relaxes for me. Watching it stretch his hole freaks me out, so I grip the dildo in one hand and lean over him until our sweaty bodies are pressed together. His heart thumps against my chest as he tries to rock his hips deeper onto the shaft. “Fuck, Dal,” he moans, biting my shoulder. “Are you gonna make me beg?”

“Yeah.” I kiss his jaw. “Just this once.” His balls brush my fingers, which means I’m all the way inside. I didn’t even know that was possible. Holding my breath, I ease back to the tip and slide forward in my first thrust.

Beck whines, and I can feel his hard cock jutting against my abs. When I reach between us to touch it, he catches my wrist. His voice sounds all fucked up. “Make me come without touching me. I know you can, pretty boy, come on. Please. I need it.”

I feel like I’m flying. My fingernails dig into his thick shoulder as I speed up, my hips shoving the length deep. It takes a second to find the rhythm and angle without losing my grip on the base, but when I do Beck’s head falls back with a string of sounds I never would have expected from him—soft and pleading, with a frantic edge. His cock bounces against me as I hit a firm, driving pace, the fastest I can manage. When I drop my head to kiss his chest, he sinks his fingers deep into my hair and refuses to let go.

It startles me when he jolts with a gasp and spurt after spurt of hot cum hits my chest. Just like in the forest, he prays my name as he comes like it’s the first and last and only thought in his head. His legs squeeze my hips, and his grip on my hair tightens past the edge of pain. My exhausted arm gives out, and I collapse on top of him, smearing cum between our bodies.

Once I help him slide the dildo out of his ass, we lie there in a tangle of limbs for god knows how long, sticky and gasping. I try to check in with myself, because I just did two things I never thought I’d like, but all I find is empty-headed bliss and the desire to bask in the warmth of Beck’s body. So I

do. After a while, he starts running his finger slowly up and down from the back of my neck to the top of my ass, which pushes me even closer to sleep.

“I’m recharged now,” he croaks finally, brushing my hair to the side so he can see my face. “You’re gonna have to run faster than you’ve ever run in your life next time. I took it easy on you before. Maybe I won’t even let you come.” When I shiver involuntarily, he smirks dangerously.

“Guess what?” I mumble, dropping my head back on his chest and enjoying the attention of his fingers along my skin.

“What?”

“We have exactly twenty-seven minutes to figure out how to clean a dildo.”

BECK

I'VE BEEN IGNORING Alex's calls for almost a week. The thought of talking to him fills me with a bitter, dark ache that feels kind of like hate. But I have no idea who I hate or why. It's so fucking confusing. Dallas would say I'm finally grieving the loss of my childhood before I move on or some shit. All I know is that the time I spend hanging with Dal and Calvin are the only parts of each day where I don't feel completely overwhelmed.

Today, while I wait in the car for Scout to get out of work, I find three missed calls from Alex, followed by two from Pascal. My heart sinks, because this smells like some kind of gang emergency that I won't have the option to ignore. I decide to call Pascal back, since he's the person I feel less like punching.

"Finally," he gripes when he picks up. "What the hell have you been doing all week? Making friendship bracelets?"

"What do you want?"

There's a pause, followed by clunking and the sound of voices. I can tell 'Lex is there with him on speakerphone. The two of them are almost as codependent as we are. "Alex did something nice for you because he feels bad," Pascal announces bluntly. "So you two need to get over yourselves."

I roll my eyes and flop back in my seat, willing Scout to hurry up. "I'm scared to know."

Alex clears his throat, and his voice gets louder. "I found her."

So many thoughts try to cross my mind at once that by the time I let them all through one by one, I've been staring out the window in silence for at least a minute. "Don't mess with me tonight, man. I don't have time to chase random leads right now."

“I have Anjali Santra’s cell phone number literally sitting on a piece of paper in front of me.”

“That’s not possible.” I started searching for Dallas’ mom a year and a half ago, with almost no information and no idea where to start. Every time I thought I’d found her, it turned into a dead end. We were getting closer, but I figured it might take another year, if at all.

“If you don’t want it, then I won’t give it to you,” he grumbles.

For a single twisted, sick second, I almost tell him to keep it. My life is already crumbling around the edges—I don’t know if I’m strong enough for another earthquake right now. Not one that touches the center of my soul. I pinch myself, hard, to bring the world back into focus. “Send it to me. And Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“I really am sorry,” he offers. “About the kid. If I see him, I’ll make sure he gets left alone.”

Scout knocks on the window, making me jump, and I unlock the passenger door as I hang up on the guys. He buckles his seatbelt, then turns toward me and freezes. “My man. You literally look like you just saw a ghost. If that shit’s real, please tell them not to pass through me.”

I exhale slowly, trying to get my thoughts in order. Ever since the night we brought Calvin home, I can’t seem to disconnect my feelings from each other and get them back into their boxes. “You, Roman, and I need to talk.”

I spend the whole drive to Denver International Airport wondering if I did the right thing by not telling Dallas where we’re going. It feels like a betrayal, watching him live his life like normal for a whole week with no idea what’s about to happen. The nerves are eating me alive inside as I try to rehearse different ways to break the news. But if I told him in

advance, gave him time to overthink it, I'm ninety percent sure we wouldn't be here right now.

When the white, triangular peaks of DIA's roof poke up out of the boring grassland, Dallas' head jerks toward me. "What the hell is going on?" None of us have been here before, but everyone knows about the iconic architecture and haunted blue horse statue guarding the road with its massive ballsack on display.

Sliding my hand across the seat, I catch his fingers and squeeze. "I'll explain in a minute, I promise." Dal won't take his eyes off my face as Scout pulls into a parking garage and grabs the nearest spot. He and Roman jump out of the car without a word and make themselves scarce.

"Beck." Dallas pulls his hand away. "You're scaring the shit out of me."

I reach across and take his face in my hands, brushing my thumbs along his cheeks until he calms down and meets my gaze. Everything feels completely breathless for a moment. "I found your mom."

He goes absolutely still, his wide eyes blank. I don't think he's even breathing. When he opens his mouth like he's going to say something, a weird sound comes out instead—a mix between a word, a sob, a whimper, and a visceral noise. Cutting himself off, he presses his fist to his mouth and shakes his head slowly. "You didn't," he croaks. "You couldn't."

"She lives in Santa Monica. When I contacted her, she offered to buy us all plane tickets. I think she wants to meet you face to face instead of calling. Maybe I should have told you, but I didn't want to get your hopes up. And I was worried you wouldn't come."

"Because she doesn't want to see me," he protests, pulling back. "She left me."

"It's not true, baby. Her boyfriend made her leave and cut her off from everyone. By the time he died a few months ago and she started searching, she had no way to find you."

Leaning back against the door, he takes a deep, shaky breath and stares at his hands in his lap like he's never seen them before. The silence feels eerie, but I bite my lip, forcing myself to be chill for once and give him space. "You talked to her? To my actual mom?" he whispers finally.

"I did."

"Did she sound okay? Is she healthy? Is she dating anyone? Does she have a job? Did—"

He would have kept going all day, but I hold up my finger to stop him. "Dal, you can ask her yourself in like seven hours."

My boy never cries half-assed. It's something to do with the hormones, how they stifle his emotions until they're big enough to explode. I'm not surprised when he breaks down; I just pull him onto my lap and let him cry against my shoulder for five minutes. It's a rough one, tearing his body apart with violent, wrenching sobs, but all I can do is hold him and hum one of my mom's old lullabies into his hair while he rides it out.

When he sits up and wipes his face, he still looks bewildered. "How did you find her? I don't understand."

"I've been asking around for a year and a half, trying to find someone that knew her boyfriend. I figured a guy like him might have ties to drugs. A couple months ago, when he turned up dead, one of my contacts heard about it. My buddies helped me work backwards to finding your mom and getting her number."

"You had contacts? That sounds expensive."

Of course he's focused on the budget. Smiling and shaking my head, I reach over and fix the strands of hair sticking to his tear-stained cheeks. "I've done a lot of favors, and Scout and Rome picked up some extra jobs when they could."

"They helped you?" For a second I think he's going to break down again, but he rallies and wipes his eyes roughly. "Shit, Beck. I don't even know what's happening right now."

“Everything’s gonna be okay, pretty boy.” I slide my hand into his pocket and pull out the clean tissue he always carries. “Clean yourself up so the airport employees don’t think we’re kidnapping you.”

That pulls a garbled, weak laugh out of him as he tries to scrub the pent-up emotions of two years off his face. As soon as we get out of the car, he spots Scout and Roman loitering by the elevators and takes off running. I grab the duffel bag with Dal’s and my clothes in it and lock up. I enjoyed packing both our stuff into one bag, a reminder that he belongs to me now. It’s a moment of euphoria I can hold onto later when he discovers everything I forgot to bring and what a shitty job I did trying to pick outfits for him.

