



SCANDAL

BILLIE BLOOM

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B I L L I E B L O O M

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Synopsis

Xander is a storm of contradictions, a shadow lurking in the corners of a world he doesn't quite belong to. Broken and depraved, he thrives on pushing boundaries, testing limits, and taking risks that could cost him everything. His scholarship dangles by a thread, his moral compass spinning in chaotic directions. This semester is his last shot at redemption, a final chance to escape the downward spiral that threatens to consume him.

Enter Cameron, the embodiment of innocence in a place stained with privilege and secrets. Fresh out of the closet and wide-eyed with hope, he wears his heart on his sleeve and believes he can mend even the most shattered souls. As the son of the college president, he's embraced by the ivory towers that Xander teeters on the edge of, and he's determined to prove that love can bridge any gap.

Forced together thanks to the random dorm lottery, Xander and Cameron find themselves sharing a space that becomes both refuge and battleground.

In a world where their love is forbidden, where redemption seems elusive, can Cameron's trust and hope heal the fractures in Xander's soul?

Themes – redemption, bi-awakening, forced proximity, hurt-comfort, forbidden love.

Chapter One

Initialization

I'm not anti-social, I'm just not user-friendly.



Xander

The semester is one hundred and seven days long and I just need to make it to the end. Then I'll be cured. Or maybe a little bit less of a broken fuckup. That's what my therapist says at least, not in those words, of course. Her words were more along the lines of, "take it one day at a time, then one month, then one semester. You can change." You can't hear the mocking tone in my head, but just know it's there because I highly doubt I can change.

Either way, I'm going to give it the old college try and focus on not losing my academic scholarship this year. That's what two and half months of mandatory in-patient treatment has taught me. That I'm not ready to be out in the real world yet. College is a dream, and I don't want to blow it.

In-patient treatment was Dean Runkin's condition for me to stay on this fall. But maybe it has been a good thing. It

sounds cheesy to call it hope, but Joy, that's my therapist, she says I have hope now.

Honestly, it's amazing I haven't been kicked out of school. I was in the wrong last semester. I see that now. Don't need to worry about who else has been in the wrong. Can only worry about myself. I just keep repeating Joy's words until I believe them.

And when I say fucked up, I mean *real* bad, in so many public and well-documented ways. There is a thick file with my offenses tucked away in Dean Runkin's office. He has that special knack for sweeping things under the rug, when it suits him.

According to Dr. Talow from the in-patient center, I have an addiction. Not the kind they have a group for though. Mine is with power and conflict, with drama and pushing boundaries. Assholes anonymous. That's the group I need.

Not that my friends care. They praise me for my fuckery. Doesn't reflect well on them, but it *was* all my idea.

Fuck, it'll be nice to have a dorm room again, and a meal plan. The accommodations at Whitmore College are way better than the Sunnybrook Healing Center. My stomach rumbles at the thought of unlimited dining-hall food. I'm sure I must have lost ten pounds this summer. Probably all muscle. There is no gym at Sunnybrook. I could only do so much with body weight exercises. Time to put it back on.

It's a short walk from the bus station to the dorms. The old cottage-style homes surrounding this campus are tightly packed in neat rows with old maple trees lining the streets. Before the college moved to this area, these were vacation cottages. Now college kids have taken over, mostly. I wonder how different the vibe is now. Definitely rowdier.

My right shoe is just about falling apart, and I stumble on it as I cross the threshold into the ornate brick building that dons the name "Caudwell Hall" above the door in chiseled stone. Probably some ultra rich alumni with the desire to prove themselves. That's how Whitmore College rolls. They go after

new money, because they aren't old enough to draw old money.

I'm one of the exceptions. A poor kid. An orphan, if I really want to make you pity me. They don't give many scholarships here. They don't need to, because plenty of rich people want to send their kids. But Whitmore wants me, because I'm good at computer science. Coding to be specific, with a side of hacking. Not many people want me, but Whitmore does.

That's not true though. Plenty of people want to use me. Whitmore is no exception.

Anyway, I need to remember to grab a few bucks to get new shoes. I don't have much in the bank, just what I managed to scam last semester. That's one thing the dean didn't find out about... the money. Thank fuck. I guess Jordan Phillips has been too embarrassed to admit she's paid me.

Being back in these halls, even though I never stayed in Caudwell specifically, feels familiar in a good way. The gleaming marble floors. The dark black walls with gold fixtures. Whitmore has style. Feels good to be back.

Dammit, I might actually be hopeful.

303. 304. 305. 306. Here goes nothing.

The door to 307, my new dorm room, is already open.

It's weird to stay in the dorms past freshman year at college, but my scholarship requires it, so here I am.

I'm instantly hit by an explosion of colorful objects neatly arranged in half the room. It's like a Target ad for dorm rooms. Overwhelming doesn't even begin to describe it.

My new roommate is standing with an expectant smile on his face, ready to greet me. He is also dressed in bright colors. He matches the damn room. I resist the urge to laugh and take him in. He's small and sinewy, with creamy skin and bright pink cheeks. His eyes are even baby-blue saucers. He's like a cartoon prince with pink lips and dark lashes. He looks so damn innocent. Total Squishmallow of a person.

When I enter the space, I can practically see his brain light up with a million thoughts, which quickly spew out in rapid-fire fashion. “Hey, you must be Xander. I’m Cameron. Nice to meet you. I picked the bed by the window. I hope that’s okay. I didn’t know when you’d be coming, and I wanted to get set up. Sorry, I’m probably talking too much. I do that when I’m nervous. I just transferred here from Susman College. I’m glad they have queer dorms here. It’s nice to be around other gay guys. Unless you are an ally. Or an upperclassman. I heard that upperclassmen stay in these dorms too.”

The boy with the verbal diarrhea, my new roommate, is short, especially compared to me. Sort of a twink, although I’m not sure if that word is offensive. I’ll need to learn all the terminology if I’ll be living in the queer dorms. They don’t really call it that officially. It’s called ‘inclusive housing’.

But anyway, that’s what Cameron reminds me of, a twink. His face is pretty and soft, and I bet he’d cringe if he knew what a piece of shit I was. This boy looks like the definition of innocence. Like a Bambi in human form. I wouldn’t be shocked if there was a glowing halo on his perfect head.

“Whatever,” I mutter, and toss my duffel bag into my corner of the room. I don’t have much to my name. Just the duffel stuffed with clothing and my laptop. My computer is my favorite friend and my worst fucking enemy, because people always want to use me for what I can make this computer do. That’s how the world works, I learned long ago. People find a way to use you, so you just have to make sure you can use them right back.

As I crash onto the bare mattress, Cameron starts up again. “I brought a mini fridge and you’re welcome to use it. I can even grab snacks you like when I do the shopping. I’m lucky enough to have a car here. I can take you places. Whatever you need. Hey, are you going to the welcome party later? We could walk down together. But you should know that I am gay, so if you don’t want to be seen with me, I get it, but I

know that Whitmore has an anti-bullying policy about that. Not that I think you're a bully, I'm just saying."

How wrong he is. I give him the side eye, which seems to stop him in his tracks. Sitting up, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and look straight into his big doe eyes. "Listen, kid, no offense or anything, but you don't want to be my friend. The sooner you learn that, the better off your life will be."

Cameron looks smacked by my words. He blinks a few times. Then he just smiles in response to my warning. What the actual fuck is wrong with this guy?

He takes a deep breath, and I brace myself for more word vomit. "My dad always calls me a chameleon because I can make friends with anybody. Plus, I love learning new things. So don't worry. You won't scare me away. I once had this friend who even went to jail for a while. And you're a student here, so you can't be as bad as that even..." he pauses to laugh. *Again, so wrong.* "Anyway, not saying you're the type to go to jail, of course. And maybe you need a friend like me who can put up with anything, because you seem to be down about something. Hey, should we get a pizza? I'm starving."

There's no time to tell the kid to fuck off because a guy appears in our doorway. He's a big jock like me, but I don't recognize him from the gym. Maybe he plays football. The players have their own better, private gym. "Hey, Cam, your dad said to stop by and introduce myself. I'm Zack Browning." The guy pauses as his eyes land on me. "Xander Briggs?" he questions, a brow raising with concern. Maybe he's shocked to see me in the inclusive dorms. Not that I give a damn what anyone thinks of me.

"Yeah. Have we met?" I grit out in a clipped tone.

Zack's eyes narrow. "No, but my *girlfriend* Haley knows you."

Shit. Haley? The girl from the top of the pyramid. The girl whose supposed best friend was all too happy to fuck her over for a viral video. All at my suggestion...

Cameron is bound to find out one way or another that I'm a total slime puppy, but for some reason, the thought of him knowing bugs me.

"Cam, let's take a walk, huh?" Zack suggests, and Cam shrugs, blissfully unaware of my reputation, which I'm sure won't be the case for much longer. When they leave, I shut the door. Not interested in having any randoms stop by, thinking I'm the friendly type.

Swallow it down. That's my only option. Live with my mistakes. That's what Joy says. If I'm going to change, I need to own up to my past and grow from it. No hiding. No lying. Already wrote an apology to Jordan this summer. Even though she was happy to let Haley fall. Anyway, the letter was part of the conditions from Dean Runkin when he let me stay. Honestly, if I wasn't so good at coding, the school would have kicked me out after Jordan's father's complaint came in. Guess she's started feeling a little guilty that Haley has been in a coma. But Whitmore is happy to keep me, or rather, to keep the intellectual property rights to the code I write for them.

I pull out my clothes and shove them into the drawers. There's no rhyme or reason to the order. Underwear, jeans, T-shirts... never saw the point in separating them. Just grab some shit and go.

Such a difference from my new roomie. I can image Cam cringing at my organization choices. Good thing he's not here to see it. I look over at his little cart with the clear drawers that's complete with labels: Office Supplies, Utensils and Plates, Bathroom.

Jesus. We couldn't be a worse match. I just hope I can resist the urge to fuck with him. He's perfect prey. So trusting. So open. *Damn.* I'm such a fuck for even thinking that.

Nayla's face appears in the cracked door, just as I'm starting to spiral deeper into my self-loathing. She steps inside and tilts her head, her twin puff-ball pigtails bouncing slightly with the effort. "Well, this looks cozy. You know you can put sheets on your bed. Stay a while."

“No use getting too comfortable,” I grunt, and stand up to hug Nayla close to me. It’s been a long summer away from her. We’ve been best friends since we were five, and she knows how to keep me in line. So, needless to say, she is one of the few women immune to my charms. Thank fuck for that.

She assesses the decorated half of my room, eyebrows shooting up her forehead at the sight and I know what she’s thinking. Where my side is as bare as a prison cell, which suits someone like me, Cameron’s looks like a unicorn vomited all over it. It’s quite the juxtaposition.

Nayla chuckles. “So, who’s the roomy?”

“Some kid named Cameron. He’s a goody-two-shoes that talks too much. Pretty though,” I mutter those last words absently, and Nayla gives me a suspicious look.

“You know, your celibacy pledge extends to guys too.”

“Very funny,” I groan. “I didn’t take a celibacy pledge so much as swear off women. And I’m not gay or anything, so you don’t have to worry. Besides, I didn’t mean pretty as a compliment.”

“Sure, you didn’t. Pretty is ugly, up is down, and farts smell like roses. Got it. Let’s get something to eat because your side of the room is fucking depressing.”

“And yours is so much better?” I challenge her for no good reason, because I know hers has always been better. Nayla has taste. And parents who give a shit, even if they don’t have much. So, she has the dorm comforts that I swear I don’t give a fuck about.

When she pinches my bare arm just above the elbow, I switch the subject. “Who’s *your* new roommate?”

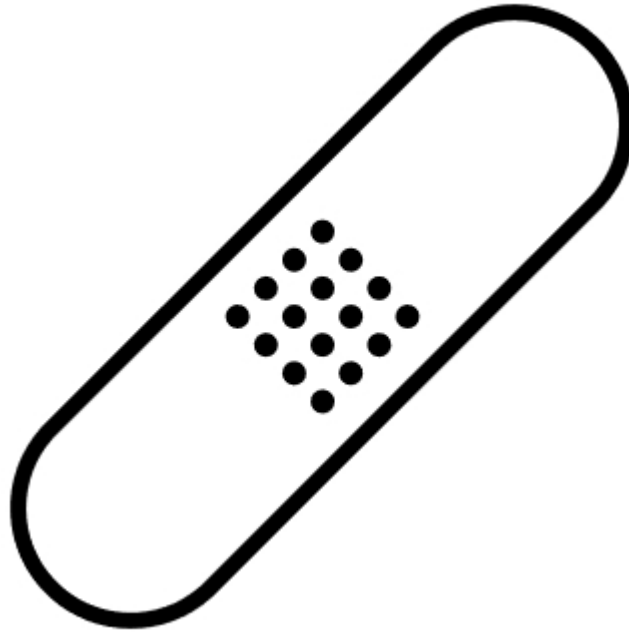
She gives me a warning look, before answering, “Name’s Bertha. She’s a real troll. Got green skin and warts and everything.”

“Hilarious. Listen, I’ve made it seventy-one days without trying to fuck with anyone. I’m practically healed.”

“To be fair though, you were under the watchful eye of the Sunnybrook system.”

She waits for my retort, but it doesn't come. Joy warned me of the same thing. That things would be harder when I got back to college. There would be situations that tempt me to act out. “Just keep me on speed dial, okay? No judgement. I need you around.”

Poor Nayla. She doesn't need me like I need her. If anything, I'm holding her back in life. But I'm not going to tell her as much. She's the only person who gives a shit about me. I know, poor orphan boy. Listen to me, I sound like a total ass. Enough self-loathing, time to fill that empty hole inside me with some food.



Cameron

My new roommate is drop-dead-gorgeous. Seems a little skinny for his clothes though, like maybe he lost some weight. His face is like a model, with hollow cheeks and a jutting jaw. He's got a fat upper lip and a perfect square nose. And those eyes. They are orange-brown. I didn't even know that color existed. It takes me a second to recover from the assault on my hormones.

Then my word vomit starts immediately. But I don't have time to make too big a fool of myself, because a football player my dad sicced on me is currently showing me around campus.

Sigh. So much for a magical meet cute in which me and my new roommate fall in love. Junior year is not starting off the way I've expected. Not one bit.

Xander Briggs and I may have only spent a few minutes in each other's presence, but I'm a good read on people, and I can already gather one thing about him. He is *seriously* emotionally unavailable. I'll try not to have an instant crush on that fact.

If I had to bet, he's straight. Something about that single duffel bag, not making the bed up with any sheets thing tipped me off. Not that gay men can't have no sense of style or be minimalists. I'm just saying, it's a vibe I'm getting based on his appearance, which wow, makes me kind of a shit for assuming. I'll have to keep asking. How he managed to dodge my question... not that I asked outright. I'll have to try again later.

It does seem weird that Zack of all people is giving me these weird glances as he shows me around campus. I think they might equate to a bi-curious stare. Or he's just flirting because of who my dad is.

"This campus is quite pretty," I hear Zack say as we walk along the sidewalk. My attention focuses back to my surroundings. There are lots of mature trees, all full of swaying leaves. They won't last long. Not in northern Michigan. My dad promised the climate here is similar to Indiana, but I don't see how, not when we're seven hours north. Seven hours colder. What the heck is that going to be like?

"What do you like to eat?" Zack asks in a loud voice, a mild tone of irritation. I realize he may have asked me more than once. Whoops. Was I tuning him out as he explained things about Whitmore? Maybe. He drones on in this self-important way that kind of already drives me crazy.

"Uh, anything. I'm flexible when it comes to food."

Zack nods and continues on his one-man tour of the small town that surrounds the campus. "You'll want to avoid The Box because that place will give you food poisoning, but The Fishbowl has decent stuff. Oh, and that building is where you'll have all your computer science classes. What else am I missing?" he asks himself as I saunter slightly behind him, taking in the scenery, which at the current moment is his butt. It's decent. Nothing to write home about.

Since coming out Freshman year, I really thought that I'd spend Friday nights dancing up against hard bodies covered in glitter under neon lights, but I was so wrong. My last school,

Susman College, was in a small ignorant town that I lived in for the past eight years.

But when I came out, things got progressively dangerous. After two years of cold glances at best, and outright threats at worst, Dad started finding a more accepting school. Whitmore fit the bill, priding itself on being alternative and open to the elite of society's outcasts. As soon as Dad signed the contract for the presidency of Whitmore, I filled out my transfer paperwork and booked a spot in the dorms. Did I mention I'm the president's son? That's why a star jock like Zack is bothering to show me around.