Dallas bounds up to Roman and tackle-hugs the huge man. Scout grins at me as the two of them squeeze each other tight, then yelps when Dal grabs him and drags him into a three-way hug. “Thank you,” I hear Dallas saying, his voice muffled. “Thank you, thank you.”

Everything comes together when I step up behind Dal and wrap my arms around all three of them. Roman grips a fistful of my t-shirt, and Scout’s hair tickles my chin. I can smell all of them at once, and feel our body heat mixing together in the cold parking garage. I’m more scared of this huge building and the world beyond Fort Holden than I’ve been in a long time. None of us will know where to go or what to do, but we’ll make it.

Dallas laces his shaky fingers tight through mine, and Scout hooks an arm around my shoulders. “Ready?” he murmurs.

“No,” Dallas says instantly, while Roman shakes his head. Scout rolls his eyes and blows a fart sound out through his lips.

“Let’s go fuck this place up, losers.”

DALLAS

I squeeze Mom's hand in my sweaty fingers, so tight it probably hurts. "Please talk to him for me. I can't, Mommy. Please."

I know better than to beg Anjali Santra for anything once she's made up her mind, but I'm so scared I try anyway. Sure enough, she gently pries my hand off hers. "Yes you can, Dallas. Go get your photo taken."

It throws me off every time she says that name, like a hit of vertigo. I only chose it five months ago. But it's the good kind of dizzy, instead of the sickening, crushing feeling when I see my old name.

Taking a step forward, I peer into the classroom where a photographer stands in front of a backdrop and lights, snapping ID pictures for all the incoming freshmen at my new high school. "He's gonna know. As soon as I talk, he'll be able to tell. Then everyone will know."

"Look at me." I've already outgrown my mother, so she has to reach up to take my chin in her fingers. She and I look so much alike—long black hair, dark eyes with thick lashes, and narrow, pointy noses. We never talk about my dad—to her, he never existed—but it doesn't matter because I don't seem to have an ounce of his genetics except for the fact that her skin is a shade darker than mine. "If the photographer thinks you are anything besides my handsome, perfect son, he's wrong. We'll have to go out for pizza after and laugh until our sides hurt at how wrong he was to mistake you for something you're not. Alright?"

I straighten up and try to swallow past my dry throat. "Yes ma'am." I can feel her eyes on my back like a warm touch as I tip my chin up and walk into the classroom. I'm wrapped in a hot, itchy binder under the brand new navy polo and slacks we picked out yesterday. None of the clothes fit quite the way

they're supposed to on the bodies they were made for, and I feel like everyone can tell. Ever since I started to transition, it seems like the entire world is looking at me with x-ray vision. I wonder if that ever stops.

“What’s your name, young man?” The photographer props his heavy camera on his hip and checks the list on the table next to him.

I glance over my shoulder at the petite woman waiting in the hall. Even though she likes to dress impeccably, she’s wearing the silly “Check out my moves” t-shirt my chess club sold last year as a fundraiser. She doesn’t flash me a thumbs up or anything cheesy, just raises her eyebrows and nods.

“Dallas Santra,” I answer. My voice sounds even higher and squeakier than usual, and it makes me want to die. I wait for him to do a double take, use his x-ray vision, and correct himself to ‘young lady’. It happens every day, no matter how I stand or what I wear.

All he says is. “Great. Sit down and smile for me.”

I square my shoulders and try to remember my posture. My face feels stiff as I stretch my lips into a perfect smile. Blinking from the flash, I climb off the stool and go to sign the sheet he’s holding out for me. “Have a great year, dude,” the photographer says as I almost write my old name, catch myself, and scrawl down the new one. “Love your shirt, by the way. I have one just like it.”

“T-thanks,” I stammer, backing away before he can get a closer look. As the girl in line behind me heads for the stool, her eyes catch mine and she smiles in a way I’ve never been looked at before in my life—the curious, hopeful grin of a girl meeting a boy she thinks is cute. I make probably the weirdest face in the world and almost crash into the door frame because I’m too busy staring at her.

“He called me dude,” I hiss as I sprint over to mom, grabbing her arm and jumping up and down. “And he liked my shirt, and did you see the girl? Oh my god, oh my god.”

I'm not nearly old and complicated enough yet to understand everything in the smile she gives me. She shakes her head teasingly. "Not even your first day in school and you're already breaking hearts. You'll have to start learning how to be a good boyfriend, won't you?"

"I can't believe it." I throw my arms around her and bury my face in her shoulder. The last six months have been horrible in so many ways. I lost most of my friends from my middle school when I came out. My extended family smiles to my face, but they refuse to use my new name and I've overheard horrible screaming arguments between my mom and my aunt. I can't count the number of times I've wondered how this could be worth it. But right now, I'm the happiest I've been in my entire life. "Can we still get pizza?"

She laughs, her eyes still gentle. "Very well, but you're going to treat me with some of that paper route money." Mom's a pediatrician—she doesn't need my money, and I don't need a job, but she insisted on making sure I learn the value of hard work and budgeting.

"Deal." I skip toward the exit, too excited to wonder if boys skip or not.

Behind me, I hear her voice. "Dallas?"

I turned around. I know I did. But I can't remember what she said. Every time, the dream slows down and freezes here, as I struggle desperately to turn and see her face one more time. To look into her eyes and let her see the man I've tried so hard to become for her. But I never—

"Mom!" I jerk upright, gulping in air. My head hurts, and I have no idea where I am. Huge windows overlooking empty concrete, line after line of tightly packed chairs, moving walkways—I look around frantically, shivering.

"Dallas. Wake up, baby." It's not Mom's voice. It's another voice I know. My other home, my safe place. My lungs finally decide to work as I turn toward Beck. "You're okay," he

soothes, brushing his fingers along my jaw. “You were dreaming.”

When I see Scout and Roman behind him, picking at the single bag of chips we could afford for dinner, I finally remember where we are. We wandered all over the huge airport, asking staff members where to go and what to do. Most of them probably thought we were crazy. In security, we lost three knives, all our shampoo, and Scout’s hair gel. This is what happens when I’m not allowed to research our plans in advance. Beck might have lost his temper and fought them over his favorite knife, but he held his tongue so that we could spend tonight in California instead of in jail.

“I’m scared.” I rest my head on his shoulder. “What if everything’s messed up?”

“Then we’ll come home,” he says simply, kissing the top of my head. “And you’ll spend the rest of your life stuck with me, and a house full of annoying-ass people, and a bunch of stinky pets—because you know Roman’s never gonna stop.”

“That sounds like heaven,” I murmur into his t-shirt, and feel him chuckle. He doesn’t realize that I’ve never been more serious in my life.

BECK

“BRAID IT AGAIN.” Yanking out his hair band, Dallas struggles to twist his back toward me in the back of the rental car Ms. Santra reserved for us at the airport.

“It looked perfect,” I protest, resting a calming hand in the middle of his back. “I can’t do it any better.” My eyes catch Scout’s sympathetic glance in the rearview mirror as Roman helps him navigate city traffic. We’re fifteen minutes into a twenty-five minute drive, and I’ve already rebraided his hair four times.

“Please just try.” His shaky voice cracks. “Or should I do a ponytail? Fuck, I don’t know.”

I smooth the dark strands back from his face and try to tidy it with my fingers. “Wear it down. It looks really good.”

“I guess so.” He stares at me without actually seeing me, then sits back in his seat and fixes his eyes on the back of Roman’s head. Reaching across, I grab his hand and squeeze gently. He doesn’t squeeze back, but over the next ten minutes his grip tightens and tightens until his fingernails feel permanently embedded into my skin and I’m fighting not to grimace. When we turn off the highway into a residential neighborhood full of a million samey-looking nice houses, he squeezes his eyes shut. My thumb can feel his pulse fluttering frantically in his wrist. I have no idea what to do for him, so I just sit there and let him mangle my hand.

The houses are pretty—three stories with little turrets and flourishes that make them look historical, even though they’re new. Every driveway has a sports car or a high end hybrid, shadowed by mature trees and flowering bushes. It’s weird to think that Dallas would be living somewhere like this if he hadn’t gotten kicked out. He’d never be cold or hungry. If that sick bastard hadn’t ruined his life, I would never have met

him. I wouldn't even know he existed, except for that Dallas-shaped hole in my chest that would have stayed empty forever.

This is why I don't think about shit. I just get all mixed up.

Dallas is radiating so much stress into the car that my heart starts hammering when we turn onto the last street. We don't have to check the address, because there's a short-middle aged woman who looks just like my boyfriend waiting at the end of one of the driveways with her arms wrapped around herself.

"Baby." I nudge Dal's arm. "Open your eyes."

Scout must have a sixth sense, because he stops the car in the middle of the street right when Dallas spots his mom out the window. A second later, Dal throws his body against the door, scrabbling at the handle and punching the lock until it flies open so fast he tumbles onto his hands and knees on the hot asphalt.

I lean forward between the front seats and all three of us watch in a kind of hushed silence as he stumbles to his feet and races across the street. His mom tries to run toward him, but after a couple of steps she starts crying so hard that she has to just stand there with her arms out until his skinny body collides with hers. They cling to each other like it's the end of the world and they're on the very last life raft. My chest feels full as I look at them, so full it's shoving my heart and all my organs out of place. It feels amazing and kind of awful at the same time. I have no idea why, because we're so far past the level of emotions that me and my box brain can understand.

Scout's lean fingers slip through mine and squeeze, like he's giving me an anchor as we watch the two of them rock back and forth, sobbing. "You did good," he murmurs. "Really good. Look at him."

I prop my ear against his shoulder and bite down hard on the inside of my mouth, to give myself at least one feeling I recognize. "I wish I could hug my mom."

His grip tightens. "I know." He rubs his thumb soothingly along the back of my hand for a minute, then says, "Hey,

maybe this lady has always wanted to adopt a giant, ugly, white son.”

I choke on a snotty laugh. “Shit, this is weird.”

Roman taps my arm, and I realize Dallas is waving us over with one hand while he tries to dry his face off with the other. His dark eyes are sparkling, like a night sky full of stars. Wishing for the first time in my life that I had on nicer clothes, I climb sheepishly out of the car. I want to wait for Scout and Roman to back me up, but they’re busy parking the car in the driveway, and it would be weird for me to just stand here.

“Beck,” Dallas babbles, exploding with nervous energy. He grabs my wrist and tugs me closer, until I’m standing right in front of his mother. She’s almost two heads shorter than me, but there’s something regal and intense about her that makes me want to fold my hands behind my back and stare respectfully at the floor. “This is my mom, Anjali. Mom, this is my...” Dallas hesitates for a second, like he’s finding the right word, and slides his arm around my waist. “This is my partner, Beckham.”

“Hi...ma’am,” I add, trying to remember how to be polite. Based on what Dallas has told me, this lady with her sleek, gray-streaked updo and tailored yellow blouse is big on manners. “Thank you for having us.”

She dabs at her teary eyes with a handkerchief, then looks me over from my unruly hair to the holes in the knees of my jeans. Her lined face has more wrinkles from frowning than from smiling, but I think it’s because she takes everything super seriously, like Dallas. When she finally smiles, her solemn eyes brighten and the gentle kindness pouring out of her takes my breath away. “We’ve spoken a little bit. You’re the one who brought my son back to me.”

Not sure what to say, I just nod.

When she opens her arms, I don’t react because I’m too busy staring in confusion. She must take that as an invitation, because she steps forward and wraps me in the tightest hug I’ve ever had in my life. I look breathlessly over at Dal, who nods at me with a shaky smile. So I hug her back.

I have almost no memories of my mom, beyond vague impressions and half-obsured dreams. But as Anjali Santra squeezes the life out of me, I get a sudden, razor-sharp picture of the blonde woman from my picture kneeling down and holding out her arms. Every time I staggered into them, she'd envelop me completely in this soft, warm squeeze that smelled like her and made me feel safe. Even though this woman can barely reach around me, I get that same protected, wrapped-up feeling, like someone's looking out for me.

As if she can read my mind, she hugs me tighter. I've been waiting nervously to see what she'll ask me first. I'm not exactly mom-impressing material. All she says as she steps back is, "Do you like lamb samosas?"

Blinking in the brutal California sun, I frown in confusion. "Huh?" I thought only millionaires ate lamb.

"Mom, he doesn't even know what paprika is."

The woman's eyes widen, and I swear her rich brown skin goes a shade paler. "Dude," I mumble, elbowing him. "Don't embarrass me."

Instead of going after me, she reaches across and playfully pinches Dallas' arm with an exasperated gesture that looks like an old habit. "And you haven't been teaching him about good food? I raised you better than that."

"He makes us a lot of cookies," Scout offers as he and Roman approach. "Just about every kind you can think of. There isn't much cooking to be done with rice and beans."

Dallas fidgets, glancing at me. I guess no one has told his mom that we're filthy poor. She glances at our ragged clothes again, then nods graciously toward the house. "Lamb samosas were Dallas' favorite, so I've made them for supper. Come in, all of you, and I'll get you settled in your rooms."

I follow Scout and Rome back to the car for the duffel bags, not that they need help. I'm just not sure what to do with myself. Roman pokes me gently as I watch Anjali and Dallas climb up the front steps together with their arms around each other. He doesn't have his voice, but he mimes taking a deep

inhale. When I obey, he demonstrates letting it out again very slowly. *You weren't breathing*, he signs helpfully, with a small, crooked smile. *Just keep doing that.*

Glancing down, I poke the edge of the perfectly-mowed lawn with the toe of my sneaker. Everyone thinks I'm just nervous to meet Ms. Santra, and I definitely am. But the minute that we arrived in this sparkly, idyllic neighborhood where Dallas should have been living his storybook life, the countdown started to the moment where nothing will ever be the same again. I've been trying to get myself ready for this all week, but now that it's real, I don't think I have enough time.

DALLAS

It's a good thing my mother always makes too much food, because she could never have estimated the sheer quantity Roman and Beck are able to devour between them. Biting into the rich, savory flavors of one of her homemade samosas, the ones we cooked together every weekend, almost makes me start crying again. The guys love them so much that it makes me a little sad. If we could afford groceries, I could have worked on recreating mom's recipes and introduced them to all my favorite Indian dishes.

It's dark out by the time we finish supper. Scout keeps rubbing his eyes, and Roman's literally asleep in his chair as the twelve hours of completely unfamiliar travel catches up with us. "Go to bed," I whisper when Mom gets up to pour some coffee. "She won't mind."

Scout coaxes Rome to his feet and leads him upstairs, but Beck hesitates. "You gonna be okay?"

I nod, catching his hand and kissing his knuckles. "I'll be up soon. I just want to talk to her a little."

When Mom comes back and finds the table empty except for me, she hesitates with a flash of the same uncertainty that's squeezing my chest. "Do you want a coffee?"

"I don't really drink it much now." Looking for anything to keep my hands busy, I stand up and start stacking the rattan placemats in the middle of the table. This is the part I was afraid of, where we realize that we've lost something we can never get back. Where the most important bond of my life gets reduced to awkward small talk.

Instead of sitting at the table, Mom crosses the hall to the living room and sits down on a big, gray sectional that looks as soft as a cloud. She pats the cushion next to her firmly. "Come here." Like I'm ten years old again, my body instinctively reacts and pulls me to obey.

This close, I realize her smell has changed from floral perfume to something more sweet and spiced. Everything else about her is exactly the same as I remember, except for a sadness in her eyes and a few more streaks of gray. We stare at each other for a minute, like neither of us knows what to say.

“You left me,” I blurt. “Why did you leave me?”

Carefully, giving me a chance to pull away, she puts her arm around me and draws me in to her side. I used to curl up against her shoulder for hours while she read aloud and stroked my hair. My body doesn’t fit the same as it did even three years ago, but I pull my knees up and stare at the bookshelves on the far wall as she talks.

“Hayden convinced me to apply for jobs in California, before all this happened. I know now that he had a mistress here, and all kinds of drug-user friends.” I’ve never heard anything as close to pure hatred in my life as the way she spits out the syllables of his name. “I got an offer at a children’s clinic here, and I was going to tell you about it that night. When I got home, Hayden told me that he had tried to explain about the move and you were furious. According to him, you said all kinds of horrible things, packed your bag, and left.”

She pulls in a shaky breath. “I didn’t believe him, but he showed me your room. Your clothes were all gone, along with your backpack. The gifts I’d given you, the pencils, your books, your toy car, were all broken or thrown in the trash. And you left your phone behind so I couldn’t contact you. I was so devastated that I couldn’t think clearly. He said we had to take the job and leave, but when I begged him for more time, he lost his temper. From that day on, he was never the same. Everything bad that happened to him was my fault. I was a stupid, spoiled woman who raised an ungrateful leech of a child. I’m deeply ashamed that I couldn’t find the strength to leave him before he overdosed. Without you, I was half a person. I barely had the will to get out of bed each day, and I lived in fear of him.”

“Mom,” I choke out, wrapping her soft hand in both of mine. “I’m so sorry.”

“No.” She tilts my face toward hers and searches my eyes. I can see more tears threatening to spill over. “Nothing I just said was an excuse. If your boyfriend could track me down without a single clue, then I should have been able to find you again. I can never be sorry enough, or grateful enough to Beckham for what he’s done.”

I open my mouth to insist that it’s nothing, but to my surprise, that feels dishonest. Sitting here next to her, I can feel the painful edges of things I’ve tried to bury. Some part of me has wondered every single day what I did wrong, what made me not worth searching for. I squeeze her hand in mine, massaging the tissue between her thumb and palm that helps ease her headaches. “I forgive you. I’ve changed a lot, and so have you. I want to make up for lost time and erase that fucker from our lives.”