Anyway, I just know this year is going to be loads better. So long as too many people don't find out that my dad runs the school, because in my experience, that hasn't been a good thing. People are weird about it. If anything, at Susman, that made me even more of a target than being gay.

"Can we grab something to eat now, actually? I'm pretty hungry."

"Oh, shit, my bad," Zack quickly apologizes. This is another reason why I prefer that people don't know who my dad is, because they treat me weird when they know.

"Don't sweat it, and hey, uh, can I ask you a quick favor?" I stare down at the tightly packed brick pavers beneath my bright-blue sneakers before stealing a glance at the imposing physique next to me.

Zack bites his lip and smiles. There it is again... I may still be a baby gay, but I'm pretty sure that's a flirty look. Or maybe he's just being friendly. He is doing my dad a favor by showing me around campus. Couldn't say. I still haven't quite figured out flirting. "Sure, what do you need?"

"Can you not tell anyone about my dad? It's just... people get weird about it, in my experience, so I'd rather it not be a *whole thing*." I can't help the jazz hands I wave at the end of that statement. I held them in for far too long to not wave them now.

“No problem. I’m really good at keeping secrets.” Zack practically purrs that last word as he drops his voice low. I’m either crazy, or he is actually factually hitting on me. But he said he has a girlfriend, so I’m starting to question whether Zack is a good guy or not. Or maybe I am really this shitty at picking up on cues. I swear I am usually great at reading people, unless it’s romantically. Romance is a deep mystery to me.

“Oh, and something you should know, which is definitely not a secret around here...” Zack starts, and my interest is immediately piqued.

“What’s that?” I ask in his pause.

“About your roommate,” he leads in slowly.

“What about him?”

Zack looks around us, as if checking for a clear coast, then he pulls me off the sidewalk, into a little alcove, where we stand pressed close to each other. His voice drops to a whisper. “Be careful around him.”

“Why?” I ask quickly, needing more than a vague warning. “Careful of what?”

“He uses people, to get what he wants. He finds out what they want and exploits that for his own gain. He doesn’t care about anyone. He’s a total sociopath.”

The words would have more meaning, if it wasn’t for the fact that Zack is pressed so closely up against me, that I can feel him on my thigh. You know, feel *him*. Okay then.

For the moment, I am not sure if I believe Zack’s warning. He’s the one who seems to be the wolf in sheep’s clothing. He’s setting my creeper alert off.

“Thanks for the warning,” I say dismissively as I quickly step back out into the sunlight.

A few awkward minutes later, we enter the noisy dining hall. “Thanks for showing me around, by the way. I know my dad can be pushy sometimes. He thinks having a star on campus befriend me will somehow make me cooler.”

Zack passes me a tray. “I volunteered for it. But you’re right, he did ask some of the senior team members if we were up for the tour. Your dad seems like a guy who really cares.” I can practically hear the sucking up, backpedaling tone he is pulling on me. Making up for pressing his semi into me, I presume.

Not to mention, I can never be sure if someone like Zack is genuine because I’m not ignorant of the needs of a football team. Dad sets the school’s budget now, and the football team relies on a big generous budget. So, the schmoozing is starting already.

But Zack is right about one thing, my dad really does care. That’s why he left his last job and came to Whitmore. He may be president now, which means a great paycheck, but for most of my years growing up, he was a single dad living on a low faculty salary, paying for my private school education to give me the best shot at making something of myself. That means we still need my tuition waiver, because there’s lots of debt to catch up on from the past twenty years.

“Sure, yeah. Hey, are those your friends? They’re waving at you.”

Zack notices the group of guys at a table shoving their faces in between waves. “Oh yeah. That’s the squad. Want to go meet them?”

I brace myself as I grab a black-bean burger and smear it with mustard. “Yeah, sure. Meet you over there. I just want to get some salad.”

As he joins his friends, I see him saying something to them, and they all keep glancing my way. I’m just going to rise above my awkward feelings and head over. No big deal. I can do this. I’m a chameleon after all. Plus, since my dad has paid the team a personal visit, I’m sure they already know who I am. At least they’ll be polite.

“Great to meet you, Cam.” One guy holds out his hand as I approach, and I balance my tray in one hand to shake his.

“How you liking Whitmore?” another asks, sliding over to make room for me.

I’m sweating bullets from the spotlight, but I swallow the lump in my throat and slide into the empty space. The iced tea on my tray wobbles and I grab it just before it tips. “It’s great. Real friendly folks. How’s the team looking?”

I’ve learned that athletes love this question, and these guys eat it up as expected. They break out into a chorus of stats and jargon that I can more or less follow. At least it gives me time to take a few much-needed bites of food.

I was so eager to not miss my new roommate, I might have skipped breakfast waiting for him. What a letdown that’s been. Maybe a giant part of me was hoping for a hot gay roommate who would fall madly in love with me and show me all the things I’d been missing. But that isn’t Xander. I do have a pretty good gaydar, even if I can’t figure out flirting, and it so does *not* boop for him.

At that thought, I feel the heat of a pair of eyes staring me down from behind and I turn instinctively. As if summoned by my thoughts, Xander is sitting a few tables over, indeed giving me a death stare. *Okay then.*

When Xander catches my eyes, he bolts up from his table and stalks to the trash where he buses his tray in what I can only describe as a fit of rage, before he stomps out of the cafeteria. This guy is all sorts of odd, and man do I want to unwrap that package and find out why.

I shouldn’t care. I should leave him alone. He has told me as much himself. But he seemed so sad earlier, and sad is my kryptonite. Doesn’t really matter what the circumstance is, if I see someone looking sad, I’m going to swoop in and be their friend. I can’t help myself.



Xander

The cafeteria may have been too much, too fast for me. Smiling faces, laughing groups of co-eds. These probably don't trigger normal people, but to me? All I see are greedy faces. Attention whores. I mean, in my defense, there are literally four different people filming themselves right now. I'm supposed to just ignore all that?

Instead of ignoring it, my mind keeps wandering to all the ways to make these elite brats show their true colors, all the ways I can get them to exploit themselves. See how far they will take it, just to be internet famous.

They are all so eager to do it. Who knew rich kids would be so money hungry? Even growing up with everything, they still want more. Money. Attention. Spotlight.

When I spot Cameron, whose pink lips are wrapped around a fat burger, that little ingenue makes my chest ache in a weird way. He looks so different from everyone else. His eyes are trained down. He seems nervous. Then again, he's surrounded by a bunch of fratty football players. That can't be his crowd. He sticks out like a sore thumb.

“Midnight,” I say the codework quickly to Nayla and stand up from the table, rushing to the trash cans to bus my tray. That’s the word we agreed on using, when I was starting to have thoughts of fucking with people for my own pleasure. Only, the truth of this moment is that Cameron gives me new weird thoughts that I don’t have the mental energy to process.

I don’t even look back at my friend, because I know she will understand. Booking it to my room, I check the time. Still a little early for my dose of Naltrexone, but I’m taking it anyway. Just got a thirty-day supply, to get me over the hump. Right now, it feels like a magic pill, even though it doesn’t do much, it does help dull the ache when a craving to fill my emptiness by making someone else empty hits. I feel around my duffel for the bottle, and it rattles in reply. Twisting the cap, I swallow a pill down, without even a sip of water. Getting pretty good at that.

Crashing back on the bed, I pull open my phone and click the meditation video my therapist has sent me. Calming music plays out, a little chime dings three times in the background, and I practice my breathing.

A deep voice begins, “I am working my recovery.” Taking a sharp inhale, I repeat the words before the next affirmation starts. “I am finding my integrity one day at a time.”

Trying my best to believe the words, I repeat the speaker again, “I choose to live in the moment.”

I don’t even realize when the door opens as I say the next line, “My past actions do not define me in the present.” But the sound of the door closing has me jolting upright and smashing my screen to stop the video.

I must be glaring daggers at Cameron, based on the look of fear on his face. “Sorry. Hope I didn’t disturb you. Maybe we should have a signal for privacy. Could come in handy, for when you have girls over? Or guys?” There is a definite question in his tone, and I take a bit of pleasure in not answering.

He pulls in a breath, and continues, “Or if I have a guy over. Though you don’t have to worry about that because I don’t really know how to meet people yet. But maybe by the end of the year I will have it figured out. I didn’t really have a chance to at my last school, it was in a conservative town... and I’m rambling again, sorry.”

I bite my cheek to avoid chuckling at Cameron’s incessant babble. I don’t deserve to laugh anymore. Not yet, anyway.

If anything, his chatter *is* kind of a nice distraction. Perching my elbows on my knees, I stare at him until he sits down on his brightly colored bedspread. Man, he looks scared of me. *Good, he should be.* “You talk a lot.”

“S-sorry,” he stutters, face falling a bit.

I lean back, resting my head on my hands against the concrete wall. “Go on then.” I give him an expectant look.

His brows stitch together. “About what?”

I stifle a laugh and it turns into a snort. He couldn’t stop himself every other time, but being put on the spot has him tongue-tied. Noted. “Say anything.”

“Uh. Um...” he mumbles, clearly out of his element. Why do I love that so much? His unsureness, the way he fidgets as he pulls a knee protectively to his chest. This is probably not a good sign, that I already like toying with him. But there is something different about him. He’s not made of pure ego. That much is clear.

“Well. I, uh, I just signed up for the LGBTQ+ student group. That should be fun. They have lots of mixers and events for helping us meet people. Although I assume being in the inclusive dorms means I’ll meet guys around our building. I wonder if straight people have anything like that? Then again, I guess every party is a straight-people mixer. Though I bet you don’t need any help meeting uh... girls? Guys? People?”

There it is again, his not-so-subtle questioning. I stare him down for a minute, enjoying the eager expression on his

waiting face. “What’s your major?”

His smile twitches, much to my satisfaction. “Computer science, you?”

My eyes lift in surprise. “Same.”

“This school has one of the strongest in the country, so that must mean you’re really good. Write any code I’d recognize?”

Coding is one of the few things that my brain allows me to obsess with that doesn’t directly wreak havoc on my life, though people seem to find clever ways for me to abuse my talent. “You heard of WriteMe?”

His eyes bug wide. “You wrote the software that students use to cheat on papers?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Wrote the software to detect papers that have been created by it.”

Cameron leans back into his pillows and pulls a large ice-cream-sandwich-shaped Squishmallow into his lap. At the sight of him all folded up like that, I get this strange overwhelming urge that I want to be in that Squishmallow’s place, being squeezed into his lap. *What the fuck, dude?*

I stand up quickly, and grunt, “Gotta take a piss.”

Out in the hall, I press my back to the door and take a few deep breaths. A guy holding a stuffed toy shouldn’t threaten my sobriety, but it so does. Am I really that fucked up? I swear, I’m getting worse before I’m getting better.

At least I’ve been writing more code than ever before, and that’s my key to staying in good graces at Whitmore. I run through some code in my head and eventually, my heartrate settles.

When I enter the room again, Cameron’s sitting at his desk browsing a website for the LGBTQ+ student club he mentioned. “Website’s shit,” I mutter as I close the door.

“It is awful, isn’t it? It doesn’t even link to resources. I wish I could get a spider code up to pull in resources, at minimum. I’ve only been into coding three years though, so

I'm sure I'm nowhere near where I need to be to pull it off. Maybe you can help me out when I get stuck this year?"

"Maybe," I say as if it's a remote chance, then I lie back on my bed and hook an arm over my eyes.

Cameron spins around to face me. I can't see him, but I can hear him. I can *feel* him looking at me. This kid doesn't scare easily, which somehow makes him more intriguing. "How long you been coding anyway?"

"Sixteen years."

"Holy smokes. That's a long time. You could probably teach the courses." There is clear admiration in his tone, and honestly, he isn't entirely wrong. Sometimes I learn new things or different ways of thinking from the professors, so that is saying something. And the courses give me time to write my own code, so I don't mind sitting through the lectures. But all of that really makes me sound like a dick. Well, a bigger dick than he probably already realizes I am after talking with Zack, so I decide not to respond.

There are heavy footsteps barreling down the hall that stop at our door. Then there's a loud banging sound. "Briggs. Get your ass out here. Time to get our drink on, bro."

It's Tanner. *Shit*. I knew I'd have to face my friends sometime. Is it too much to hope for one night of peace?

Opening the door, Tanner punches me square in the shoulder and I take a step back at the impact before whaling him one back.

"Who's this?" he asks, looking around me.

"Cameron," a small voice answers. My poor roomie's face looks a little horrified. Fair enough. My friends are a bit *bro-ish*, whatever that says about me.

"Dude, come get wasted with me and let's find some chicks." To Cameron, he adds, "Briggs is the king of pussy. If you need a wingman, just hang around this one and he'll toss you some scraps every now and then."

Well, that's fucking embarrassing. Especially because Cameron appears to be blushing. The sooner I can get rid of Tanner, the better. I hook my arm around him and steer him into the hall. "Bro, I, um, I can't party with you for a while. I'm on probation with the college. No drinking. No parties. No girls. That's the deal they offered so I can keep my scholarship."

Some of my friends are still oblivious to the fact that the complaints lodged against me are valid. They feel the need to defend me in all my bullshit. I'm trying hard not to be sucked in by their logic. *I am culpable for my past actions.*

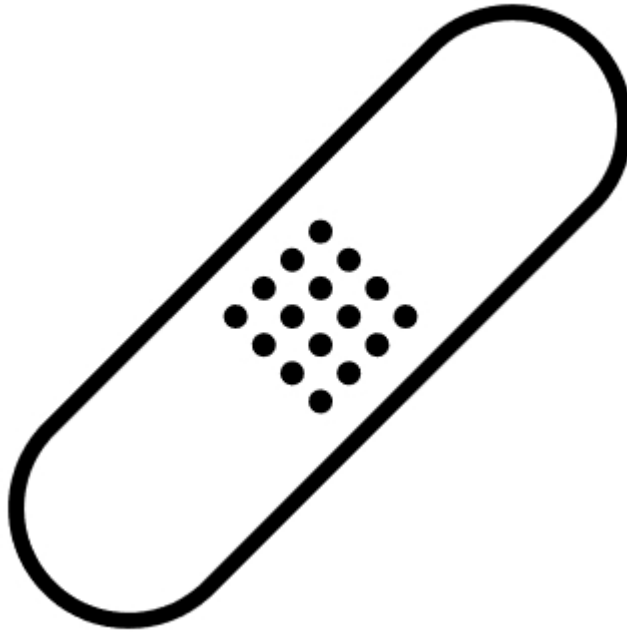
"They can't do that, man. Total bullshit. I'm telling you, let my dad get you a lawyer. Those girls won't know what hit 'em."

My head shakes vigorously. "No, thanks, man. They need me to settle down a bit. That's all. I got this. We'll be back together on the hunt in no time." That's a total lie, because in order to maintain my assholes-anonymous recovery program—a name Joy isn't that fond of, but supports since I seem to like it so much—hitting on women and drinking are both completely off the table. Whenever I drink, my desire to fuck with people gets way worse.

"Shit. That's fucking gay. If you change your mind, we'll be at Sigma tonight."

Even though I'm cringing at his slur, like the asshole I am, I don't correct him. "Uh, yeah, sweet, man, maybe. I'll hit you later." More lies. Thankfully, lying is not one of the things on my new AA list, even though it maybe should be.

Now I feel like such an asshole, there is only one thing that will calm me down. Dressed in jeans and slide-ins, I beeline for the back door and set off at a run. I'll only stop once my legs and lungs sting from overuse. It's the only way I can fill the hole inside me, by making my muscles ache.



Cameron

I have figured out two important things about Xander in the last few days.

First, he is a total enigma. Second, see the first. The man is like a magic eight ball... you never know what you're going to get out of him. Definitely seems a little depressed though, which is sad, because people that hot shouldn't be depressed. I know, I'm probably being an asshole again. It's just that he's unbearably attractive, and sleeps less than four feet away from me at night. How cruel.

Anyway, I shouldn't even be thinking about Xan right now. I mean, Xander. Not giving him a cutesy nickname. No sir. Anyway, there's no reason for him to pop into my brain. I'm sitting at breakfast with my potential new best friends from the LGBTQ+ student group, picking at the berries in a bowl of Greek yogurt.

Currently, they are shouting out ideas for the queer Halloween party, which is still two months away, but they apparently covet the holiday.

“Gay icons?”

“Superheroes, but queer!”

“Lady Gaga fashion?”

“Oh, I know, we should do dead millennial brands. You know, like Blockbuster, American Apparel, Toys-R-Us, Myspace, Blackberry.”

“We’re not millennials,” I laugh. “But I like that one best. Is it too mean though?”