Swallowing her tears, she replaces them with that tough, unshakeable smile I remember so well as she brushes my hair back and pats my cheeks. “You’ve gotten so handsome, and your eyes are so much wiser.”

I can feel myself blushing. There’s so much I need to tell her; it’s going to take weeks to catch up. But we have all the time in the world now. “I should get some sleep and make sure Beck’s okay. Pulling this together stressed him out, I think.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. I may need to go out early and buy extra eggs and bacon for those boys.” She pecks my cheek and helps me stand up. As I head for the door, she catches my hand and tugs me back. I can hear the clock on the wall ticking quietly as she just drinks me in for a minute in silence. “The day you were born,” she says slowly, “I thought I could never love you more. But when I met my son, that love felt small by comparison. Seeing you today, everything you’ve become...I didn’t know this much love was possible. Getting to know each other again may not always be easy, but I just want you to know that.”

DALLAS

SOMETHING'S OFF WITH BECK. He's still awake when I come skipping upstairs in a state of complete emotional overload. I brush my teeth in the en suite and babble at him through a mouthful of toothpaste about everything my mom said. "I told you she didn't want to leave," he says with a tired smile as I plop on the bed next to him. "Sometimes I'm a little bit right."

I tilt my head at him, but he doesn't quite meet my eyes. "Are you alright?" Maybe it's because he ate twice his body weight in samosas.

"Yeah." He drops his head back on the pillow. This bed feels like it literally descended from heaven on a cloud compared to the ones at home. "We've just been up since dawn..."

"And spent three hours in a death trap," I offer with a grin, quoting his rant from earlier today after he almost peed himself in terror on takeoff.

He slaps my butt. "Exactly. And I just met my, like, mother-in-law. So I'm trashed. Come here."

His big hands wrap around my waist and haul me into bed next to him. He rolls half on top of me and crushes me to his chest like he does when he's having a bad dream. "I love you more than I love lamb," he mumbles into my hair.

"And I love you more than you hate flying."

He just groans and wriggles deeper into the bed.

When I wake up, he's not touching me. I prop myself on my elbows, trying to orient my body to my location. The red digital clock on the dresser says three-thirteen AM. I feel around the bed, in case I lost him somehow, but he's not here. The en suite is dark and empty. He must have gone downstairs to get water.

I should wait, but something pulls me out of bed and toward the door. Just when I grab the handle, I notice that the window on the far side of the room is open wider than it was when we went to sleep, and the screen is sitting propped against the wall. Panic clenches in my chest for a second before I remember that we're in a safe, affluent neighborhood, not Paradise Peaks.

When I've gotten control of my thumping heart, I creep over to the window and stick my head out into the muggy night. The gently-sloped garage roof comes right up to the sill, but I can't see anyone on this side of the peak. I'm about to head downstairs when I hear a soft sound, like a whimper. Not even bothering to put on a shirt, I hike my leg up and clamber awkwardly onto the rough shingles. I'm not particularly high up or close to the edge, but this feels like the most daring stunt I've ever pulled.

I forget my sense of vertigo when I crawl up to the peak of the garage and look down the other side. Beck is curled up in a ball with his head resting on his tightly pulled-up knees. His shoulders jerk and I realize the sound I heard was a hoarse, wrenching sob. I just stand there and stare with my mouth open, because no matter what, no matter where or when or how, it's a fact of the universe that Beck never cries

He coughs out another sob, then another, squeezing his legs to his chest. When my foot scrapes on a shingle, he jerks his head up. His eyes are red and wet, with tears glistening on his cheeks. He looks scared, like his body is malfunctioning in ways he doesn't understand.

He wipes his face roughly, trying to bite down on his hiccuping breaths. "I'm fine. Just go back to bed."

"Are you kidding me?" I scoot down the slope on my butt, because I'm terrified of tripping and rolling off into the azalea bushes. When I reach his side, I try to brush his hair back from his face. Instead of looking at me, he pulls away and hides his face again, sniffing and choking a little. "What's happening, Beck? Talk to me."

He shakes his head firmly. “I’m okay. This whole thing is just a lot. There’s nothing wrong.”

I silently hold out my pinkie to him. He stares at it for a long time before he rests his cheek on his knee and closes his eyes. Carefully, I slide my cool hand up under the back of his shirt and rub the hot, thick muscles along his spine. My heart aches as he dissolves back into a series of miserable sobs before he manages to pull himself out long enough to catch his breath and dry his face.

He stares out over the roofs of the other houses, their big yards with pools and fancy greenhouses. “Fucking hell,” he grumbles, his voice all torn up as he grabs the front of his shirt and uses it to blow his nose. “I suck. I’m a piece of shit.”

I pull my hand out from under his shirt and offer it to him, letting him wrap his hands around it and hug it to his chest. “Why?”

“I’m so fucking happy for you; I need you to believe me. I thought I could do this, if we talked on the phone every day, but it’s going to fucking kill me. To go to the meetings without you. To not be able to touch you. How the *fuck* am I gonna sleep without you?” He just finished crying for the first time in decades and already he’s about to break down again.

“Wait, wait, wait.” I go up on my knees, tugging my arm away, and grab his face in both hands. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

His eyes are glazed with pain and panic. “Huh? I’m talking about when the rest of us fly home tomorrow night.”

I grab at all the pieces, trying to make sense of them. “Beck, did you think I was staying here with Mom? Indefinitely?”

“That’s the whole point, Dal. You got your mom back. She made you a room here and everything.”

“I...” Dropping back on my ass, I shake my head. Now I’m the one fighting that tight feeling in my throat. “You thought I might never come home again, but you still brought me here? So I could be happy?”

He tilts his chin up in a confused half-nod. “It’s okay,” he forces out. “We’ll live together again someday. I’m sorry I cried like a little bitch; I don’t want you to feel guilty.”

“You...” All I can do is stare at him. I knew he loved me enough to pursue me and own me. But I guess I didn’t know that he also loved me enough to let me go, even when it tears him apart and goes against his deepest urges. This man is always bigger than I realize. We, Dallas and Beck, are bigger than I realize. The kind of thing that feels like eternity.

“I’m coming home with you, Beck. My family and my job are both there. Mom’s going to start looking for jobs in Colorado, so she can move back and live near me. But I’m not staying here.”

His eyes meet mine as he breathes slowly, flexing his fingers and trying to center himself in his body again. “Oh.”

I feel so overwrought after today that I can’t help but laugh a little. “Yeah.”

“Now I look like a loser,” he mumbles, rolling his eyes and viciously cleaning away the last of the tears. “Total fucking freak. Thanks for that.”

“Oh, this was my fault?” I poke his arm playfully, then jump when his hand whips out and catches my wrist faster than I can process. He drags my arm closer and rests his forehead against it. I can feel how shaky and tense and fucked up he is. And I don’t know what to say, because there’s no way to verbalize how much I love him right now—the kind of love that rips you open, chokes you, makes you helpless, hurts you and shelters you.

The overflowing emotions, the stirring in my body as his breath slides along my skin, the strangeness of this place that makes me ache for something familiar—it all comes together into a single thought. “Beck.” I whisper.

He doesn’t lift his head from my arm, but he tilts it until I can see one green eye, smoldering like a low ember.

I hold his stare, even as it slowly, dangerously pulls out the prey inside me. “Do you need to mark your territory?” I ask

softly. His nostrils flare, and I feel his muscles tighten a little. “Do you need to claim me back?”

He makes a weird sound halfway between a growl and a groan and lifts his head. I can hardly breathe with both of his eyes on me, as it sinks in what a mad thing I just suggested. We’re not in a forest—this is a house in a clean, quiet neighborhood where people might call the police on us if they hear anything strange.

But I can’t be good, not when I feel like this. When he tries to touch me, I crawl backwards out of his reach. He goes still for a moment, the sadness fading away into something visceral. “Dallas,” he says hoarsely. “Be careful.”

“Last time it was my game,” I murmur. “This time it’s yours. Show me what happens if I forget who I belong to.”

He closes his eyes and lets out a long, shaky breath. When he opens them again, they’re dark and dangerous. “Then run.”

I glance over my shoulder, remembering suddenly that I’m on a roof in my underwear. “Maybe I should change—”

“Look at me,” he demands, pushing himself up into a crouch as all his muscles coil in anticipation. “What do rabbits do?”

“But—”

He shakes his head sharply.

“They run,” I whisper, a wave of raw adrenaline rushing through me. Last time, we prepared and perfected every detail. But I know we still have *papaya*, if things get out of control.

He narrows his eyes. “Then start running.”

There are too many choices. I freeze up, trying to think.

“You have thirty seconds’ head start,” he says quietly. “If you’re still here, I’m gonna pin you down right there and fuck you so hard everyone in this house and all the ones around it will hear you scream my name.”

The man could make me come just by talking like that, but I don’t have time to enjoy it when I’m scrambling and limping

back over the roof, forgetting to be scared of the height. I fall clumsily back through the window onto plush carpet. I don't know how many seconds have passed, but I don't think I have time to grab clothes, or even shoes. Nothing at all. Fuck him.