“How so?” Leo counters. Man, he is cute. Blond and really pretty in the face. I wish I was that pretty. Maybe I am. I wouldn’t know. Even with these guys, I never get hit on... so there’s that.

“I don’t know. Not mean to the brands, but is it making fun of people who are older than us?”

“Didn’t mean it that way,” Dillan says with a shrug. He is taller than Leo and has these pretty wide-set eyes.

Owen, the smallest of the group, taps his chin. “I think it’s a good one. We can just say go as defunct brands, but leave out the millennial part.”

“People are going to wear whatever anyway, do we really need a theme?” Leo reasons.

Seriously, since I am starting to become friends with a group of gay guys, why isn’t anyone looking at me with fuck-me eyes? Maybe I have too much of a baby face. That’s probably it. I steal a glance at my face in the window’s reflection and suck my cheeks between my teeth. That makes me look like a cocked-out model, which is possibly better than looking like an overgrown toddler. But there isn’t any fat on me to lose. I’m practically skin and bone already. And I don’t want to give up the little peach I worked all summer for.

In this day and age, butts are king.

Back at my dorm, after a long-overdue self-love session, I am obsessing about my baby face, studying it in the mirror, when Xander walks into the room. Wasn’t he supposed to be

in class all morning? I quickly jump back from the mirror, not wanting him to see me being so damn insecure.

I swear, he fights back a chuckle. “What’s so funny?” I say in an uncharacteristically bold moment.

“Easy, kitten,” he mutters, almost under his breath, but not quite.

I spin around to face him. “What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

He takes me in, eyeing me. My hands are planted on my hips and I’m tapping my toe and the whole thing makes me look a little ridiculous, so I straighten and will my hands to hang lamely at my sides. “I’m not a kitten. If anything, I’m like, a... a lion.” *Smooth.*

“It was a joke. I’m aware you’re not a kitten, even if you are cute like one.” He turns away from me, thankfully, as my mouth drops open.

“Did you just call me cute?” I manage with a shaky voice.

Xander looks up at me with those orange-brown eyes of his, and I feel like I’ve been smacked.

He doesn’t speak, so I press it. “Didn’t think you’d call a gay guy cute, not when you like smashing pussy with your bros.” Okay, so I might have been sitting on some hurt feelings from the other day, when Zander didn’t correct his friend’s use of ‘gay’ as a bad thing.

But my words do the trick.

Xander’s face is now the one that looks smacked. He seems to be chewing the insides of his cheeks, they are so far sunk in, his jaw is working overtime.

We’re locked in a stare down, broken only when he lets out a frustrated growl. His eyes slam shut and he turns away from me. His hands scrub roughly down his face and then with another growl, he swipes his backpack from the floor and stomps from the room.

When the door slams, my stomach sinks into a pit of guilt. *Why should I feel bad?* I try to coach myself, but it's no use. My kryptonite is activated. Xander is clearly hurt, even though he hid it with anger. I can see that. And it was my words that did it.

Pulling on my sneakers and grabbing my keycard, I head out after him. The hallway is empty, and there is no way to know where he ran off to. What am I even doing anyway? What would I say if I found him?

I'm being stupid. Xander clearly doesn't like me. He said I was cute in the same way an infant is cute. That doesn't mean anything. I don't owe this guy anything. I need to learn to ignore him. Which is hella hard, because of the hotness, and the way his fuck-boy cologne smells. That stuff is potent.

With a deep cleansing breath, I head back inside and decide to get start on my homework. Priorities, first. Damaged boys, second. *I mean, never.*

When I flop down on my bed, I feel something hard press into my leg and that's when I just about die. How long did I leave Mister Big lying here? Oh. My. Fuck.

Chapter Two

Iterations

If at first, you don't succeed, call it version 1.0.



Xander

I'm trying not to be a total prick to the person I have to share a twelve-by-twelve room with. I really am. But today, it's just a little bit fucking hard.

It's all Cameron's fault too. How the fuck is a guy turning me on?

Here's the thing... I came back early from class because my head was fucking splitting in two and there was nothing happening in the lecture that mattered anyway, so I thought I'd lie down. But when I got back to our room, I saw something lying on his bed... Fuck, I can't even think about it right now without feeling an overwhelming urge...

What I saw brought back every sordid desire I've ever had, times a thousand. How the fuck is that possible? I mean, Cam is so unlike everyone else here. In his own category. Scrappy. Sweet. I can read that much about. Like he fits in, but

doesn't belong with these pricks. And thinking of his all soft like that... then seeing a fucking dildo... now I can't stop thinking about how he uses that thing. *Fuck*. How he could use me... but no. I can't think like that. I swore off women because I need to get myself under control. I assume that extends to guys too.

Then I called him cute, which seemed to piss him off. And *fuck*, he *did* overhear Tanner, and now he knows I'm a total prick for not correcting the slur. Fucking great.

I beelined it the fuck out of there for an hour, but the room is empty now, and Cameron's wet towel is hanging up. The dildo is hidden away again, and since I can't stop thinking about how big and rainbow it was, I have to listen to my meditation video with a cold rag over my head and a bag of ice on my balls. If that doesn't jolt me into behaving, nothing will.

A few hours later, Cam returns, but I'm under control now, more or less. He sits down without a word and starts working on homework. I try not to watch his screen, but I can't help myself. The mistakes he's making in his code are grating on me, and I want to stalk over there and fix everything. Instead, I text Nayla, *Midnight*, because I know she'll drop everything and come distract me. I'm so damn selfish.

As if on cue, there's a knock on the door a few minutes later. I lean over to grab the handle and pull it open a crack. "Hey, you."

"You rang?" she cocks a brow at me and then looks over at Cameron. "Hey, you're Cameron, right? I'm Nayla," she calls out in a friendly voice, and he turns to give a polite smile and wave. He's such a good boy. A total angel-faced sugar plum, and I'd love to wreck his beautiful face. *What the fuck am I thinking?*

"Come 'ere," I reach for Nayla and pull her down next to me and hug myself around her like I'm a boa constrictor.

"You have no sense of boundaries," she squeaks out, struggling to breathe in my grip. I loosen it and she shifts away from me. "Should we, uh, go for a walk or something?"

Cameron whips around in his chair and gives us a conflicted look. “I can go for a walk, if you need to, um, use the room?” he says like it’s a question. I am quietly learning a lot about Cameron. Like that he always needs to please other people, and he’ll bend over backwards to make someone comfortable. And that he really wants to know whether I’m gay or straight. Man, if I was into guys, if this was three months ago, this kid would be serious in trouble.

Nayla and I give each other a long look at his question before we burst out laughing.

Cameron looks between us until we finally stop. His face is twisted in question.

“Let me let you in on a little secret, Cam, cause you seem like a great guy,” Nayla starts, and I shoot her a warning glance, which she easily ignores. “If you ever see me falling for this fuckface, you just call the mental hospital and turn me right in, okay? Promise me, Cam. Say you promise.”

He sputters the words, uncertainly, “I-I promise.”

“Good.” Nayla smirks, lying back across my chest.

“Ouch,” I say feigning offense, and she chuckles lightly. I grab my chest to emphasize my faux hurt. Even though I was actually in a mental hospital this summer, more or less. I’m not bothered by that part. Or any part really. Everything she says is true. I’m damaged goods.

She gives me this look like, *you’re such a shit, but I love you*. “No less than you deserve, you prince of darkness.”

I can’t help eyeing Cam to gauge his reaction. It’s just as I expect, a little shocked and confused, but also intrigued, which is dangerous for him. No, not dangerous. I’m not interested in Cam. He’s a guy. Why do I keep getting that mixed up? That’s how fucked-up I am. That’s all there is to it. I’ve crossed so many wires, and now I’m going on month three of no sex. Part self-inflicted punishment for being an asshole, part trying to avoid any fantasies that would make me want to act out.

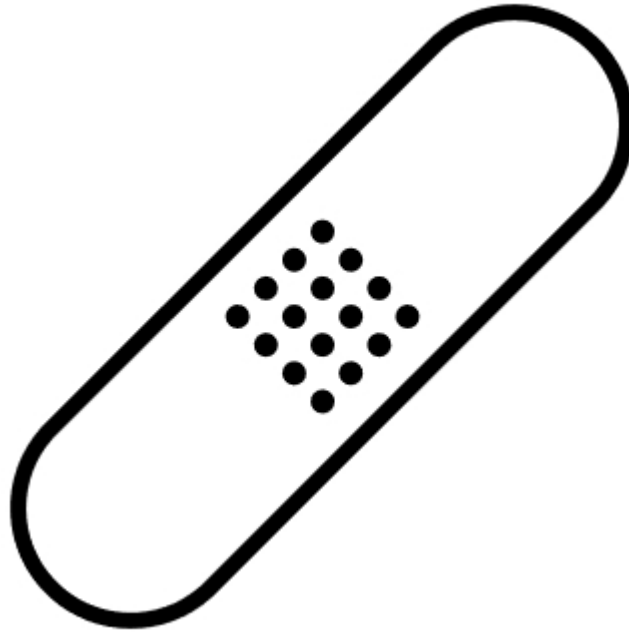
Not even cranking it. I should be celebrating, but I don't want to count my chickens and all that shit. I'm only lasting this long because I'm hiding from the real world. Hell, Nayla eats with me and walks me to class. I'm practically supervised every time I leave my room. Except for when I run, which is going to be my new thing. Maybe time to get some running shoes though, since my sneakers are still fucked, and I completely forgot to get a pair. Those sandals made my feet ache like hell.

"Hey, Cam?" Nayla asks as she pinches the skin along the underside of my arm absently.

"Yeah?" Cameron asks, turning back to her.

"You're missing a closing bracket after the function statement. In case you didn't notice."

"Thanks," he mutters in a defeated sound, and turns back to the monitor.



Cameron

Whatever got into Xander a few days ago day seems to have died down a little. He's being less of a jerk face now, but still kind of weird. That guy is an enigma, in a bad way. I decide now. Which is why I want to figure him out even more.

Maybe the best way to do that is by talking to him, not staring at him in the middle of the night like a fricking creep. He's making these weird noises though, like it's a nightmare, or a good dream... I can't tell. He definitely seems to be sleeping. And I'm barely even noticing that he's in gray sweatpants with a big flagging boner. Nope, haven't noticed that at all. Who doesn't use sheets and a blanket? He's likely some kind of sociopath, like Zack says.

But yeah, that tent in his sweats... my guts ache just looking at that thing.

I'm too inexperienced. That's the problem.

If I had more experience with sex, I wouldn't feel a damn thing about him. I probably need to find a guy and just ask already. Maybe that's my problem, that I never ask for it? Do

guys think I don't want it because I've never been forthcoming about it? That's something to consider.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say Xander is having some sort of sex dream though. Either that, or he's being chased by demons. Hell, maybe both. He could be a kinky guy. He strikes me as the type. I bet he likes to choke girls and shit like that. I bet he likes to hold someone down, and mount them... and *damn*, that imagery is so not helping.

I palm myself under the blankets, resisting the urge to do it right here and now, because that'd be creepy. Right? Yes. Definitely. Right? Just checking.

"Ungh," Xander moans as his head flops to the side and he juts his hips up into the air and then he shudders with pleasure. *Jesus H.*

Then he makes a loud exhale, a strangled moaning sound that goes straight to my belly. Is this a wet dream?

Seriously? *Holy hell.* What am I supposed to do right now, bury my face under my pillow? Pop in some ear buds? Leave the room for a few minutes? Probably, maybe, and yes. But before I can think for another second what to do, the moaning sounds stop, and I look away, just as I spot two piercing orange-brown eyes flick open at me.

Fuckity. Fuck. Fuck.

My breathing picks up without my permission and I will it to calm back down so that my chest isn't rising and falling so obviously. Maybe that makes me look asleep though? Not if it's that fast.

He's standing. I can hear the telltale shifting and my eye squints open out of an abundance of caution. I mean, Xander is a wild card, and based on Zack's warning, I'd be stupid not to keep an eye on him. In front of the dresser, he shucks his sweats and boxers, and I don't need to keep looking at his perfect muscled ass. So I tear my eyes away.

I can hear as he slips on a new pair of boxers, and I brave a glance. He turns to face me. He looks... I don't know how to say it. Crazy? Deranged? Angry? Curious? A mix of all of

that. The corner of his mouth curls up. “Did you get a good look?”

I’m stunned into silence. Did he just say that to me? *Shit.*

The internet has warned me about shit like this, about how straight guys might react when you’re caught looking. Am I in the wrong? One hundred percent.

That’s a new place for me to be.

Xander does things to me that makes me act, well, not right. Plus he triggers my hero complex... that deep-down need take care of a lost boy and love him back to health.

He takes a few steps toward me until his knees are right at the spot where my hand is hanging off the bed. I want to pull it away, but I can’t make myself move.

“Well?” His voice is gravel. This close up, I can smell him even more intensely than usual. It’s the faint smell of his cologne that has mostly worn off by the end of the day, but still lingers in a way that makes me want to rub myself on him like a cat. Soak up all that scent onto me. Press my teeth into his skin and lap him, like he’s a bowl of milk.

I let out a shaky exhale because clearly, I am working myself up. And this is not the time to be lost in a fantasy. Xander is standing over me. Why is he standing over me?

“I... uh... I woke up because you were making noises in your sleep. It’s dark. I didn’t see anything.” Does that sound convincing? I hope so.

“*Hmpf,*” he sighs out, then his muscles seem to relax as he pushes his bare knee forward, slowly, until it touches my fingers. My whole body shakes and lights up as the electric warm feeling of his skin lands against all my nerve endings. In a reflex, my fingertips twitch and I caress him.

His freaking knee!

With his tan, smooth skin and soft hairs... My lord, he is magnificent.

If he told me to gobble him down right now, I would.

My gaze is flicking between his intense stare and my fingers, constantly gauging his reaction, soaking in the touch to be sure it is real, and calculating why on earth he is over here.

Have knees always been so erotic? I am a goner. Forever doomed to have a deep-seated knee kink as long as I shall live.

Still drinking him in through my skin, I debate how long this is going to all last, if he is going to pull away any second. If I should pull away, rather than caress his freaking kneecap. But he doesn't pull away.

Instead, he pushes his knee up higher until he's kneeling with one leg on my mattress and my hand is consequently forced up his thigh. The very tips of my fingers press just under the hem of his boxer shorts and I freaking gasp out loud.

He chuckles in reply. "You like touching me?"

I swallow so fucking hard it echoes through the silent room, like a comical cartoon gulp sound that is genuinely audible. That earns me another low laugh from the back of his throat. Oh god, to lick that throat... that is the stuff dreams are made of.

I manage to nod at some point to his question, and he leans into me a little bit more, until my hand is up near the crease where his thigh meets his torso, and dammit, if I had any guts at all, I would crawl my hand over and grab his cock.

Speaking of which, when he walked over here, his raging sleep boner had died back, but it is starting to rally now, and I can see the shape of it under his boxers, filling with periodic twitches. It is the stuff ballads are written about... that glorious moment on the precipice of greatness. A moment so palpable, I could sink my teeth into it.

Do it. Just grab him. This is the move, dude. This is your signal. Grab his cock!

My wrist is bending toward him, but at that very same moment, he takes his thigh away, his foot planting firmly back on the ground. He makes a little *tsk tsk* sound that drives me wild.

Then he's back in his bed, like nothing happened. Like my adrenaline isn't pumping wildly through my veins. Like I'll be able to roll over and forget about his knee, about his thigh... yeah, fucking right.



Xander

What. The. Fuck. Something is definitely wrong with me. But I knew that already, didn't I?

I think I just broke my sobriety. Did I not? Was this not one of the things I wasn't supposed to do while I was recovering? Toy with people. Play with someone who is helpless. Control a situation and get off on the control. Yup, checked all those boxes. *Fuck.*

Having a wet dream, that part wasn't my fault. I couldn't control that shit. The internet said it was a possible side effect, of not cranking it on the regular. I checked. Surprised it took me over three weeks to have it happen, honestly.

And wow, that dream... total left field. No idea what to make of it. I swear, I'm a twisted fuck who loves all sorts of new shit, but guys? Yup. Guys have never entered my mind.

Enter, Cameron.

I've been noticing things about him since we moved in together, but I've managed to not think about him in too sexual a light.

Can't say that anymore.

That dream! My god... if real Cameron was anything like dream Cameron, I'd be done for.

Probably would have to move out.

Wouldn't be able to have that kind of temptation around.

The way he rides me in that dream... so demanding, so pushy... so noisy, and not because he is putting on a show for me, but because I am really making him feel *that* good.