I throw open the door and race down the stairs as quietly as I can, gripping the rail so I don't slip on the unfamiliar hardwood. Luckily it's a newer house, where nothing creaks. I think Mom's room is on the first floor near the back, so I make for the front door. A faint thump comes from upstairs, but I don't know if it's my imagination or two hundred and thirty pounds of predator coming after me.

I shoot one frantic glance around to check for a security alarm panel, but I don't have time to look properly. All I can do is hope as I unlatch the front door and ease it open as silently as I can. I don't even waste time shutting it behind me; I just sprint out across the night-dew speckled lawn and hope to god no one is looking out their windows. Every house on the street looks dark, and I can't hear any voices or cars. It's a funny contrast to Paradise and the neighborhoods around it, where you couldn't get people to stop screaming and fucking and racing their cars for even a few hours to get some sleep.

I have no idea where I am. When we drove into the neighborhood, I was so terrified that I didn't process anything. I want to find a park or somewhere with trees, any kind of familiar place for a rabbit like me to creep into the roots and grass—not slick concrete and unforgiving windows everywhere.

He's coming, I know he is. If I just flee down the middle of the street, he's going to run me down in seconds. Thinking so fast I slip into pure instinct, I tear across the street and up a neighbor's driveway to crouch behind their Mercedes. My mostly naked body is shivering and sweaty already, buzzing with excitement.

This hiding spot isn't good enough, so I crawl deeper into the shadows and duck behind a yard waste bin overflowing with branches. From this angle, I can't tell if Beck's outside. I risk leaning forward until I can see Mom's door. Shit. It's closed now, but I can't spot Beck anywhere. Does the man

fucking teleport? If he's waiting at the end of the driveway, my clever plan has cornered me.

"Come on," I breathe, trying to tap into my strategic chess brain. He beat me last time; I know I'm better than that.

The corner of my eye catches on the six foot privacy fence leading into the backyard. "No," I scold myself. "No trespassing." Playing primal sex games in people's backyards in the middle of the night is disgusting and wrong. Only animals would do that. Gritting my teeth, I prop my head back against the wall and close my eyes.

BECK

MINE.

Mine mine mine mine mine mine mine.

Mine.

It hurt so fucking much to cry for him. The last time I cried was when my dad pawned Mom's ring. I remembered that feeling tonight, when something I needed like oxygen got ripped out of my hands. But everything's going to be alright. Dal told me I didn't have to be good anymore. He told me I could let it out.

After counting to thirty, I pause in the bedroom to pull on my jeans and sneakers, enjoying the fact that Dal tore through here in terror. He'll be running around in his skimpy briefs while I'm fully dressed. That's my right, as the hunter. I don't want to get the police called on us, but I'm sure as fuck not holding back.

He left the front door open, too. A perfect, scared rabbit. When I step onto the porch, I grin because he left big, obvious footprints through the dew on the grass. Circling the lawn, I track the faint wet patches left by his bare toes as he crossed the street. The tracks peter out, but I'm pretty sure he ran up onto one of these properties. That's naughtier than I would have expected from him. I thought he'd stick to the streets like a law-abiding citizen.

My whole body heats up as I study the cars and bushes in front of each house, watching for movement. Jacking off in the street really would get me arrested, but I don't have to; my hard cock is already shoved up against my jeans, rubbing when I move. It hasn't been inside him since the first time, and just the thought has me leaking everywhere.

Click. My head snaps up, and I frown, concentrating on the sound. Metal on metal, followed by a little creak. Holy shit. I think he opened a gate into someone's yard. He's taking this

game to the next level. Keeping an eye out for security lights or dogs, I sneak up to the nearest house, prop my foot on the fence, and hoist my head over the top to make sure the yard's clear. All I can see is an empty deck and a pool. Bunching my shoulders, I lift myself up and sling my legs over the fence.

I can't sense Dallas in this yard. Curious about what's on the other side, I cross the grass and climb up the back fence to see. More yards, and another street beyond. Good. He's looking for an escape from the neighborhood, into more natural territory, but he's not going to get it. I pause again and listen, fingering the bottle of travel lube I stuffed in my pocket from the duffel. He's lucky to be getting any lube besides spit and cum, but I don't want to break his ass when it's still practically a virgin.

The fence shakes just the slightest bit, and I look up in time to see a figure scramble over into a yard three down from where I am. I would have paid money to watch my pretty boy try to scale a six foot barrier in his underwear. Easily vaulting fences, I make my way to the street in front of the house he's trespassing on. I wait silently for five minutes, curious if he's going to come out or if he decided to hide.

When he doesn't appear, I grab a stick from their yard waste bin and slip over the fence. He picked well; this one has a load of shrubs and a couple of sheds. Keeping to the shadows, I walk the perimeter of the yard and use my stick to push aside branches and leaves so I can let in the moonlight. He hasn't bolted, which means he's pressed into a small hiding spot, perfectly still, holding his breath and hoping I won't see him. I will never be able to jerk off to porn again, because nothing can compare to this.

He's behind the fifth and sixth bushes along the back of the yard, curled up in a ball against the fence. His wide eyes catch mine as he pushes himself to his feet, his whole body tense. Grime from the fences streaks his perfect brown skin, and his beautiful hair is tangled around his shoulders.

He starts to bolt, slipping in the dirt as he tries to dodge around me. I easily block his escape with my body, and he takes a stumbling step back against the fence, baring his teeth

when I take a step closer. “Pinch me three times if you need a safeword,” I growl.

Before he can react, I grab him and shove him face-first against the fence with my hand tight over his mouth. He whimpers, struggling hard, but he doesn’t pinch me. I bury my face in his neck, until my world is just the heat of his skin, his smell, and the swell of his ass as I push down the back of his briefs. When I slide a finger into his crack and find his hole, he jerks his hips forward with a groan and tries to bite my hand.

“Fine then.” I slide my hand from his mouth down to squeeze the base of his neck. “Don’t make a sound, little rabbit. Unless you want everyone to see.”

“Fuck you.” He breaks off with a choked whine when I pry his cheeks apart and pour a ton of lube down his crack.

“Spread for me.” I kick at his ankles with my sneaker, pushing them apart. “Show me my hole.” I love talking sweet to him. He deserves every good word in the world. But I can feel in his body how much he loves this, too. He understands how all these parts can exist inside me at once, even better than I do, and that’s why he’s mine.

He resists, but when I lean more weight on him and rub his hole, he shudders and widens his stance until he’s offering me his ass. I swipe up a finger full of lube and push right in, so fast he gasps and arches his back. I don’t want to hurt him, but I don’t want him to be comfortable. In the world of this game, I’m showing him the consequences for trying to leave me. I can tell he’s trying to be good and let my finger in. When the second one comes, he cries out, then claps a hand over his own mouth.

“That’s right,” I murmur, working my fingers into the desperately tight, velvety clench of his ass.

He slides his fingers off his mouth. “Please.”

I go still. “What?”

“Can I please touch myself?” he whispers shakily.

“Wow.” I nip his shoulder hard enough that he jumps. “Did I already tame you?”

“No, I just—” he squirms his hips and gives a soft sob. “Please.”

“Do it.”

My cock aches at the way he desperately shoves a hand down the front of his briefs. We don't have his vibrator, but something tells me that if he has no expectation of needing to come tonight, it might happen for him. I can feel the spasm in his ass the second that he rubs his dick. I have plenty of lubrication, so I start pumping my fingers in a deep, fucking rhythm. He claps his free hand over his mouth again, swallowing a desperate sound. I listen to his body under mine, the struggle and need, until he's fully surrendered. Then I yank my fingers out and step back. He almost falls over, his briefs pushed around his thighs, and looks over his shoulder at me with glazed, frustrated eyes.

“I'm not tired yet.”

“You're kidding,” he whispers, trying to get his breathing under control. His chest is flushed, and there's lube dripping down the inside of his thigh.

“You want my cum in you? You want me to watch you try and hold it in?”

He squeezes his eyes shut, shivering. “Please, Beck.”

“That's not how you ask.” I point toward the gate. “If you do a better job this time, maybe you can come too. Or maybe not. Thirty seconds.”

With a low groan, he pulls up his briefs and limps toward the gate. When he finally gets the latch to work, he finds the strength to break into a run, leaving the gate open behind him. I follow and pause at the corner of the house, counting to thirty in my head as I watch him stumble and weave down the middle of the road. I can imagine the asphalt scraping at his bare feet, the need in his loosened asshole, his wet underwear clinging to him. Every molecule in his body is tuned to me right now. He's right—this is what I needed.

After twenty-five seconds, he veers away and disappears behind some houses. I wait until thirty, then start jogging

easily after him. Over the years, I think he'll get better at running and hiding. He'll make me work harder. But there's something fun about this, how helplessly unable he is to get away.