And my lord, he is so *so* tight. And warm. He is spread out over me, his legs over my legs as we sit on the edge of the bed. I can see him in the mirror, we don't even have a mirror in here, but in my dream we do. I watch his small muscular chest as he tenses up, his cock bouncing wildly, spraying like a faucet as I pound into him.

Should have just left it at that. But my sleepy brain is sick. It knew he was right across the room. Saw his eyes on me too. He wants me. I can tell.

I wanted him to touch me, somewhere, anywhere. So I pushed my knee into his hand. *Jesus*. What the fuck must he be thinking about me right now? Must seem like a weirdo. But he liked it. He was such a good boy. He didn't try to reach over and grope me. I wouldn't have shown that same restraint in his shoes.

I want him to though, grope me, I mean. I'm still stunned by that thought. But I want Cameron to touch me. What does that mean?

Thank fuck the red alarm went off in my brain reminding me to stop. That one touch could send me down into a bad spiral again, get me kicked out of college, have my scholarship taken away, my connections to a respectable job severed. I'd be homeless then for sure.

After a few minutes back in my bed analyzing my thoughts and admonishing myself, Cameron leaps up from his bed. He's always wearing these matching pajamas, like a little business suit for sleeping. They look soft.

He slips out the door and I hate that I'm bothered by his absence. He probably just went to the bathroom.

Or to get the R.A. and rat me out.

Before I can worry too long, he's back with red cheeks, breathing a little heavy. *What did my naughty boy do in the bathroom?* Nope. That is foolish. He's done nothing. He took a leak. Chill the fuck out, big guy.

I fumble for my ear pods and stuff them in my ears, flicking on a meditation video. By the end of it, I'm asleep. My ear pods are half out of my ear by the time I wake up in the morning.

Cameron's already sitting at his desk, working on hunting for the problem in his code. I can see it from here, but I'd be a dick to say something. Or at least, I get the impression from Cam that he wouldn't like me to say something about his mistakes. Maybe he would, how the fuck should I know?

When I get up and stretch, he turns to me. His expression goes straight to my dick. Got total fuck-me eyes. I've created a monster. But just to be clear, I'm the monster. Cam, on the other hand, is a casualty. He can only get hurt by me. That's what I know how to do, and I don't want to hurt people anymore.

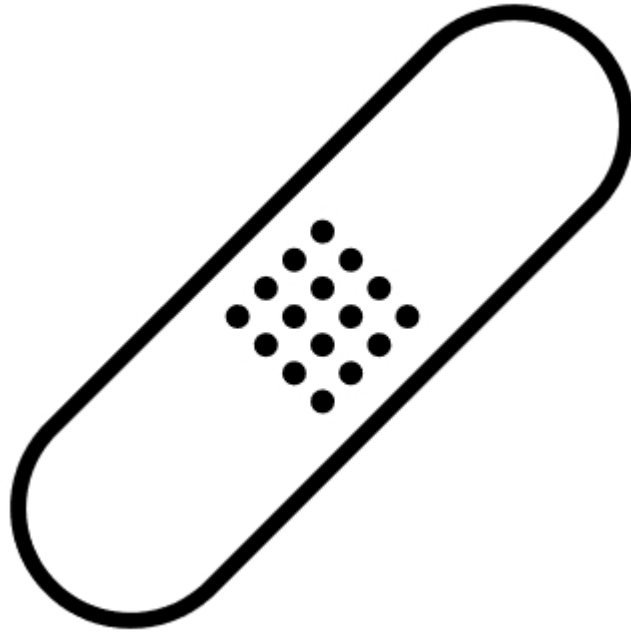
"Grabbing breakfast," I say, because I feel like I owe him some words. These aren't the words I owe him, but it's all I have to give.

"I'll come with you." He stands and grabs his phone off the desk, shoving it into his back pocket before his eyes meet mine. "Or, I can go later. No big deal."

What expression am I making that's got him saying that. "No, it's cool," I reply. *It's cool?* Who am I? It's not cool. *Stay away from me. Don't come near me. Don't star in my dreams and give me any type of awakenings unless you want to feel humiliated and broken at the end of it.*

After I throw on some gym shorts, a hoody, and slide-ins, I hold open the door to the hallway and Cameron walks by me.

He smells... like a sunny day and citrus fruits... yup, this was a shit idea.



Cameron

“You’re staring at me in a really weird and unsettling way.” I seem to have found my confidence today. I’ve never seen Xander eat without Nayla. Every meal, she stops by our dorm to get him. So maybe that’s where my confidence is coming from. He’s finally broken his routine of being cold and distant, and I’m breaking mine of being shy and introverted.

“You have avocado on the corner of your mouth,” he says in a bored tone.

I wipe quickly with my napkin, but it comes away crisply white. “I did not,” I protest, and that causes Xander’s lip to curl up just the teeniest tiniest bit on the side. “You’re kind of a bully,” I say before taking another big bite of my avocado toast.

He shrugs. “Probably. You should want to stay away from me.”

My eyes fly to his. He’s staring a hole through me, and dammit, it somehow makes my heart flutter. *No need to get excited, he doesn’t like you.* Hell, he just told me to stay away. But for a guy who likes the ones with broken wings, that stuff

is catnip. “Stay away?” I ask in a sultry tone. Apparently, I am all-out flirting with him now. *Shesh*. Rain in it, baby bird.

With a nod, he continues to push the eggs around his plate. “Yes. I’m not... I’m trouble, okay? I get people into trouble when they hang around me. So, just steer clear of me.”

A little laugh escapes my nose, and I drop my voice to a whisper, “You’re the one who approached me last night, in case you forgot.”

“Nothing happened,” he scoffs, as if I’ve somehow said something offensive. His eyes cast down to his plate. Why can’t he meet my gaze? Maybe he just doesn’t want to.

I’m about to open my mouth to ask why he did that last night, when he clenches the sides of his tray and stands up. “Shouldn’t have come here with you. Just do what I say. Stay away from me.”

“Psh. Okay, *Dad*.”

His eyes are on me, glaring once again. He looks like he wants to debate something, but instead he tightens his grip on his tray until his knuckles turn white. To my shock, he actually sits back down at the table.

I probably don’t need this kind of crazy in my life, even if it comes with an equally large dose of hotness. But still, I am glad he is still sitting with me. I’m just not connecting with anyone else I’ve met yet. Even the guys from the LGBTQ+ group.

After a few long, pretty-awkward moments of staring each other down, I decide enough is enough. He might have the social skills of an earthworm, but I don’t. I pride myself on being able to talk to anyone.

“Make any interesting codes this week?” That sounds pretty natural to me. Not a bad start at all. And it has the intended impact, because he looks at me and his face softens a little, like he is giving in. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Well?” I prod, waiting for him to tell me. When he doesn’t, I add, “Don’t wait for me to tell you about anything

interesting I'm making. I'm still just working through all the basic projects for class."

"I know," he says, sounding a little arrogant. Maybe he caught that though, because he adds in a kinder tone, "I see snippets of your work, in our room. Hard not to notice. Only so many places to look."

A chuckle breaks free from my lips. "I can relate, obviously," I say in a knowing tone, lowering my eyes at him.

Xander's mouth becomes a tight line and I'm sure I've said the wrong thing again. But he seems to decide to let it pass as he tells me about his latest code work. "Doing a project for Whitmore right now. The code compiles literature from a field, organizes it based on keywords. Sort of like writing a literature review. Then it matches those reviews with calls for grants. It will make Whitmore faculty much more competitive in grant writing. Which means more money for Whitmore."

"Sounds cool. How are you doing it?"

My question works like a charm, because Xander is saying more words to me than he ever has. He's almost reciting code to me from memory. That's when I decide he must be some sort of genius. Hopefully not the evil kind, unless you are asking him. He doesn't seem to have a high opinion of himself. That is probably the most surprising thing about him. For all his cockiness and arrogance that he seems to portray to the world, I am starting to wonder if that isn't armor.

When my phone pings with a reminder to start walking to class, my plate is empty and my elbows a little sore from how long I've had them planted on the table while I listened to Xander talk. I think I could listen to him read the dictionary and still find it interesting. He is that charismatic. And by charismatic, I mean hot.

Even as I sit in class, I am still clinging to the sound of his voice, the way his orange-brown eyes watched me while he speaks. It is the most attention he's given me, and it feels *really* freaking good. Maybe he is right. That kind of attraction

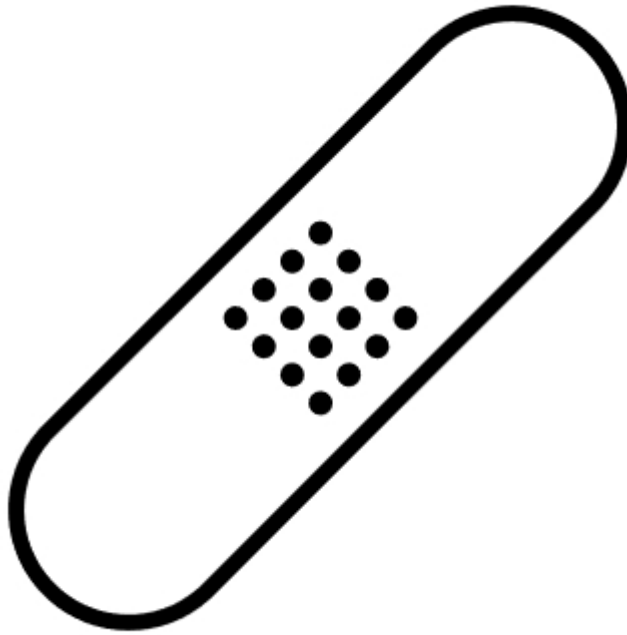
will be dangerous if I don't get my stupid crush under control. I need to hang with friends. That will help.

After class, I text the guys from my LGBTQ+ student group. We haven't really clicked yet, but maybe I haven't tried hard enough. When I ask if anyone wants to get drinks, Leo and Dillan say yes, so at least that will give me a little distance from Xan. I stop by the room only to toss my bag and switch into something cuter—my tight black jeans and an even tighter caramel-colored T-shirt. Tonight, I need to get attention from actual gay men, ones who are emotionally available.

Chapter Three

Data Types

Programmers don't byte, they nibble a bit.



Cameron

“Why are you so sulky lately?” Dad asks as I push some torched green beans around on my plate. Since this side dish is usually my favorite, I guess I’m being pretty obvious.

“It’s nothing.” I brush his comment off and force myself to take a bite of the lemony legume. Try to forget that six days ago, my roommate let me touch his thigh in the middle of the night, and I had to crank it in the bathroom afterward, and now I’m crushing on him a little bit, and I don’t have any real friends yet, and no guys like me. Yup. That’s nothing. Totally fine here.

Dad gives me a pointed look, lowering his chin in that way that invites conversation.

“I feel weird, talking about it with you,” I admit.

“It’s a sex thing?” he asks nonchalantly. I am wholly not prepared for my father to bring up sex so casually, so I practically choke on my bean. Sputtering and coughing, I take a sip of water to clear my throat.

“It’s not a sex thing,” I say in a hushed whisper. “It’s just that, none of the gay guys at this school seem to have any interest in me. See why I didn’t want to say that to my dad?”

Dad shakes his head. “Not really. We’ve always talked about everything. This should be no exception. Now, what makes you think guys don’t like you? After all, you have the Parker man genes, and we are lookers.” His eyebrows waggle obnoxiously.

“Yeah, that’s why we’re both single, because we’re so handsome.” I make sure he sees my eyeroll.

He brushes his shoulder off in dramatic fashion. “I’m single because I’m focused on my career. Not because I don’t have options.”

“Way to rub in it,” I groan.

Dad sets down his fork and his brow pinches as he looks at me. “I don’t know how dating guys works...”

I belt a laugh at that. “I’d assumed as much.”

He smirks. “And I know you have always been good at reading people, but is there a chance you aren’t sending the right signals to these guys?”

That’s a thought. I swallow my green bean and start cutting at the chicken. “What signals should I be sending?”

Dad points his fork at me, a bite a chicken dangling off the end. “Well now, maybe you are sending friend signals, when you need to be sending flirtatious signals.”

I think over his words. Have I really found anyone attractive enough to flirt with? Besides my roommate, who I totally should not flirt with. I mean, Leo and Dillan are cute, but I can’t say that I have tried to get their attention. I’m not sure if I like them like that. Maybe Dad is right.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he says with a smug grin.

“It’s rude to read people’s minds,” I complain, before returning to my dinner with new gusto. “Maybe I do need to put myself out there more.”

“What have you been doing, anyway?”

I think it over. “Studying, of course. And maybe spending a lot of time with my roommate. I’m pretty sure he’s a genius. Did you know he is making a coding program for the faculty? He says it will help them get more grant money or something.”

“I didn’t know that. Sounds cool though. You spend a lot of time with this roommate of yours?”

“Maybe,” I admit, feeling my cheeks heat.

“Could be good to get out then, make some new friends. Flirt with someone you don’t live with.”

Now I’m certain my cheeks are bright red. “I don’t flirt with my roommate,” I say a little too defensively. Dad gives me another one of those knowing smiles. “Besides, he’s not even gay.”

“Well, in that case, I insist you get out of here after dinner and go to a party or something. I’ve heard that football player you met, Zack, is having a party at his fraternity tonight.”

“You stay up to date on frat parties?” I laugh.

He nods. “They have to let us know in advance, so when Dean Runkin mentioned it at the leadership meeting, it made me think of you.”

“You want me to go to a frat party? You know what happens at those?”

“I think it’s best for us both if I pretend I don’t,” he says with a wink.

A few hours later, I park back at the dorms and head inside to wait until the appropriate time to show up at a party. Definitely not before ten, which sucks for me, because I find it hard to stay awake past midnight.

Finally, it's nine forty-five, and I can assess myself in the mirror and head out.

"Getting all gussied up, huh?" It's that deep voice that makes my legs weak. Xan's voice. I mean, Xander.

"Going to a party," I answer without a glance back at him as I spritz on some cologne.

"Must be a good one, if you're wearing that fuck-me cologne."

I bark a laugh and turn on my heel to face him. "Fuck-me cologne?"

Xan's chiseled face catches me wholly off guard. Why does he have to be so beautiful? His eyes are boring a hole into me. "It smells like sex."

"I doubt sex smells like that," I counter, before I can realize how my words sound. *Shit.*

His brow cocks immediately at the obvious meaning. "Interesting," he practically purrs.

"Anyway, it's a frat party, so I highly doubt I'll be getting any offers for sex." Yeah, that so didn't make me sound any better. Xander is looking so mouthwatering good that I can't keep my thoughts in order tonight.

His lips turn down at me. "Which frat?"

"Zack Browning's frat."

"That guy gives me a bad vibe." His jaw ticks, arms folding over his broad chest.

"He's not so fond of you either," I admit.

"No shit." Xander falls back onto his bare mattress, but his eyes stay trained on me. "Be careful."

"Thanks for the advice," I say with a weak smile as I shove my ID in my pocket and head for the door.

Inside the packed party, I feel more alone and awkward than ever before. Why the hell did I think I would like this? I

wave to a very drunk Zack from across the room and he gives me a big smile and a wink. His arm is slung around a girl's neck, which must be his girlfriend, Haley.

Making my way to the long line for the keg at least gives me something to do. I scroll on my phone, to try to not look like such a loser, when I feel someone link their arm through mine. "Can I cut in here with you?"

It's Nayla, and I've never been so happy to see a familiar face. "Please. I was pretending to not be such a loner. I don't really know anyone here. I don't know why I came. My dad said I should make more friends. But who could make friends in this chaos?"

"Well, this is a good start," Nayla says in an easy tone as she jostles our arms together for emphasis.

"Good point." Now I have a genuine smile on my face for the first time tonight. "Didn't peg you for a frat party kind of girl."

"I'm a free-beer kind of girl." She winks at me and holds up an empty red cup.

"Xander seems like a free-beer kind of guy, but he was judgey when I told him about the party," I say in my most nonchalant tone, even though I am totally fishing for details about my roomy.

Nayla pulls her lips in between her teeth for a moment. "He used to be. He's growing past all that. Lucky for you, I'm not!"

When we get our beers, Nayla clinks the plastic cup against mine and chugs down the golden liquid, and I awkwardly attempt to follow suit. Liquid dribbles down my mouth and I wipe it with the back of my hand, gasping for air.

She laughs, grabbing my hand in hers. "Come on, let's dance!"



Xander

I'm so fucking frustrated. Probably why I just pounded out a hundred and eleven push-ups in under five minutes. Didn't know what my limit was before tonight. I'm not sure why it bothers me so much that Cameron has gone to a frat party. Maybe I'm just jealous that I can't party anymore. That's the line I want to believe, but I know it's bullshit. I wanted Cam to stay in again with me, like he has most nights, so I don't feel so alone. Not like we talk a lot, but it's nice just to have him here.

Instead, he's clearly on the prowl, all dressed up, trying to find a boyfriend I assume. No one here is good enough for Cam, I know that for a fact. Cam is the exception to my theory about humans, he doesn't have a selfish bone in his body.

I text Nayla to ask her if she is stopping by any parties tonight.

Not feeling tempted, are you? she fires back.

Hell no, but Cam is going to Browning's frat. They are going to eat that kid alive. He's too trusting for his own good.

Three dots appear and then disappear a few times before the message finally comes through. *Nice to see you caring about someone other than yourself (and me, of course).*

Now that's just a wholly unacceptable accusation, but I manage to ignore it, because I have an agenda. *Well, if you find yourself out that way, make sure he doesn't die. I don't want to bother getting a new roommate.*

Ten minutes later, Nayla sends me a selfie of her and Cam on a crowded dance floor, with big happy smiles on their faces. And somehow, that makes me feel even worse.

All I want to do right now is go down there and check on Cam. Make sure Nayla doesn't let him drink too much. She loves to drink. Hell, we both do. But I can't. I get bad ideas when I drink. So I won't. But I could at least stop by. Have a smoke outside the party.

There's an idea.

I can hear the party before I even arrive. There is loud base-rich music bumping out through the walls of the old structure. The wraparound porch is empty though. Not surprising, since the frat is college-sanctioned, which means they try to keep people inside to not draw too much attention to the fuckery going on inside.

The whole sight is familiar, and yet, I'm surprised that I feel no urge to head inside. Maybe I'm growing a little bit. My therapist thinks I am, based on my progress so far. Jury is out.

The house is an utter piece of shit, and the rail almost falls over when I try to grab it. The porch is littered with strained plastic chairs and covered in about forty layers of paint.

I can see my breath already. It's starting to get really cold at night. That's one thing about Glen Arbor, it's so far north, you gotta make sure your balls don't freeze off in the wintertime. But this is where Nayla wanted to go to school, so I had to follow.

Not sure what the fuck my plan is anymore now that I'm here, I sit on a chair in the dark corner of the porch and light a cigarette. I don't make a habit of smoking, usually, but they are the only bad things I can do right now, and I need something destructive so I don't barge inside and carry Cameron out like caveman. *And do what with him, exactly?*

That's a thought I'm not going to elaborate on. Won't let myself. I'm already pushing it just by being here.

When the door bursts open, I stay quiet in the shadows as I watch Zack Browning and his girlfriend, Haley, stumble into the darkness. I feel this weird little pang in my chest at the sight of her. Thank fuck she woke up from that coma.

They are both wasted, and Zack is pawing at her. She is slurring her words and complaining as a car pulls up and she gets in quickly. Is it safe to drink that soon after a coma? It's been what, four months? Not even. Not my business though.

"Did she get her ride okay?" a sweet voice calls out. I didn't even realize the door had opened with all that commotion. But I know that voice. It's my Cam. No. Not mine. Just my roommate, Cameron, I mean.

"Yeah, sorry she almost got you in there," Zack offers as he stumbles toward Cam. When he trips on nothing, Cam closes the distance to offer him a shoulder to lean on. Such a good boy. Doesn't realize he's in the lion's den.

"It's just throw up. But yeah, glad I'm not covered in any. Thanks for pulling me out of the way."

"I'm a gentleman like that," Zack says with an unconvincing hiccough.

Then everything happens really fast. Zack uses his stature to trap Cam against the wobbly railing on the stairs, his hands coming down on either side of Cam.

"Z-Zack?" Cam asks, unsure of this posturing. My heart starts racing and I stand up silently in response.

"You could suck my dick, if you want," Zack says suddenly.

“Uh. Um. N-no thanks,” Cam stutters in an offended tone. Damn right you should be offended, Cam.

“But you’re gay,” Zack presses as he leans his body into Cam’s, using his free hand to unzip his fly.

At that moment, I have no ability to account for my actions anymore. I’m seeing red, pulling Zack away with such force that his ass thuds as he hits the ground in confusion. He’s lucky that’s all I’ve done to him.

“Xan?” Cameron asks as he registers me in the darkness.

“Gone gay for your roommate? Almost killing my girlfriend wasn’t enough?” Zack spits out, having apparently found some sobriety with his own rush of adrenaline. He’s in my face in two seconds flat, and I push his shoulder to warn him off.

“Fucking fa—”

That’s all he gets out before I deck him square in the jaw. He stumbles back a few steps before charging forward with a swing of his own, but he’s intoxicated and slow, so I easily duck it. Still, there is a loud smack sound. His fist has connected with something... with something of mine... with Cameron.

“You motherfucker,” I shout at the top of my voice as I charge him again, but I feel a hand tugging on my sleeve. I turn for a split second to see Cam’s pleading eyes in the pale moonlight, and that’s enough time for Zack to get the jump on me. His fist gets me in the eye. I can instantly feel the blood running.

But the force of the hit knocks Zack off balance and he stumbles to his ass again. Cam takes the chance to tug me away at a fast pace down the empty streets.

I can taste the blood in my mouth now. It’s traveled that far from my brow. But I’m barely thinking about that, because Cam was hit, and I just want to get him home.

When we get under the streetlamp at the corner, I grab his shoulders and spin him to face me. “Are you okay?” I study the damage. It’s just a little split in his lip. Only a couple of

droplets of blood. But what they mean, that's what has my mind reeling. If I wouldn't have been there, how far would Zack have pushed him?

That fuckface.

I could kill him.

Cam is giving me a look like he is afraid of me.

Inhale. Exhale. Calm down.

"I would never hurt you, Cam." My words shock me. Since when wouldn't I hurt someone? Not physically though. Not directly... but I'm not supposed to make caveats that justify my past behavior.

He nods, face softening. "I know."

"How could you?" I challenge. He needs to know to avoid me. Not to be so trusting.

"Just do. You saved me."

"That prick," I growl the words. Still too much adrenaline in my blood.

Cameron's hand slides down my bare arm, sending the hairs standing at attention. His palm grasps mine and he walks, tugging me forward by the hand. Never held hands with anyone before.

"Come on. Let's go clean up."

His hand feels good in mine, but he drops it quickly as we fall in step, side by side. Walking so close his shoulder is rubbing against my upper arm. How does that feel so fucking good?

Back in our room, things are somber. The mood is heavy. There are unspoken words between us. Hell, there are unspoken words in my own mind. Places I won't let myself go. Things I'm trying hard not to think about.

Cam sits back on his bed with a sigh and I get a washcloth wet to dab at his mouth. "I should be tending to

your eyebrow,” he argues weakly.

“In a minute.” I continue the gentle pats at his lip until the little spot of blood is cleared.

Reaching out, he grabs my arm and pulls me down next to him on the bed. So much rainbow, but it’s soft and comfortable. Been a while since I had sheets and a pillow. Probably since my second-to-last foster home. That’s the last time I can remember having bedding. It’s optional, but sure is nice when you have it.

He snatches the rag and folds it over to the clean spot before he dabs my brow. I can now fully smell the beer on his breath.

“How much did you have to drink?” I question a little harshly. Not loving the idea of him out there intoxicated. Makes him more vulnerable to assholes like Zack.

“Enough,” he hums, and tosses the rag toward his desk where it lands with a thud. There is a lot of silence then. The sound of Cam’s breath rising and falling fills my ears. It’s heavy.

“Enough for what?” I ask in a teasing tone. Shouldn’t ask this, but I do. May need to catch a meeting of Assholes Anonymous at this rate.

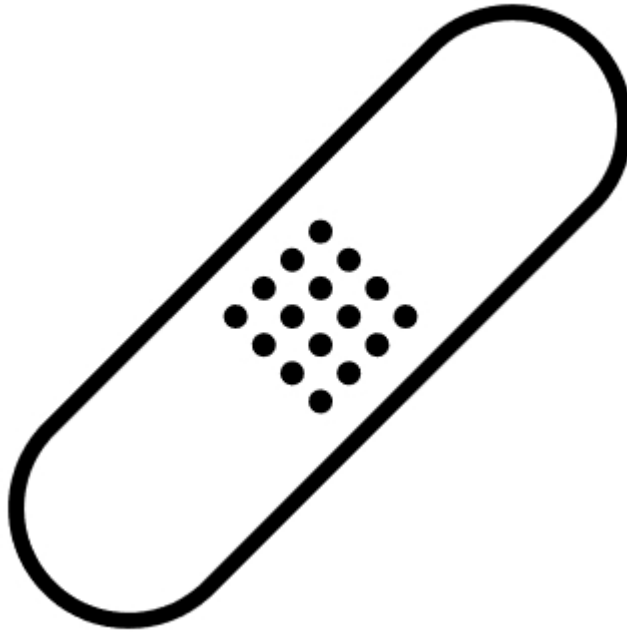
“Put your arm around me?” he says the words like a question, but he nestles under my arm without waiting for an answer. It falls heavy on his shoulders. Instinctively, I tuck him into my side. He feels good tucked there. Sturdy, but delicate at the same time.

My heart rises into my throat, and I have to swallow the lump that forms. My free hand tugs at my shorts to give me a little more room. It’s getting a little tight for space.

“Are you into guys?” Cam practically sings the question. His voice is so melodic. So irreproachable. So genuine and curious.

I stall with a long breath. “I didn’t think I was.”

“And now?” he presses.



Cameron

I can't believe I'm pushing the question. What do I even want him to say? That he's madly in love with me? I mean, maybe. That's stupid, because we still barely know each other. It's just me projecting my insecurity, I'm sure. That no one wants me. That the one guy I find so appealing has zero interest. *Why can't he be interested in me?*

"And now..." he parrots. "Now, I'm not so sure anymore."

"Anyone in mind?" I'm just plain fishing now. Blatant. I don't care.

Xander chuckles. Shifting on the bed, he slides a hand down my jaw, holding it between his fingers. Our eyes are locked. "If I was stable enough to have a crush..."

It'd be you. It'd be you! I fill in the words for him in my mind. He doesn't say them. I don't have the confidence to fully believe them either.

"You seem stable to me," I say instead.

Xan laughs again. This time it's a dark laugh. "It's been a few months."

"Since what?"

His lips are sealed as he releases a heavy exhale. "I can't believe you don't know already. People love to talk about it."

"Since what?" I repeat.

"Since I last manipulated someone. Since I last used someone for entertainment. Since I almost killed that girl."

My body tenses. "You wouldn't kill someone," I protest.

"I didn't try to kill anyone, no. It was a poorly thought-out prank. I didn't think she'd go through with it. So no, I didn't try to kill anyone. I just promised Jordan Phillips that I'd hack her social media and make a video go viral. She paid me for the pleasure. We came up with the idea together. That she'd drop the girl at the top of the pyramid. I didn't think Haley would end up in a coma. And that's not the only incident, just the most recent."

At those words, I settle back into the crook of his arm.

He leans away from me in response, looking at me with a serious expression. "Are you as twisted as me or something? I mean, who voluntarily cuddles after hearing something like that?"

"I'm not twisted. It's just obvious to me you've changed. From whatever you used to do. Whoever you used to be. You're not perfect. No one is. But it feels like you want to be better. That's good enough for me."

"Someone is going to wreck you someday, and it won't be me." Xan sounds sad, and that makes me want to show him the man I see.

I pull his arm back around me and shove him a little, so we slide down the pillow. "Obviously, it won't be you, Xan. You're my guardian angel."

"Huh," he grunts thoughtfully, and I feel his muscles relax into the bed.

It's quiet for a long time, and I assume he's asleep, but I can't help muttering one last thought. "If you need me to rub your knees tonight, I'm available."

His body jerks next to me as he chuckles, but his lips stay sealed. And on that note, I fall asleep in his arms.

In the morning, I can feel the warmth of Xan wrapped behind me. We've both managed to roll to our sides and he's spooning me. And I can feel his thick morning wood... so I stay ultra still and soak it in. Soon enough, he'll wake up. Probably freak out. Probably run away. Tell me that can never happen again. But for now, I'm going to enjoy my good fortune. Even though my bladder is protesting. So worth it.

There's a knock at the door that ruins the whole vibe though. Who the hell would come by this early? The knock is pretty cheerful.

Xander rolls away from me, wordlessly, and I mourn the loss of him. The door swings open and a chipper voice sings out, "Good morning, boys, what do you got for me?"

When I turn over, I confirm it's Nayla, holding up a brown bag high in the air. A platter of paper coffee cups are balanced in her other hand.

"Don't you get hangovers?" I complain, shifting myself as stealthily as I can to hide the hard on that still won't quite go down.

"She doesn't. It's annoying," Xander confirms as he snatches a cup from her and takes a long drink.

"Just had to check on my new best friend, Cameron. Someone disappeared from the party last night without saying goodbye. And what the hell happened to his lip. And your eye!"

"Long story," Xan grunts in reply. Nayla sets the bag down on my desk and sits in my chair, spinning it side to side in a motion that would surely make my stomach weak.

"I've got time. Spill it."

Xan shrugs and her gaze snaps to me. “Did he do anything bad last night?”

Her tone is accusatory, and I think back to what he told me last night. What Nayla surely knows about him. “He saved me last night. I was jumped.”

It’s not a lie, per se, even though it’s a vague semi-truth. Nayla may call herself my best friend, but I just don’t open up that easily to people. One night of dancing won’t make me spill my guts.

“Xan?” she asks again.

“I’m still good. Don’t worry. Don’t think what I did last night counts.”

She’s quiet for a while, just staring, as if her gaze will make him dish. Finally, she seems to give up, because she resumes twisting from side to side in my chair. “All right then. Good. Glad to hear it.”

“Bathroom,” I groan in the pause, and make my escape.



Xander

Never done that before, slept next to someone. Not just next to someone, but holding them. When I woke up early this morning, before the dawn even broke, I rolled over to hold Cameron close to my body. He made a peaceful little humming sound as I spooned myself around him. He fits perfectly against me.

I'm trying to hold onto that memory, as I walk down the narrow halls, back to the administrative offices. My stomach fucking flipped when I saw the email this morning from the dean, asking me to come down as soon as possible. Just like I've expected, as soon as something good happens to me, like holding Cameron in my arms, something shit follows.

The student who sits at the front desk in front of Dean Runkin's office recognizes me. I'm here often. Never for good reasons. He waves me right back.

"So, there is a cut on your brow too," Dean Runkin wastes no words.

I slip into the leather chair across from his oversized oak desk. "Yes, sir. Is that what I'm here for?"

Runkin's eyes fix on his computer screen, and he peers over his glasses. "You hit Zack Browning last night. Do you deny it?"

"No, sir."

"And you were at a student party, when you were asked not to attend for the entire year."

"I was outside of the party, yes." There is no use arguing with Runkin on the details of the event. It wouldn't sound right anyway, my reasons for going. *I'm obsessed with my roommate. I was mad he left for the night. I didn't want him to meet some asshole. I was right anyway, and he was almost sexually assaulted by your star football player.* Yeah, that would sound great coming from me. Totally believable.

"Any particular reason for hitting Mr. Browning?"

"I was defending my roommate, Cameron."

Runkin's right eyebrow lifts. "Cameron Parker?"

"Not sure. That could be his last name. Can't really remember." I shrug. Just a half lie. Truth is, I try not to know too much about Cameron. Better for him if I don't.

The man's face seems to twist through a series of expressions before settling back to neutral. "And you understand not to do it again?"

Stunned by his words, which are making it sound like I'm being let off the hook, I stare at him. His eyes meet mine in the pause.

"Uh, right. I won't."

Runkin gives his famous smile-frown. "Good." He taps out some words on his keyboard before closing it. He shifts. Focusing attention back on me. "And how is the new code coming along? Should we expect it before midterms?"

I straighten in my chair. "Yes, sir. Absolutely."

Then I get a rare Runkin smile. "Better deliver, Mr. Briggs."

"Of course, sir."

There is an awkward beat before he frowns again, making a walking motion with his fingers. “On your way then.”

“Right.” I leap from my seat and make a hasty exit, before I break those condescending fingers of his.

As I make my way to class, I can’t help replaying that weird kaleidoscope of facial expressions Runkin wore, after mentioning Cameron. Is Cameron’s last name Parker? Why would Runkin know Cameron? How did Zack have time this morning to make a complaint about me?

The thoughts don’t stop, even as I sit in my coding paradigms course. My laptop is open in front of me, though I’m not taking notes. But I am curious about Cameron, and what he means to Runkin.