Apparently he veered off into a soccer field. There's a playground on the far side I'm guessing he wants to hide in. But he wasn't fast enough. Halfway across the grass, he glances over his shoulder at me and starts sprinting all-out. I didn't even know he could move that fast. Every instinct in my body washes over me in a tidal wave, culminating in a single word. Mine. Then I let myself go and run, not holding anything back. The night air smells sweet as it flows over my sweaty skin.

He might have at least made it to the parking lot, but he gets caught up on a waist-high metal fence running along the far side of the field. The latch on the gate sticks, and he scrabbles to get it open. The next second, I'm on top of him. He tries to turn and shove me off, but I grab a loose fistful of his hair and bend him forward over the fence until he's stuck with his ass in the air. He reaches up and tangles his fingers with mine in his hair, gripping tight, but he doesn't try to pry them off.

I drag his briefs all the way down this time, so he can feel my leg pressed between his as he listens to me unzip my jeans. My cock softened some when I was running, but it hardens instantly under my fingers as I pull it out and rest it against the swell of his ass cheek. He squirms and whines as I slick my cock, and tries to touch himself again. I push his hand away. "No. You focus on me now."

His pretty ass still looks open. I should check with my fingers, but I can't stop myself from slipping in the head of my flushed cock instead. Bent over the fence, he can't move or do anything but cry out. He bites his fingers, trying to stay quiet as I shove my hips forward and settle myself all the way in. I sit there for a while and enjoy his body pulsing around me, like it's trying to push me out or pull me deeper. It feels so good. Sometime when we're watching TV in bed, I'm gonna

put him on my cock and leave him there all night. Because he's not going anywhere.

The whole fence rattles as I start fucking him for real, not thinking about his pleasure, just using his ass. He yelps at each thrust, his voice thick with need, like there aren't houses all around us. "Someone's gonna hear you and wake up," I say, thrusting harder. "Imagine looking out your window and seeing this."

When I speed up, he drags my hand out of his hair and down to his face. After a second, I realize what he wants. I slide two fingers into his mouth, deep, pressed between his tongue and the roof of his mouth with his teeth scraping my knuckles. The wet heat of his saliva trails along my fingers as he lets out muffled cries and his ass works my cock.

Something collapses, startling me, and I realize he's managed to unlatch the gate under his hip. It swings open and he stumbles forward off my cock which juts up, slick and frustrated.

"Tired yet?" he mocks in a slurred voice, trying to bolt. But he forgot about his briefs. He only makes it three steps before he trips and has to grab the hood of a parked sedan to keep from bashing his face. "Shit—"

I throw him face down against the black paint of the hood and shove myself back inside him before he can catch his breath. This time he just keens quietly, his voice jerking with each thrust and his fingers slipping against the car that doesn't belong to us. I'm so close, looking down at his naked back with his hair tumbling everywhere. But I need to see his eyes. I need to see their dark depths and their grounding promise that he'll never leave me.

He yelps when I pull out and toss him onto his back. Normal Dallas would be freaking out that we're smearing ourselves all over someone else's property, but tonight he just watches me with glazed eyes as I grip his ankles and spread his legs so I can admire his body like we're the only two people in the world.

Bracing my hands on either side of him, I slip back inside and fuck fast enough that the car suspension squeaks, his legs wrapped around my hips. He told me the pressure and being used feels good, even without a prostate, so I use him as hard as I want without touching his cock at all. He has to stuff his fist in his mouth again to shut himself up. I don't have a free hand to muffle my own noises, so I just have to bite down on the inside of my mouth until I taste blood. That makes me fly even higher.

He must be able to feel when I come, because both of us stiffen at the same time. White heat rolls over me as I unload inside his willing hole. That's where I find my peace. He's mine, and I'm his. This man claims me just as viciously and single-mindedly and selfishly as I claim him, he just does it in a quieter, more elegant way.

When I come up out of the blinding, bright light, he's shaking and slick with sweat, staring at me with almost black eyes. I pull out and look down. His abs are tensed as he clenches his ass around my cum. "Fuck," I breathe. "You're so good." Propping one of his ankles on my shoulder, I trail my finger down until it brushes his tensed hole, then tease it. "How long can you hold it?"

He moans wretchedly. "Don't." A little bit leaks out, and he struggles to tighten up more as I play with him.

"Could you hold it if you came?"

"Shit," he whines, struggling a little. "No."

"I think you could. If I told you to."

I catch both ankles again and spread his legs wider. When I make a move toward his cock, he struggles for real and tries to grab my hair. "I can't. I can't."

"Does that mean I win again, pretty boy?"

He shakes his head, his jaw jutting stubbornly, even though he has nothing left. "Never. I can hold out."

"You know you can't." He moans quietly and tries to get away again, but I just tighten my grip. "If you scream, everyone will see you lose."

His fingers curl into fists against the glossy finish of the car. This time I don't have to experiment as I fold his legs up and lean in to suck his cock into my mouth. It's bigger than last time, and harder, drenched with his precum. He makes a broken sound, bucking, as I tease the head of it with my tongue, then lap a circle around it. I suck slow and relentless, then faster, whatever pace I want. There's literally nothing he can do.

My cum slips out of him right before his orgasm hits, dripping down onto the muddy bumper of the car. I use it as lube to push two fingers back inside him and stretch him out as I keep sucking. He clamps both hands over his mouth and fights me as he comes. It goes on forever, two or three times longer than the others, and he's almost crying by the time he finally collapses.

I kiss the inside of his thigh, then his belly, then his chest. I rest my forehead in the hollow of his throat and count backward from five.

Three...Two...One.

"Did I just drip cum on someone's car?" There it is. I grin to myself; he sounds mortified.

I tilt my face up so I'm looking at the bottom of his chin. "Dallas Santra." My brain is completely empty and peaceful, and I have no idea what's going to come out.

"I fucking dripped cum...What?" he snaps kind of impatiently.

I've never thought these words, not consciously, but they're all arranged in order and ready to come pouring out. "I love you more and more every time I breathe. And after the last breath, I'm gonna find you again and stay with you until all the planets and suns melt. When there's nothing left, I'll still be holding you."

He comes up on his elbows and gapes at me. "You should save that for our wedding vows," he murmurs finally, in that voice where he makes jokes because he's overwhelmed.

I kiss his belly one more time, then help him sit up between my knees as he hisses in discomfort. “What if this is our wedding vows?”

Blinking up at me, he rakes his hair back out of his face. “I’m not getting married naked on some stranger’s car hood.”

“You sure?” I brush my thumb down his slightly crooked nose. “What about those people who get married by themselves first, then do the wedding shit later?”

“They do that at a *courthouse*—” He cuts himself off and studies me for a minute. “You know what? Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You just said the most beautiful thing anyone will ever say to me. So why not?” He wraps his arms around me and rests his ear against my chest for a long time, like he’s thinking. Finally, he pulls back and grabs both my messy hands in his dirty ones. “Beckham Alexander. You’re the only thing in my whole life that’s always felt right, from the very start. You’re the reason I get out of bed in the morning and go out in the world and try my best. Everything I do is so that I can come home and see your smile again. Sometimes I think *love* is too small of a word for us. But I don’t have a bigger one, so I love you.”

“Wow.” I rub my forehead, and now it’s my turn to feel all hot and embarrassed. But I memorized everything he said, and I’m going to keep turning it over in my head until I process every part of it. “So we’re married now?”

After a long, profound pause, he laughs. “Of course not. But you can tell everyone we are, if you want.”

He stretches up and kisses me delicately, the opposite of everything we just did. Then he sits back and looks around while I tip my head back to enjoy the night air. “Beck?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Where the hell are we?”

I glance over my shoulder. All the houses look the same, and we took one too many turns for me to keep track. “I don’t

know.”

“Terrific.” He struggles to his feet, swaying a little, and searches for his briefs. After he pulls them on, I give him my t-shirt so now we’re both half dressed. There’s no point in arguing with him as he kneels down and uses the hem to try and wipe cum off the car bumper, even though it’s already covered in mud. “We are disgusting,” he observes, scrubbing with his forehead scrunched up. “No self control. Might as well be animals.”

“Yeah. And it gets you hot.” Even in the dark I can see the back of his neck flush.

Once he’s satisfied, I put my arm around his shoulders as we cross the soccer field again, then start hunting through straight, identical streets for a house that has no distinguishing features. We’re fucking lucky it has our rental car out front, or Scout would have to come out in his pajamas to help find us before Mrs. Santra wakes up.

But part of me hopes we never find our way back. Part of me just wants to walk and walk with him beside me forever, in the peaceful night, with our cocks satisfied and our arms around each other. We’re gonna go a lot of good places together in our lives, but right now this is the most perfect thing I can imagine.

DALLAS

NONE of us can afford to lose our jobs, so we have to fly home after barely twenty-four hours in Santa Monica. My mother made a whole list of sightseeing options for our one day in town, in case we needed a way to fill the awkwardness. But after a long, lazy breakfast in the sun-drenched dining room, where we show Mom photos of Tubbs and tell her all about Calvin, we're content to just spend the day enjoying a house that isn't falling apart at the seams.