Maybe just a little peek at the school files won’t hurt. Not like I’m going to do anything with the information. Unless Runkin has it out for Cam. That’s something I’d need to know about.

Just this one last time, I’ll use my fake staff credentials to get into the student system, which I created in secret during my first semester when they had me test computer security. I log into the student record system to look for anything that might give me a clue. It’s the standard stuff, like Cameron’s birthday, his permanent address (which is oddly local), his class schedule. But there is something interesting... he has a tuition waiver. It’s a code I’ve never seen before STFWVR.

Pulling up the database dictionary, I check it out, filtering by code to see the meaning: Staff Waiver.

So, someone who works here is related to Cam. Or Cam works here, though I didn’t see an employee record for him in my search.

I pull up the employee records and type in the last name Parker. There are three of them. I guess it is a common last name.

The first Parker is Deborah, but the records show she was terminated six years ago. The next is Thomas, but he is a

twenty-two-year-old tutor in the student success center. Neither of those could be his relative, not one that qualifies for a tuition waiver at least. Then there is Martin Parker, and my stomach flips violently. Martin, aka Marty Parker. Aka, the fucking new president of the fucking college.

Ahh shit.

No wonder Runkin flipped a nut at the name. He didn't realize the random housing lottery stuck me—the school's most unsavory fuckup—with Cameron, the president's baby boy.

Well, I guess that's me done then. As soon the president finds out about me, he'll rip Cameron out of the dorms so fast my head will spin, if they don't find a reason to kick me out first.

Of course he's the president's son. Only I would fall for someone that would result in a fatal error of epic proportions.

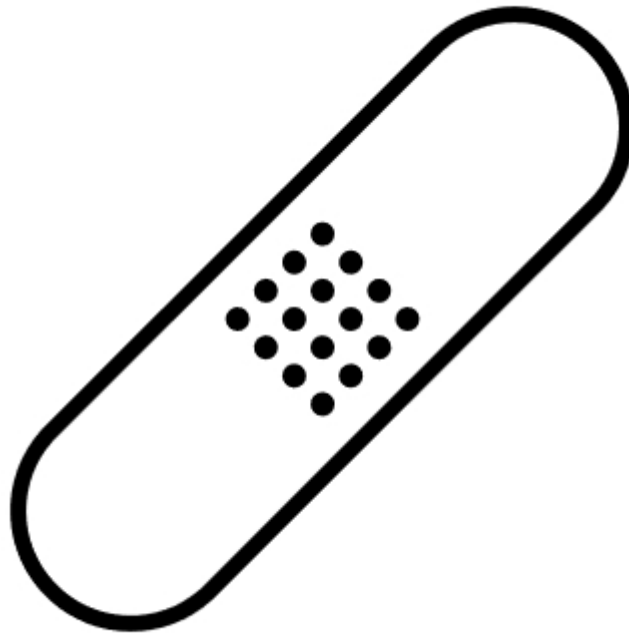
Is that what happened though? Did I really fall for a guy? Do I really care about someone in a real way? It seems very unlikely, so I naturally doubt it. There must be some angle I'm playing, that even I don't see yet. Some way I want to exploit Cam, or fuck with him. I mean, the president's son? That's pretty fucking on point for my tastes.

But that's so not how it is. I know that, deep down. Still though, it's not to say my fucked-up brain won't use this new information to its advantage. I'm definitely going to have to keep Cam at arm's length now. No more cuddle sessions. No more swooping in like Superman.

Chapter Four

Exception Handling

I'm not lazy, I'm just in energy-saving mode.



Xander

“Nayla said you had to go to the dean’s office today. Was it because of me?” Cameron is sitting on his bed, legs folded under him. Since he just showered, there is this sweet scent of his grapefruit shampoo wafting from across the room.

“It’s hard to look over at your side, the sheer amount of contrasting colors over there make me dizzy.”

“Don’t change the subject,” he scolds.

“Your shampoo stink is filling the room.”

“Was it about Zack? Because I can go down and explain to him...”

“No,” I interrupt. “It was not about Zack. And I don’t want you using your *connections* to get me out of anything.

Trust me, it won't help."

Cam's face falls. "My... my connections?"

I'm trying not to get worked up, but that's hard to do when you are trapped like a rat inside the belly of a unicorn. "Is it supposed to be a secret?"

His throat bobs as he swallows. "No. Not a secret exactly."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I snap, tone much harsher than I mean it to be.

"I don't know. You never told me what your parents do for work. It's not something people seem to bring up."

"My parents are dead to me," I mutter under my breath, my leg bouncing a hundred miles an hour.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to bring up a sore spot. I'm just saying, people get weird when they find out. I just want to be treated like everyone else."

"Ha. Of course, you do," I spit, and Cam's shoulders slump in a defeated way. *Fuck*. I'm such an asshole. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that."

Damn that trembling bottom lip of his. "You shouldn't have helped me. This is my fault."

At those words, I bolt up from the bed and start pacing. "Like hell I shouldn't have. Zack was going to fucking rape you! Don't you get that? He wasn't taking no for an answer. I should've cut his fucking dick off."

As I rant, I catch my reflection in Cam's mirror. Red face, deranged eyes, black hair askew. I look insane. Taking a breath, I force myself to sit on my bed.

Cam looks more alarmed than before, and I almost throw up, realizing it's me he's afraid of.

"Thank you," he says in a calm voice, regaining some of the composure in his face.

These words catch me wholly off-guard. My blood pressure drops a few points.

“Why shouldn’t I tell my dad about Zack? I could defend you. Make sure you don’t get in trouble just for helping me.”

“Tell him if you want, but I don’t need your help with Dean Runkin. He’s getting what he wants from me. I’m not in trouble.”

“Getting what he wants?” Cam stands and crosses over to sit by me. He’s never sat on my bed before. He’s wearing bright yellow sweats and a matching sweater, the epitome of sunshine, sitting on my bare mattress, looking wholly out of place.

“The code I told you about, for the faculty grant funding thing,” I remind him.

He scoots closer, so our thighs are touching, and I shift away. There’s a little dip in his brow at the move. “People use you, Xan,” he says softly.

His words are too much. Too sweet. They hurt coming from him. I shift away so he won’t see the impact they have on my face.

The bed dips a little as he once again shifts closer. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

I snort and look back at him. “No one can hurt me. I don’t have any feelings.”

“I don’t believe that,” he challenges, closing the gap between us, so once again our thighs are touching. *Fuck*. The feeling of his body is incredible. I want to melt into him. Hold him again. That was a fluke though, right? Not the new norm. I can’t hold Cam for so many reasons. First and foremost being that I’m a warped unlovable piece of shit who uses people. Second being that as soon as his dad realizes who I am, I’ll never see him again. Third being I’m bound to wake up soon and realize I’m clearly having some sort of mental breakdown that is making me think I’m suddenly gay.

My existential crisis is interrupted when Cam runs his fingers down my spine, and I shudder in response to the erotic feeling. He giggles. The man actually giggles!

“See, you have feelings.”

Turning to face him, I have to fight my smile. “You’re ruining my brooding. I’m not ready to not be mad yet.”

His smile stretches his cheeks. “Okay, big guy. Keep brooding.”

I scrunch my nose. “You’re asking for it.”

“Asking for what?” His face lights up.

I shake my head. “Most people would not want to play with me. You remember what I did to that girl, don’t you?”

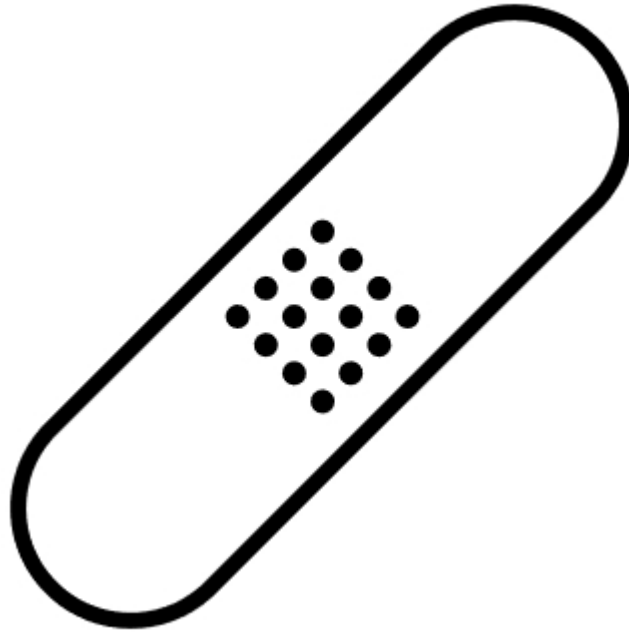
His face gets a little more serious. “You made a suggestion, that’s not much, Xan. You always say to stay away from you, but all I’ve seen is a friendly guy who stands up for his friends.”

“Who said we’re friends?” I scoff.

“I don’t need to know. For the record. Whatever else is in your past, it’s in the past. We can keep it there. I know Xander Briggs today. This is the Xan I’m friends with.”

Have to bite my lip hard to stop the choking sensation building in my throat. I probably have a brain tumor or something. There’s no reason for me to be this emotional. “You should want to know,” I croak.

Cam shakes his head. “I don’t.”



Cameron

Somehow, I've managed to wear Xander down. We're officially friends.

Every day, I tag along with Xan and Nayla at meals. We walk to the computer science building together. We write code in the library for hours every night. Well, I attempt to write code, and Xan and Nayla take turns fixing it. My professors are incredibly impressed at this point.

Tonight, there is no Nayla though. She is out on a date. I can tell that Xan is trying not to be pissed about it. Not because he likes her like that. But I think her dating someone would mean that he loses her. Not that he would ever admit as much.

"Can't believe Nayla's out having fun and we're stuck here coding," I complain after an hour of relative silence. I may have an ulterior motive. I may be just a tiny bit thrilled to be alone with Xan.

Pausing to look up from his screen, he realizes I have packed up all my stuff. My heart flutters a little under his scrutiny.

He pinches his eyebrows together. “Coding is fun.”

I shake my head. “No. We need to have *real* fun. You and me. Right now.”

“*Real* fun?” he smirks as he closes his laptop, giving me his full attention. “Like what?” His chin rises in challenge.

My mind whirs as I try to think quickly, since this was very much a spur of the moment suggestion. When the thunder crashes outside, the words tumble out of my mouth. “Let’s go play in the rain.”

Xan throws his head back with a laugh, his inky hair shaking. “What are we, five?”

“Never too old to play in the rain.”

His chin falls into his palms, and he leans forward. “Are you serious?”

“As a shot.”

When his mouth forms a tight line, I know he’s going to say yes.

“Come on.” I stand and grab his arm.

It may be the case that I try to find ways to touch him, from time to time, when it’s natural. It’s been weeks since he spooned me, but I can’t stop thinking about it. Not that I’m trying to make something happen. Okay, maybe I am. Might be obsessing a little too much over Xan. Sure it’s probably not healthy, but the man saved me. And I feel like I’ve made this huge leap forward with him. He sees me as a trusted friend now. That’s a label he’s only given to one other person. That’s big for Xan.

“What about our computers?”

“We can leave them here. We’ll hide them in the stacks and come back for them. No one will find them.”

“I’d like to see someone try to hack my computer.” He gives a crooked smirk. I can only imagine what kind of crazy security protocols Xan has for his computer.

“Exactly.”

When the laptops are stashed, we make our way outside. The water is coming down in buckets. It's perfect.

Xan stops short under the library awning.

"You afraid of a little rain?" I challenge.

"No. I just... how the hell does someone *play* in the rain?"

"Like this!" I shout and take off in a full sprint. The feet splash along the sidewalk and I can feel the cold water soaking up the back of my pant legs. I'm already shivering, but I don't care. The feeling is freeing.

Heavy footsteps bear down behind me, then two arms scoop me up from the middle and haul me into the air. I burst out laughing at the sensation of being carried off and away, flying through the rain, as Xan holds me up high, like I'm weightless.

He stops under a sweet-smelling pine tree and sets me on my feet. We're both out of breath. Facing each other, our chests strain as we suck in the cold air.

"You're covered in goosebumps." His voice is thick. I am freezing, but somehow Xan makes me warm.

I step closer to him as thunder rumbles so deep I feel it in my chest. His arms land on my shoulders. We're even closer now. The rain is so heavy, it fills my ears, drowns out the world. Shrinks it down to me and Xan, under a tree, just this one moment.

He steps his feet apart, so he's closer to my eye line. Biting his bottom lip, it's quite the sight.

"Xan," I breathe his name and lean closer. My eyes flutter shut. I'm a man possessed. Willing to go for it. To make a stupid mistake, if that's what it turns out to be.

A pair of soft lips press into mine and I'm electrified. Tingling. On fire from the topmost hair follicles of my head to my toes curling in my shoes.

Then our lips part. I feel a soft tongue urging mine forward. Soft sweet swipes that make my brain fuzzy.

Our bodies melt together. Impossibly close. Arms holding me tight. Mouths exploring, tasting, taking. Inhaling his scent. Enjoying the soft pricks of the stubble on his jaw.

His hands cup my chin, tilting me back. Sucking, he's pulling my breath right out of me. I could die right here in the kiss and be happy. Don't want it to end. Pine-tree kisses. Forever burned into my brain.

The world lights up so bright my closed eyes sting, and a second later we split apart at the intensity of the crashing sound that rings in my ears.

Before I can even process how close that lightning strike hit, Xan has me by the hand. We're running back toward the library. My first kiss is over. *Please, don't let it be the last.*



Xander

“Kissed your roommate?” Joy parrots my words in a rare moment where her veil of professionalism slips.

“It was two days ago. Nothing’s happened since. We don’t talk about it.” I’m glad we’re speaking over video chat. The blurry pixels spare me the full look of scorn on her face.

“Is it something you want to talk to him about?” she questions. I can also guess what she is going to say now before she says it. Always turning things back to me.

“No, but also, maybe?” I shift in the hard plastic chair. Since Cam is in our room right now, I had to reserve a library study room for this session.

“What do you want to say to him?” Her face is curated back into that unreadable expression. This is something I appreciate about therapy. About Joy, in particular. She doesn’t judge me. Just asks questions. Helps me explore for myself.

Leaning back, so the front legs of the chair pop off the ground, I think it over. “Maybe that I want to do it again.”

She nods. “This is someone you could see yourself having a real relationship with.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“Would that be so terrible?” I question.

Her mouth turns into a sympathetic smile. “I don’t think it would be terrible for you to be in a stable relationship. Do you think you are ready for that?”

“Maybe. I haven’t had urges to hurt someone in a long time. Hundred nineteen days, but who’s counting.”

“That’s a lot of progress. You should be proud of that.”

I do feel proud. Not that I’ll say as much. But I think Joy knows, because I’m grinning like an idiot.

At her next words, my smile falls. “Let me ask you a question. Just a thought exercise.”

“Shoot.” I muster my best bravado.

“Why do you think it is you don’t have the urge to manipulate your roommate?”

I can’t help the laugh that breaks from my lips. Joy cocks an eyebrow.

“Sorry. It’s just, wait till you hear this...” I pause for dramatic effect.

Joy leans closer to the camera. “I’m all ears.”

“His dad is the president of my college.” There’s a silence for a few beats after this bombshell.

Joy shifts in her seat. She seems to be debating her next words. Her shoulders rise and fall. “You don’t think that will make him more tempting to you?”

My head shakes so hard, my brain jostles. “Not at all. That’s the kicker. I liked him even before I knew. And he’s not like anyone else I’ve ever met. He’s humble, and sincere. Says he doesn’t care whether he knows about what I’ve done in the past. He believes I’ve changed.”

“It must feel nice, having a clean slate like that,” Joy observes.

“It is.” I nod in agreement. “I couldn’t hurt Cam. Not for all the money in the world. Not for anything.”

“Do you think maybe, since Cam is a man, that might make you see him differently?”

My brow pinches. Differently from the other people I’ve fucked over? Different because they are women? Then I get her meaning. “My mom.”

Joy nods. “She really hurt you, by leaving you like that.” It’s something I don’t like to think about, how my mom left me when I was just five years alone. Abandoned me in our apartment. They found me sometime later. Don’t know how long I was alone for, just remember being very hungry once all the food ran out.

“Damn, Joy. We really made it in the Freudian territory today, didn’t we?” I say in an attempt to deflect from the heady emotions that are stirring inside.

She laughs lightly at my joke. “Just a thought. If your mother chased after fame and money, and you hurt women who were willing to do incredible things for fame and money, we have to wonder, don’t we?”

I reluctantly nod. I can’t possibly be that basic, can I? “Maybe. Maybe that’s why Cam is different.”

Joy offers me a smile. It feels a little forced. “I’m happy for you. Cam must be special if you respect him so much.”

“There’s a but coming,” I offer my prediction.

This time she genuinely smiles. “Not a but. Just a question. Something for you to think over.”

“Hit me.” I feel all my muscles clench in anticipation.

“I think you should decide what would be a good pace for this relationship.”

I fight my eyeroll. “Don’t rush it, in other words.”

She smirks. “You are roommates. That can complicate things.”

My head starts to look a lot like a bobble doll. “I hear you.”

“It might be good to practice patience with Cam. To take your time. Build a good foundation as friends.”

Biting my lips in, I give them a good chew as I debate her words. Then I take a deep breath. “Maybe you’re right. There’s no reason to rush into things.”

Her approving smile makes me ache a little. I’ve said the right thing, but all it means is that she doesn’t believe in me yet. Maybe she is right though. I don’t know the first thing about friendships, let alone relationships. And Cam is uniquely positioned as my ideal victim. *Former ideal victim.*

But it’s so different with Cam. There’s no need to control. I just want to spoil him. To make him smile. To let him control me for a change. Like he did the other night, when he made me act like an idiot and run in the rain... and then he took control and went in for the kiss. That was hot as fuck.

When it comes to Cam, he’s in charge.

“Okay, spill,” Nayla says as soon as Cam leaves for class.

“Spill what?”

“Why are you two being so weird?”

I have to turn away from her, so she can’t read my expressions. “We’re not being weird.”

“Your voice just raised two octaves, that’s what you do when you lie to me.” She gives my shoulder a shove.

I stick my tongue out at her. “Stop prying. It’s unflattering.”

Her face lights up. “So, there is something to pry about. Tell me.”

“You suck.”

“I’m awesome. Tell me.”

I stand up and pace the room for a minute, before grabbing Cam’s ice-cream-sandwich Squishmallow to my chest and plunking down on his bed. The smell of him wafts around me and I’m sure I get a dopey smile on my face.

Nayla doesn’t miss it for a minute. “Holy shit!” she shrieks.

My eyes are like a deer in headlights.

“You fucked him!”

I slam the pillow back in place and resume my pacing, “I did not fuck him. We just kissed.”

“Holy balls. You kissed him!”

“Actually, he kissed me,” I correct, smiling at the memory.

“Wow. So, you really do like him, huh? I knew it.”

I throw a skeptical look her way. “You did not.”

“Totally did. Ever since you wanted me to stalk him at that party. You are not subtle. But, wow, I can’t believe you like another human being.”

“Jealous?” I pump my eyebrows.

She snorts a laugh, shaking her head. “No, actually. I mean, I’m mostly happy, and little worried.”

“Why worried?” I glare.

“Well, you’re you. You know?”

“I’m not the same person I was at the start of summer.” I realize I might be standing over her with my hands on my hips, so I take a few paces back and drop my arms.

Nayla doesn’t seem affected. She leans back into the wall, folding one leg under the other. “I know that. I’m proud of you.”

“You sound like Joy.”

“You told her before you told me?” She sounds honestly shocked.

I snicker. “More jealousy. I should have known you couldn’t share me.”

Nayla throws her pencil at me, and I snatch it out the air. “What did she say about it all?”

“To take it slow.” I frown at the thought. I don’t want to take it slow. I want to take more kisses. And maybe more than kisses. I want to curl up around Cam and run with him in the rain, and do whatever other silly things he has in mind for us.

“Huh?”

“What, huh?” I question, feeling my agitation growing.

“I don’t know. Maybe she knows best. It’s just... I would have figured she’d tell you to steer clear of shitting where you eat.”

“I’m not shitting where I eat.”

“Aren’t you though? Plus...”

“Plus what?” I scoff.

She throws her hands up. “Just saying it, because it needs to be said. You only just now increased your friendship circle from one person to two people. Do you really want to blow that friendship by dating?”

“Who says I’d blow it?” The agitation is still blooming beneath my skin.

“Isn’t that why we never took it there?”

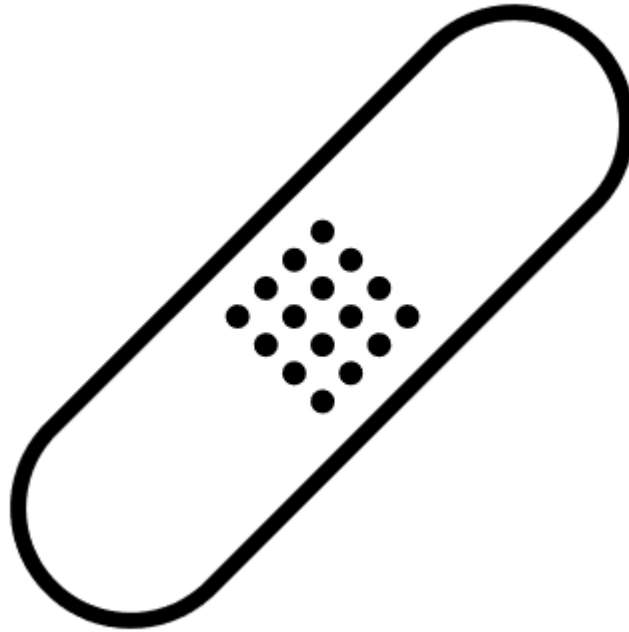
I bark a laugh. “No. We never took it there because I saw you eat your own boogers when you were five.”

Nayla sticks out her tongue and rolls her eyes. “Whatever. I’m just saying. Aren’t you glad we never crossed that line? That we don’t have some messy history?”

“I already crossed the line with Cam. We kissed. You heard that part, right? Besides, what would you know about it?”

You've never successfully dated anyone anyway. Don't tell me what to do or what not to do with Cam."

Nayla stands, shoving her laptop into her bag. "No need to yell at me. I was just saying. If you want to shoot the messenger, be my guest. But don't say I didn't warn you."



Cameron

Something has changed, but I can't figure out what. Nayla's stopped coming by our room. She's been MIA all week. But Xan doesn't seem fazed by it, so I've been leaving it be. At least this morning I found her in time for breakfast, since Xan decided to go on the world's longest run.

Aside from the extra running this week, Xan hasn't been acting all that weird after I kissed him. I half expect that to be the end of our friendship. Well, I mean, if I'm being honest, I secretly hope it would be the beginning of something more. But I'll take it for what it is. My first kiss. A perfect one. In the rain. It is hella romantic.

Maybe he's waiting for me to do it again? Is that how this works? I make the moves? Not sure I have the confidence for that again though. Don't know what gave me the confidence the first time. I guess the rain and the darkness. It felt like we were in a different world. One all our own. But here in our room, this is the real world. I don't go in for kisses in the real world.

But who could not want to do that again! Did Xan not feel the same things I felt in that kiss? It rocked me like a

damn wagon wheel. No way he's that good at faking a romantic kiss. There was nothing plutonic about it.

Not that I'm the expert though.

Too bad I can't ask Nayla, even though we're sitting alone at breakfast.

"Okay, you have stabbed that same piece of melon so many times, it's looking like Swiss cheese."

"Have I?" Even I can hear the far-off tone of my voice, I'm so deep into my own thoughts. "Sorry."

"This is about the kiss?"

My eyes flick to hers. "He told you?" My tone is incredulous, but it shouldn't be. Of course, he told her. They're best friends.

"Yeah. It, um, it didn't go so well. That's why he's been avoiding me, if you didn't notice."

"I noticed. Just didn't realize I was the wedge driving you apart."

Nayla points her fork straight at me, even though it's currently skewing a piece of honeydew. "Hey now. That's not what happened. He just didn't like my advice is all."

"And what advice was that?" *To not kiss me again?*

Her lips form a tight line. "You have to know about him, by now, right? I mean, people at this school talk, and you do have ears."

"I don't know all the details. He told me a little. Offered to tell me more. I told him I don't need to know everything."

"Well, that's stupid."

In a rare moment of confidence, I snap back, "Wow. You're just making friends left and right, huh?"

"I love Xander like a brother. But I'm fond of you too. I wouldn't want to see you hurt."

I wait for a group of people to walk by with their trays, and lower my voice, "You think he'd hurt me?"

She shakes her head, her matching puffballs bouncing from side to side. “No. I mean. I don’t think so. But still, it’s not been that long. And um...” she pauses, dropping her voice low, “...aren’t you President Parker’s son?”

“How did you find out?”

“Two and two, babe. New president that has those same baby-blue doe eyes, both starting at the same time, both named Parker. Doesn’t take a genius. But that’s Xan’s MO, you know? Going after people with powerful parents. Seeing how far he can push them. Making their deepest dreams come true. Then savoring the explosion when it all comes crumbling down around them.”

My stomach sours at her explanation. That can’t be what Xander is doing to me. We’re friends. He saved me. He kissed me under the pine tree in the rain. “What would he even gain by messing with me?” I wonder out loud.

Nayla reaches her hand across the table and takes mine. “He just likes when other people are in pain. When they are embarrassed. I love him. Don’t get me wrong. I know he loves me. He’s capable of love to some extent. I’m just saying, he’s still working on changing. I don’t know if it’s so smart that you tempt him right now.”

“So, that’s what you told him too? To back off. Let me be?” I can easily see why Xan is avoiding Nayla. Fighting the urge to walk away myself right now.

“More or less. But it’s for both your own good.”

“Seems like maybe you’re the one who likes to control people and see them suffer.” Those words fly from my mouth before I can stop them. Nothing left to do now except stomp away.

At least now I know why Xan is pulling away. Nayla’s scared him off. I don’t know how else to see it. And here I thought I knew what lonely was at Susman College. Not even close. Now I have a roommate who manages to spend less than five minutes a day in the same room as me. From what I

can tell, he's been staying up most of the night, working out while I'm studying in the evenings, and sleeping while I'm in class.

I decide there is only one thing to do now. Reconnect with some of the friends I started to make at the start of the term.

Leo agrees to try the rock-climbing wall with me at the gym, so I throw on a pair of yoga pants and head out.

It'll be nice to do something fun again. Get back to being myself, before I let a guy turn me all sulky.

"Leo!" I call out with a big wave when I see him.

"Great pants." He eyes me and pulls me in for a hug.

I'm sure I might be blushing from the compliment. "Uh, thanks."

"Didn't think I'd hear from you again. Was surprised you called. Glad, but surprised."

"Hey, phones work both ways, mister." It's a canned line, but I don't know what else to say.

He laughs at my words. "Well, Dillan and I made a pact not to hit on the new guy, so I was trying to play it cool."

"Hit on me?" I snort at the idea. "Don't pull my leg."

Leo's face screws up. "Not sure whether you're fishing for a compliment, or if you're really that sweet and innocent, babe."

I tap my nose and Leo laughs. "All right. Cute and innocent it is."

Pretty sure this is that flirting thing I have yet to figure out. Does kissing a boy open some magical door into flirting? *Xan*. I wish I was here with him.

Following Leo to the counter where a student worker sits swiping their phone screen, he clears his throat and they look up. "Size ten, please. What are you, hun?"

“Nine,” I tell the guy behind the counter, who sets his phone down without a glance in our direction.

He’s back a few minutes later with climbing shoes and harnesses. When we finish signing waivers, the guy gives us a ten-minute tutorial on how to wear the harness and use the belay device. Then we’re unleashed into the wild. Here goes nothing.

Chapter Five

Debugging

It's not a bug; it's an undocumented feature.



Xander

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. My knuckles sting from the hits that I'm landing on this punching bag. The extra hard hits have absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Cameron is smiling and laughing with some blond guy at the rock-climbing wall. A guy who keeps checking him out. Who keeps touching his arm.

Thwack. Thwack. Who just patted his ass.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. There might be actual steam shooting from my nostrils.

Guess I'm territorial when it comes to Cam. A fucking caveman. Suits me though. Another stripe for my asshole blackbelt.

Cameron spots me. I try not to notice. No eye contact. Don't come over here. I won't be nice. Can't be right now.

Should just turn and head for the locker room. Worked out long enough today anyway. My shirt is drenched with sweat.

The locker room is mostly empty on a Saturday night.

Why is Cam here on a Saturday night. Is it a date? He's given up on me. As he should. Got nothing to offer him.

Manage to grab my shit and almost break free out the back, but there he is. Little lamb. Doesn't know what danger he's in.

"Hey," he says in his sweet voice. Too sweet.

"Yo," I grunt, and keep walking.

"You mad at me?"

The words slice me from my throat to my belly. "Nope. Have fun tonight. You deserve it."

His footsteps quicken, hand reaching out to grab mine. "Wait a second. I know why you're avoiding me."

"Cam, just fuck off, will you?" I snap. Don't mean to. Don't want to say those words. Not to him. But it's the only way. He needs to move on. Get away from me. Take up with a pretty boy like the blond he's with.

"What the hell, dude?" He's trying to sound confident, but I can hear the tremble in his voice. Eyes trained down at my sneakers. If I look up into his blue eyes, my resolve will crumble. Might just carry him away to my cave. Keep him captive. Say fuck-all to the so-called good advice Joy and Nayla gave me. Have my way with Cam. Consequences be damned.

The silence is heavy. Deafening. My feet are glued to the floor, but I need to run. Need to get far away from Cam, fast as possible. Can't let him in. Won't end well for us.

He sighs. Defeated. "Nayla's wrong about us." His voice is tiny. A shred of a whisper. Might be imagining it. Cause that's what I want to hear. My heart clenches in my chest.

"You were just a distraction," I croak, finding the strength to turn on my heel and walk away. Shoulders somehow held

high.

I smack my palm against the heavy metal bar that releases the door and sprint off into the cold. Don't care how drained I am from that workout. Just need to get far away from Cam. From the pain I'll cause him. Better he learns now.

Wishing I had anywhere to go but back to my room, I take my time in the showers. Then I close down the dining hall. I watch a movie in the common room. People steer clear of me. Think my reputation has finally caught up with me.

Eventually, I'm whacked. Cam is usually asleep by midnight anyway, and it's nearing 2 a.m. Just don't look over at his side.

Easier said than done.

The minute I open the door, my eyes snap to his bed, which is still neatly made and empty. What the fuck?

I check the time again, as if somehow I've gotten it wrong. It's one fifty-six.

He hasn't come home?

Was that really a date? Is Cam wrapped around the blond guy? The thought makes my blood boil, my fists clench at my sides.

It's for the best. He deserves someone normal. Even if normal around here means more fucked than me. The normals here know how to fit in. To cloak their perversions. To keep up appearances. Never gave a fuck about that myself.

Why can't I stop staring at his side of the room? It's too much color. That's why. Like a moth to flame. That's all it is. I try to close my eyes, but they keep opening to look over there.

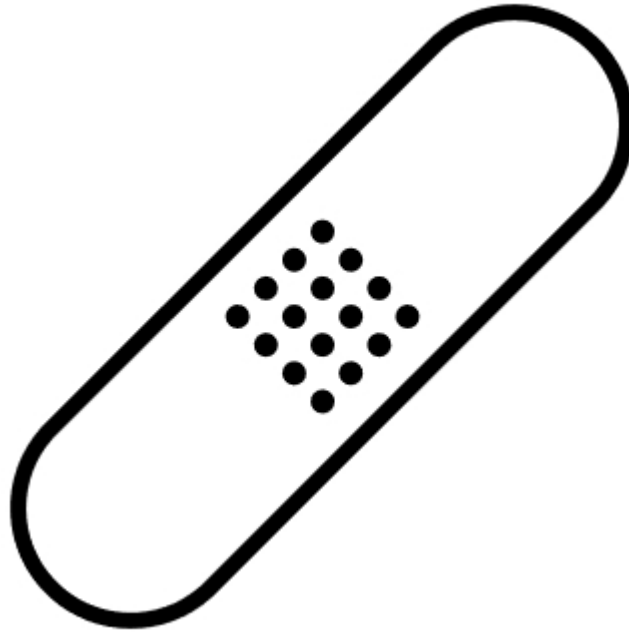
Lying back on my bare mattress, I ball up a hoodie to prop under my head. Mattress feels extra lumpy tonight. Room seems colder than usual. I tug on a pair of sweats over my gym shorts. Doesn't help though.

What if Cam isn't okay? The blond guy didn't look big enough to overpower Cam, so I should assume he's fine. Unless he's not. Unless he's lying drugged in a ditch somewhere. I could hack his accounts. Check his phone's location.

But that's off limits. Definitely falls into the category of things I no longer do. Exploit my powers. Breaking the moral conduct of polite society. *It's stalking, you sick fuck.* Yes. It is stalking. Can't do that, even though I want to.