I perch at the kitchen island most of the afternoon, watching my mom teach Beck how to make samosas so we can take some home with us. Despite what he thinks, my boyfriend-slash-unofficial-husband is incredibly smart and proficient at almost everything he tries. There's just something about the kitchen that drains away his brain cells until he's nothing but a blundering neanderthal with the common sense of a pea. Mom shows him the same steps over and over with infinite patience, but when he turns his back she keeps shooting me horrified looks that have me shaking with silent giggles.

I thought I'd cry again when we hug goodbye and leave for the airport, but yesterday was the time for tears. Today is nothing but pure, sparkling blue skies. Richard is putting me in charge of designing a window display at the store this week, Beck's going to attend a meeting with me, and Mom already has tickets booked in a month for a house-shopping trip. I'm even excited to get back to my very un-heavenly mattress, the one that smells like us and holds the imprint of our bodies.

The airport goes more smoothly when we're not carrying an arsenal of bladed weapons. I even convince Beck to look out the window as we take off, to see Los Angeles falling away into a tiny diorama of a city while he death-grips my hand. All four of us breathe a sigh of relief when we *finally* pull up the bumpy driveway full of potholes late that night. It

would have been madness for me to stay with my mother, because my soul needs this shitty little brick house.

“Tubbs!” As the mastiff comes cantering across the yard, Roman jumps out of the car, drops on his knees in the dirt, and throws his arms around the dog’s thick neck like they’ve been separated for months. Tubbs’ skinny tail is whipping back and forth so hard that his whole body wiggles.

With the slap of shoes on concrete, Calvin hops down the back steps and jogs over with Hobbes curled up in his hoodie pocket. Beck looks startled when the kid throws his one good arm around the man’s waist and squeezes. “Did you have fun? We didn’t break anything.” He hugs me too, resting his head against my chest for a moment, then smiles up at me hopefully.

“Thanks for taking care of the place. It looks like you did a great job.” When I look up, Theo is standing in the doorway with a mug in his hands. It seems like clutching hot drinks is becoming his nervous habit. I have a little bag of my mom’s favorite jasmine blueberry green tea tucked away in my duffel for him. He doesn’t return my smile, but he nods once in response to my wave and looks slightly less like he wants to hit us all with his nail-bat.

I glance over at Beck, who nods. All four of us came up with a plan on the way home. Resting my hand on Calvin’s back, I steer him gently toward the house while Scout grabs our bags. Theo watches us approach with that fight-or-flight skittishness that he can’t seem to get past. When I’m close enough to talk to him, I stop. “There’s something I want to show you and Calvin, if it’s alright.”

His jaw flexes a little as he studies me. “I need to get our shit together so we can go back to the camper.”

“Please. It’s important.”

For a second, I think he’s just going to leave. He’s been fighting for so long he doesn’t know how to stop. Then his eyes stray to Calvin’s haircut and the clean clothes I washed for him. “Alright,” he sighs.

Today is the first time in years that I've felt self-conscious setting up my injection supplies. It's hard to grab the right supplies when Theo's eyes are burning a confused hole in the side of my head. When I've tried and failed five times to rip open the seal on the syringe, Beck reaches past me and gently pries it from my hand. "I've got it."

By the time I duck into the bathroom and change into a pair of shorts so that I can expose my thigh without flashing everyone, Beck has everything ready. I take a deep breath, pressing my palms together like I'm a CEO about to present a keynote speech. "If Calvin wants to medically transition when he's older, he'll more than likely be taking testosterone injections. I thought both of you might like to see what that looks like. I'll try to answer any questions you have."

Theo's uncomprehending stare melts into shock as he processes what I'm saying. "You're not a— I mean..." He presses his lips together firmly, like he knows that he doesn't have the right words and wants to avoid offending me.

"You have to stab yourself with a needle?" Calvin squawks, scooting across the bed on his knees until he can see what Beck's doing. "That's so hardcore." He pokes the testosterone vial with one finger, like he can't believe a few drops of clear liquid can change everything.

"I like to ask someone to help me, but it's up to you."

Beck draws up the medication slowly, making sure the boy has a clear view. He narrates everything, even though it's less medical terminology and more, "then you detach the big thingie and swap it for the skinny guy".

When I look over at Theo, he's watching with laser intensity. His hands on the comforter shift as his fingers faintly follow the shape of Beck's movements, like he's trying to memorize them. He catches me watching and stops, wrapping his arms around himself. Even so, he breaks his disgruntled silence to ask a few questions as Beck finishes injecting the testosterone. Calvin's too busy sitting with his face a couple of inches from my leg, gaping at the needle. "Can I do it?" he pipes up when Beck grabs a band-aid.

“We’ve been talking,” I say slowly as I watch Calvin fiddle with opening the band-aid wrapper. “If you’re willing, we’d like to invite you and Calvin to stay here with us. I know we’re still strangers, but I think we could all help each other.”

Calvin’s head jerks up from where he’s smoothing the bandage over the injection site. “Really?” His pleading eyes fly to his brother. “Say yes, Theo, come on.”

“I’m not sure...” Theo rakes a hand through his hair, his face strained.

“I don’t want us to be cold and hungry anymore,” Calvin bursts out, thumping one fist on the bed. “You don’t either. Beck will keep us safe here, and you won’t have to let people hurt you ever again. *Please.*”

Theo looks down, swallowing hard. I can see the words crushing him, like he’s failed at taking care of his brother. There’s nothing anyone can do to change that feeling, except to give him time and space to heal. “Okay. For now.”

Beck and I exchange a quick, triumphant smile as Calvin bounces on the bed in excitement. I don’t know how long it will take to pry Theo out of the shell he’s built so tightly around himself. Maybe we never will. That doesn’t make him defective. We’re all different here, tied together simply by the fact that we’ve learned how to love and be loved in a way that the darkness outside can’t touch.

Beck keeps his hands stuffed in his jean pockets as we walk into the community center, so we don’t attract any awkward attention. But his shoulder stays pressed against mine. He holds open the squeaky front door for me, then Calvin as the kid scampers through after me. The foyer looks dated but clean, plastered in ads for everything from concerts to lost cats. A double-wide archway leads into a gymnasium, where someone has folded the basketball hoops up into the ceiling and arranged rows of chairs on the scratched wooden floor.

I can feel Beck tense at the sight of a handful of men and women standing around talking quietly. I'm pretty sure he prayed the whole way here to any god who may or may not exist that this meeting would be canceled. When we hesitate for a second, not sure what to do, a tall, broad Latino man in a Rockies jersey separates himself from a conversation and approaches.

"Hey." I tap Calvin's shoulder and nod toward a table with cookies, tortilla wraps, and lemonade. "Go find us a snack."

He shoots me an *I know you're trying to get rid of me* look, but the call of cookies is stronger. As he trots away, the man holds out a hand to Beck. "I'm Santiago, and I'm leading the meeting today. Is this your first time?"

Beck swallows, staring at his hand, then glances at the door. "Be brave for me," I murmur, so only he can hear.

His whole body as stiff as a board, Beck shakes the leader's hand in awkward silence. Just when I think he's never going to speak again, he bursts out so suddenly that it startles both Santiago and me. "What life skills shit do you guys teach? Because this kid—" he jabs a finger in Calvin's direction "—doesn't want to make fucking birdhouses. He wants to be a blacksmith, and forge fucking knives and shit." When he runs out of words, Beck turns his head and stares out the window, his jaw flexing.

Santiago has probably seen a lot, because he just smiles kindly. "We haven't done blacksmithing, but my cousin has a forge just north of town and he loves to teach. I can try to hook you two up with him."

Slowly, Beck drags his stare back to the man and meets his eyes for the first time. "Really? What do I have to do?" He's terrified that they're going to make him come to a certain number of meetings or pull out some other list of demands that force him to change faster than he's ready.

"Just one thing." The man shoots me an understanding glance. "I almost cut my thumb off today trying to slice some cheese for my sandwich. For my own safety, I'd appreciate it if you could bring me a new knife in a couple of months."

Something sharp, and so big that my wife complains about it. Yeah?”

There’s another long pause as Beck glances at me, then Calvin. In spite of everything we said, he grabs my hand impulsively in a tight, sweaty grip. Finally, he lifts his chin and takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

Even though he sits in the back of the group with me and doesn’t participate, Beck is still so exhausted by the end that he sleeps all the way home. He refused to leave the building until he had the address and phone number of the blacksmith. The scrap of paper sits crumpled in his palm as he snores quietly against the window.

When we pull up to the house, Calvin runs inside to tell Theo about all the knives he’s going to make. “Hey, look.” Beck taps his window. I squint past him, but all I can see is dirt. Some yards have a dozen different varieties of roses; ours boasts a stunning array of rocky dirt, dusty dirt, clay dirt, and anthill dirt.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Come on.” His energy returns as he scrambles out of the car and waits impatiently for me to catch up. Snagging my hand, he tugs me along the front of the house to my disastrous failure of a flowerbed. Somehow the only dirt we don’t have is the kind that grows things. But then I see it, straggling up between two chipped pieces of brick—a spindly green stem. It doesn’t even have a bloom. When the hot, dry wind rushes around the corner of the house, the fragile leaves flutter but don’t break.

“It’s a weed.”

“But you planted the flower seeds here,” he protests.

“That’s definitely not a marigold. I’m not being metaphorical. It’s literally a weed, Beck.”

“Oh.” He cocks his head at it. “That’s cool. We should move the rocks to give it space, but not until I make a cage to help hold it up. What store do you buy weed food from?”

“I think weed food is called poison.”

He prods me hard in the ribs. The breeze plays with his pale hair and the reflection of the sky tints his green eyes blue as he grins. “Don’t you dare poison him. I’m naming him after you.”

I wanted a riot of yellow and orange flowers, and this is what I get. My mom is going to pull up our driveway in a month and see nothing but one massive, extraordinarily well-tended weed.

But this is what we do. We love the things that shouldn’t be alive. We fight the rules of nature, because fuck whatever says that we have to stay the way we were born. The things that should poison us just make us stronger. Even though we shouldn’t be here, in a place meant for something beautiful, we find the cracks and we grow toward the light.

EPILOGUE

BECK

“IT’S JUST NOT THE SAME,” Scout complains, snuggling deeper into the lounge part of the sectional, with pillows consuming almost his entire upper body. “It’s not trailer-Christmas.”

I glance around Ms. Santra’s living room. There’s a real fire crackling in the fireplace, letting off the smell of smoke and pine. Seven stockings decorate the mantel, each monogrammed with the first letter of our names, and a douglas fir covered in delicate icicle-shaped ornaments stands so tall in the corner that there’s no room for a star at the top.

“What part do you have a problem with?” Dallas asks from where he’s sprawled in my lap with my arms wrapped around him. “Is it not drafty enough for you? I could open some windows. Or should I get some spiders from the garage and put them in the oven to give your ham the right flavor?”

Scout sticks his lower lip out thoughtfully and fishes another cookie out of the massive pack of Oreos Anjali put in his stocking. “Maybe it’s just that I have to wear pants here.”

Roman pats the top of his head. “The doctor says you’re going to live.” I love when that boy absolutely roasts someone in his quiet, sweet voice. No one ever expects it, not even Scout.

I know what he means, though. Scout and I have done trailer-Christmas for almost ten years, and there’s something bittersweet about a beautifully decorated house, stacks of real gifts, the smell of a holiday feast coming from the kitchen. We spent our whole lives dreaming about a Christmas like this, coming to terms with making our own traditions. Having it thrown in our laps all at once like this is a lot.

“If you don’t take the corners slow, you will *never* cross the finish line. It’s just physics.”

Dal chuckles at the sound of Theo’s exasperated voice in the next room. Anjali got Calvin one of those race tracks

where you attach the cars and drive them with little controllers. Every minute or so, we hear *wizzzzz* followed by a *crack* as Calvin's car flies off the turn and slams into some piece of furniture. Theo still spends a lot of his time with us gruff and distant, even after six months, but we're used to it now. All we need to see is how hard he works to contribute, all the questions he asks about Calvin's transition, and the way he always ends up helping Dal cook or Roman walk the dog.

Every damn year, wherever we have Christmas, the presents I picked get opened last. I go crazy trying to be patient, and this year I'm all jittery about it too because I don't know if I did a good job. I bump my knee against Dallas' ass until he notices me. "Can we go give your mom her thing now?" I whisper. The brush of my lips against his ear makes him shiver as he sits up sleepily and nods.

Trying to act casual, I pull a newspaper-wrapped package out from under my jacket on the arm of the couch and carry it into the kitchen. Everyone else gave their gifts this morning, but I was too embarrassed to do this one. I don't want to sit there in front of everyone, wishing I could sink into the floor as Anjali pretends to like it because she doesn't have a choice.

As Dallas and I appear, she plonks down a steaming tray of the sweet potato casserole we helped her make earlier, fresh from the oven. Her cheeks are flushed from the heat as she pulls off her glasses and wipes away the fog. When she sees the package in my hand, she blinks in surprise. "Did we miss one under the tree?"

"No, this one is just..." I thrust it in her direction when Dallas nudges me. "It's nothing."

Stepping away from the stove, she focuses on unwinding the paper from a foot-long chopping knife with a ladder Damascus pattern that took me eight tries. The handle has her last name laser cut into the wood. "Oh, Beckham," she gasps. "It's beautiful." All I see when I look at it is the slight warp, with some bad grinding near the back of the blade, but she seems to really mean it.

“I’ve been making one fancy knife for each month that I stayed away from the gang,” I mumble awkwardly, picking at the edge of the counter while Dallas rubs my back. “So that’s the third one.”

“I’m so honored to have this.” She turns it over reverently in her hands, then points to a pair of blue and white plates hanging over the stove. “I’ll move those and display it there, so I can look at it all the time while I’m cooking.”

Dallas fidgets and clears his throat. Now that I’m not so stressed, I finally notice that he’s nervous too. “Mom and I have a gift for you, too.”

I frown at him. “You already got me socks and whiskey. What else would I want?”

His smile doesn’t quite reach his anxious eyes. “Just open it.”

Ms. Santra ducks into the pantry, and comes back with a flat, square package that confuses me even more. Cool, smooth glass brushes my fingers as I tear it open to reveal a picture frame with three photos. My eyes automatically scan from left to right—a cute photo of Anjali and a teenage Dallas standing arm and arm in the mountains somewhere, then a picture I remember her taking this fall of me carrying Dallas piggyback through piles of orange and yellow leaves. When I get to the last picture, my brain stutters and skips and my hand goes instinctively to the wallet in my back pocket. “What?”

I’ve looked at this photo every day for fifteen years, but at the same time I’ve never seen it before. Mom’s shadowy, faded hair is the same bright straw color as mine now, and the red on her dress looks brilliant against the brown wall. Every feature of her small, smudged face looks so clear it’s like I’m standing in front of her. All the damage from the creases has been smoothed away until it looks brand new.

“I scanned it and sent it to a website where people restore old photos,” Dallas explains, propping his forehead against my shoulder and slipping his arm around my waist. “The original is still safe in your wallet, I promise.”

Trailing my thumb across the glass, I pick up the frame and hold it closer to my face, drinking in every detail. The different pieces of her I remember in fragments—her hands, her laugh, the fabric of her clothes—starts pulling together into a person. She’s arranged on one side of Dallas and me with Anjali on the other, like one of those family trees people make when their families are worth remembering.

“I hang all of our family pictures in the hall,” Anjali ventures. “I’m sure you’ve seen them.”

I’ve paused a couple of times to study all the faces of Dallas’ grandparents and aunts and uncles, looking for features of his face like a scavenger hunt.

“If you agree, I’d like to hang this there, with the others. We’ll make you another one to take home.” She reaches across the counter and takes my hand carefully. “And I want you to know that it would make me so happy if you called me *mom*. I love all of you boys, but you and Dallas are my sons. Even if you’re not comfortable calling me that, I’ll always love you and be the best mother I can for both of you.”

I don’t have words right now. “Thank you” sounds stupid. If I say “mom”, I might cry again. I’m going to say it, just not today. So I just nod, and her face relaxes into that brilliant smile that wipes away all her intensity.

Later that evening, Dallas digs up some nails and a cheesy little novelty hammer to help me hang the picture. Anjali cleared a place for it right in the middle. “The extra gaps all around it are for our future kids,” Dal observes wryly.

“One, two, three, four,” I count, tapping all the open spaces. “You think that’s enough?” He fights a grin, but it’s all blushing and sappy, because he wants this as much as I do. We’re going to practice on Calvin until we’re good at this parenting thing, then find the kids who don’t feel at home in their bodies, and the ones who wander the streets looking for someone to love them. They’re going to have an amazing grandma, and a bunch of weird uncles.

He hangs my gift up crooked three times before I take it away and do it right, making sure the frame covers up all the

extra holes he made. Then, with laughter and Christmas music and amazing smells pouring in from the other room, I put him against the wall and kiss him until all the planets and suns melt.

Thank you so much for reading *Pretty Dogs*! If you loved Beck and Dallas, please consider leaving a review!

If you haven't read Scout and Roman's (and Tubbs'!) story, check out *Bad Dogs* to find out how these lost boys made it out of Paradise Peaks together.

If you want Theo to get his own book, let me know by following @rileynashbooks on Instagram, joining Riley Nash's Underdogs on Facebook, or subscribing to my newsletter at www.rileynashbooks.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Based in the rainy Pacific Northwest, Riley is an own voices trans author who writes emotional M/M contemporary romance about broken boys who find home in each other and fight the darkness for their happily ever after.