Fuck. Feelings suck ass. No wonder my brain carefully avoided them for so long. Maybe it was self-preservation. When I hung around people who were assholes at their core, didn't have to worry about feelings. I know how to be around assholes. But kind people like Cam? Yup, never saw that shit coming.

I sit up with a huff and stare over at his bed. He's really not coming home tonight? Crossing the short space in two steps, I sit down. His comforter is soft. Displacing the blankets means his sweet grapefruit smell is wafted into the air. Can't help myself then... I lie face down in his pillow like a total simp. How pathetic am I?



Cameron

After the crushing run-in with Xan, I don't have the heart to fake a smile for Leo anymore. I make an excuse and drive straight to my dad's place. There's no way I'm going to face Xan tonight.

It's a peaceful drive through the small town. Dad's place is just on the border of Glen Arbor. Even though it's dark out, I can catch glimpses of the orange-brown trees in the beam of my headlights. They remind me of Xan's eyes, so I focus on the gray pavement instead.

When I arrive, Dad's sitting in his single recliner, watching a documentary on the Egyptian pyramids. He looks surprised when he turns at the intrusion. "To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?"

I shrug. "No reason. Just wanted to crash here tonight."

"Roommate get a romantic partner or something?" He chuckles at the thought.

And of course, I burst into ugly tears.

“Whoa, what’s this about?” He makes it to me in two strides and wraps me into a hug.

I sniffle into his sweater. The place I’ve found comfort for so many years. Probably getting too old to be comforted by my father, but I’ll give myself a break tonight.

“Let’s get you some cocoa,” he offers in his soothing voice.

“I’m too old for cocoa,” I complain, and follow him to the kitchen.

He chuckles and raises a brow at me. “Whiskey then?”

I’m not twenty-one for a few more months, but I decide to push my luck with a nod.

To my surprise, he grabs the bottle of Jameson from the cabinet and two crystal glasses. Pouring a small splash into each, he holds his up and I clink his cup.

The liquid burns my throat and I cough at the sensation. Dad laughs. “Good. That means you aren’t secretly drinking yet.”

“I drink,” I protest. “Had beer at a party.”

“Beer barely counts. Especially the watered-down kegs they get. I heard Dean Runkin pays CJ’s party store to sell it watered down.”

“That’s maniacal.”

He shrugs. “Got to keep these kids safe.”

There’s a small drop left in my glass, so I decide to sip it down too. Dad watches me, waiting patiently for me to explain.

I hop up on the stool at the counter, leaning my elbows on the hard stone, resting my chin in my hands. “This is going to sound so pathetic.”

“I once begged a girl who cheated on me to give *me* a second chance. I’m pretty sure you can’t top that.”

“That’s pretty pathetic.”

Dad laughs. “See? Now tell me what happened.”

Taking a deep breath, I debate for a minute, whether there is anything I should keep from my dad. But no. He’s always been so open with me. So understanding. He’ll have good advice. I could use some cheering up.

“I have a crush on my roommate,” I breathe the words, a weight already lifting off my chest.

“Doesn’t sound so bad. Where does the bad part come in? He doesn’t like you back?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, he’s a vault. He doesn’t let people in very often. He’s got all these things he’s decided about himself. That he’s worthless. That he’s broken. But that’s totally not who he is on the inside. He says he’s done bad things, but he’s trying to change. And the man I know is changed. He’s a good person deep down. And I pity him because people don’t see him. They see how they can benefit from him. He’s a genius, Dad. A bona fide genius when it comes to coding. I told you about that code he was writing for the school. And he’s so kind to me. He’s sort of my only friend. I’m infatuated with him. And we kissed a few weeks ago, just once. But then his best friend warned him to leave me alone. She doesn’t know the first thing about Xander Briggs, if she thinks he would hurt me, and—”

“Xander Briggs?” Dad interrupts.

My stomach sinks into my gut at his tone. “You, uh, you’ve heard of him?”

I don’t need an answer, because his face is turning to stone. “Yes. I’ve heard of him.”

“Good things, right? How his codes have made the college millions?”

“That. And other things. I’ve been informed he’s on academic probation. Dean Runkin keeps a close eye monitoring his behavior. He was mandated to attend a psychiatric clinic this summer in order to come back this fall. Jesus, Cameron. I don’t like this one bit. Xander Briggs is your roommate?” His head is shaking slowly. “Excuse me.”

Watching my dad's sure steps as he stalks from the kitchen to his study leaves me dumbfounded. Who is this man? I don't recognize him. Never seen him judge a student so harshly. He's always been forgiving and open. That's how he raised me to be.

Silently, I slink down the hall and position myself near the study door. Dad's face is lighted in the blue from the computer screen. He doesn't look up at me.

"What are you doing?" I inquire in a hushed tone.

He doesn't break his concentration. "Xander Briggs," he seethes. "Sick man."

"He's not sick."

Dad looks up at me. "I don't want you rooming with him anymore."

"I don't know who you are anymore." I've never used such a hard tone with my father before.

Feeling lost, I wander back to the living room and curl myself up in a ball on the couch. I feel strangely unwelcome here. And yet, I can't go back to my dorm room. I've got nowhere to go.

After a few more minutes, Dad's footsteps make their way upstairs, without another word to me. This house feels cold. It is strange to me, being here. It's not my home. We left my home back in Indiana, where I'd lived since middle school. That was home. This is my dad's house now. That fact has never been more apparent than it is right now.

I close my eyes and breathe, let the tears fall. Not sure how long that lasts, but my eyes feel puffy. The skin swollen and salt-stained.

My veins are pumping with unrealized action. I feel like I need to do something. To figure out what my dad did on his computer. What horrible thing he set into motion. Was Xan right? Our time was up as soon as my dad found out he was my roommate. Then again, based on what Xan said tonight, our time was already up.

I debate for a long time, whether it's right or wrong to know. Whether there is anything I can do. How helpless I am.

Fuck it.

Action is needed. I have to know.

Creeping down to the base of the stairs, my ears strain for sounds, but it's dark and silent at the top. I continue down to the study and let myself through the glass door.

I lift the laptop lid. The screen lights up, greeting me with an image of me and dad at pride two years ago. Dad in his "Free Dad hugs" T-shirt. Me in a generic rainbow flag tee.

Swallow down the guilt of breaking and entering. I have to know what he's done.

His password is exactly what I expect. Same as all our shared family accounts. My first name and our address from before we moved. Easily guessable.

When the computer loads, I can see two windows are still open. The first is the student records. It's open at Xander's file. There are five documents attached. Documents I have no doubt describe in detail what he's done that's so egregious. I could read them right now. Get the school's take on the story. But if I didn't want to hear Xan's stories before, I really don't want to hear the school's take.

Next, I open the email window and head to the sent folder. There's a message to Dean Runkin.

Dear Dean Runkin,

Based on my review of the conduct contract signed by Mr. Briggs in April, I believe the September assault on Mr. Browning qualifies as an unacceptable behavior described herein. As consequence for breaking his contract, I expect his immediate removal from student housing. It is our responsibility to ensure the safety of all students.

Regards,

President Parker

With shaky fingers, I select message options and recall the message. Not that will stop him from following up on the matter. But it's something.

Traitor. I think as I close the lid to the computer and push myself back from his desk. How can my dad be such a traitor? He didn't even listen to one thing I said. He just saw red and acted.

To protect me? It doesn't feel like it. Not if he had been listening. Not if he bothered to hear what I was saying, that this would hurt me too. That I wanted to find a way to make it work with Xan, not have him torn away from me.

The most fucked-up thing about it is that the whole time, Xan warned me that being friends with him would hurt me. But look how wrong he was. I'm the one that hurt him. This is all my fault. I'm getting him kicked out of the dorms. All for saving me. I have to go to him. Warn him. Beg for him to forgive me. I need to see Xan right now.



Xander

My heart gallops as my ears register the sound of my dorm room door opening. I blink into the darkness. My body is still frozen from GABA neurotransmitters, so I can't move. And that's fucked, because I'm already recognizing the small form in the doorway. Can already smell the grapefruit boy walking toward me. I'm tangled in his comforter like a snake.

Fucking great. I'm in his damn bed.

Finally, I shake off the GABA and sit up. There's an uneasy stillness in the air.

"Uh. Hey," I croak.

"Hey," he says softly. I try to read his tone, but I'm not sure what's there. My brain is too foggy. Too fucked.

Then I get this happy feeling. Relief sweeps through me. Cam is okay. I think. Maybe. His face is puffy, I can see it even in the pale light of the moon. It has me jumping upright. "What happened? Tell me you're okay."

"You care about me. Don't you?" he asks, like he's confirming a suspicion.

I'm too gripped to lie. "Yes. I do."

His shoulder relax and he steps closer. "It's all my fault." His words are choked.

God, just to be in his presence again... I hate myself for pushing him away. I should have listened to my gut. Taken the shot while I had the chance. Joy doesn't always know best. Nayla sure as hell doesn't.

"I was jealous, earlier. Seeing you with that guy. I'm sorry," I blurt out.

Cam's eyes widen and he takes a step back, his hand reaching for support from the desk. His lips part slightly, as if he's unsure what to say.

"I shouldn't have said that." My eyes dart around, seeking escape. I wipe my hands down my shorts. "Wait, no, that's not what I mean. I should have said it. Said it sooner. That I like you, Cam. I should have kissed you again." Apparently, I'm all honesty tonight. Filter be damned.

Even in the pale light, I can see Cam's face flush, his cheeks falling, jaw tightening. His hands tremble at his sides. He takes another step back, recoiling from me.

"I'm fucking this up," I growl.

Then he steps forward, holding his hand out. "No. I fucked it up. Xan, I fucked up so bad. My dad..." he pauses on a shaky inhale.

We both go silent for a moment, while some students noisily run down the hall, drunk on their way home from the bar, no doubt. Carefree. Not tangled in a fucked web like I've gotten Cam into.

When the voices trail off, I steel myself. "He knows about me? About us?" I wager.

Cam nods, and I notice a tear make its escape, racing down his plump cheek. I race to him, my hand coming up without my permission, to wipe the wet trail. A second makes a fast escape in its wake. His lips tremble.

“Hey. Hey. It’s okay. That’s not your fault, angel. I told you, shit follows me. I’m the shit stirrer. This is my fault. I’m the one who made my own bed, okay? I have to lie in it. You are blameless.”

“If I wouldn’t have mentioned you to him...” he trails off as he sucks in a shaky breath. I brush the hair back off his forehead.

“That’s not how this works.” I cup his face in my palms. “You hear me? I don’t want you blaming yourself. I’ve made all my own choices. This is why I didn’t want you involved with me. That’s why I gave you space. You know how fucking bad I’ve wanted to kiss you, angel? Since that night in the rain? It’s killing me not to kiss you.”

“Then kiss me,” he demands. Bravado like I’ve never heard before. Brushing my thumb over his bottom lip, so it’s pulled down a little, I release it. Those lips. So pliant.

I will obey. Anything he wants. At least right now. At least in this moment. Anything he wants. I want to kiss him too. With every fiber of my being.

Want to crash into him, but I take it slow. Glacially slow. Enjoy the sight of his lashes as his eyes flutter closed, his pulse thrumming in his neck, his tongue poking out and wetting his lips. That pretty face leaning expectantly toward me.

His breath hitches when I move in and hover just millimeters away.

Then I carefully brush my lips over his. Suck in a sharp breath of my own, against my will, a soft groan slipping involuntarily from the back of my throat.

I can’t hold back anymore. The dam of self-control bursts, and our lips meet, quickly wetting as we move our mouths in unison, locked together. Cam sucks my breath from my mouth, his tongue dominating mine. Tasting and taking me. Like we’ll never kiss again. Hell, maybe we won’t. Never know what his daddy will do. But right now, he’s mine. In my arms.

I scoop him up by the waist and his legs wrap around my middle. Cupping his perfect peachy ass, I walk us the two steps into the wall for leverage. Keep him pressed against it. All mine.

It's more than just my cock swelling. My emotions are doing some weird thing where they rise tangibly inside me, threatening to spill out of a profession of love. Gotta keep my mouth locked on Cam's to avoid such a perversion.

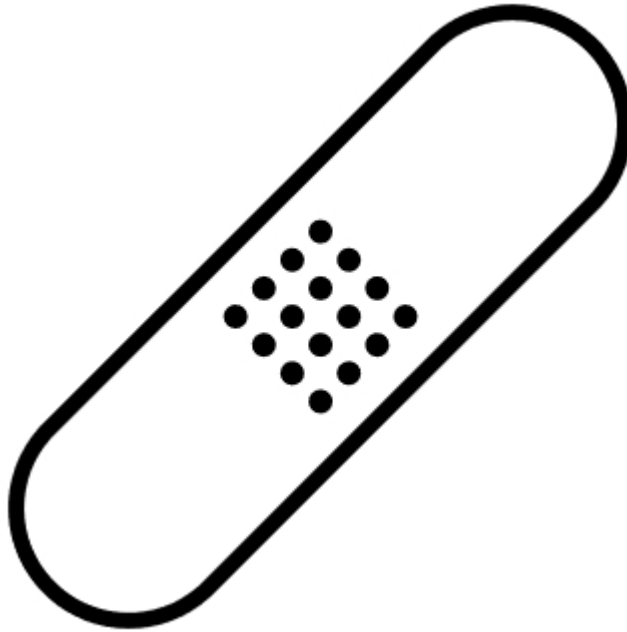
When his fingers weave into my hair and tug me closer, shockwaves of pleasure roll down my spine. Can't help but grind into him. He rolls his hips in reply. Moans into my mouth.

He tugs at my shirt, and I let him pull it off. Use the moment to gasp for air. He can suffocate me if it means more kisses. I'm starving for those kisses. But got to get his shirt off too, now that there is the promise of feeling his soft skin against mine.

I walk us to his bed and lay him down. Crawl on top of him. His hands explore my back and I flex each muscle as he traces them, nipping and sucking at his lips. At his throat. Down that delicate neck. His collarbone. The way he moans, so soft. Spurring me on. Driving me fucking wild.

As I come back up to take more of those sweet kisses, his hands fumble between us. He's taking his pants off. Execute emotional code sequence: Love.exe.

Wildfire erupts inside me. Uncontrolled and unaccounted for. Desire crackling, embers spreading to every inch of me. My nerve endings are live wires. Spreading the electric shock. Taking all the volts he has to offer me.



Cameron

“Fuck, Cam,” Xander groans when I slide down my jeans. He shifts to allow me to kick them free. Now it’s just my briefs in the way. And those pesky sweatpants of his. “Look at you,” he gasps, a finger tracing over my hard length.

A zing rips through my body. Apparently, there is a wire connected from my cock to my toes.

Now is no time to blush, but I do it anyway. You can’t write command codes for real life, but if I could I’d tell the machine to try removing pants.

I want to see him. Dreamed about it plenty of times. Thought about it an awful lot.

My brain goes fuzzy when he grips me in his palm. His hand is huge. He covers me easily. Lazy strokes over the fabric. I’m in a vice grip. My eyes threaten to roll back into my skull, but I will myself to look at his lustful grin. His eyes are a hallowed repository of enigmatic endeavors. He’s got some black-box algorithm for driving me wild. Can’t tell you how it works, but it works. Boy, does it work.

“Xan,” I groan. Wanting more and more. Greedy with whispers of things I want, that I can’t express, that I don’t know how to initiate. That I don’t know how to execute. Does Xan know?

I tug at his pants half-heartedly, biting down on my lip so hard it might bleed. A heavy breath, exhaled from his nose because his mouth is sealed. More whispers of divine things to come. The patron saint of cryptic encounters.

And then he does it. Fucking hell. He does it!

He shucks his pants in one smooth command. His cock is straining and perfect in every way. I want to lick him all over, especially that hard cock. But I’m a function without parameters while I lie here, incomplete, desperate to make more happen. So much more.

“You’re stunning,” I finally gasp, finding my voice. I don’t sound like me. I sound like a starving man, desperate for the meal dangling before me.

Another soft snort-laugh, his mouth cocking in a side smile. Then he’s down over me and holy fucking hell, I feel him. I feel him on me! His cock, it’s chaotically pressing against my thigh, my belly, my dick. I want to grab us up together, but there’s no room for my hands when he presses our stomachs together as he takes my mouth again.

Then his rhythm hits me. Lord, his rhythm. And the sounds, my heaven! I will burn these sounds into my brain. Hardwire them. Soft eager grunts that escape him. That tell me he is as torn as me. As riled up from the sensation. I want to stop and wonder if I’m the first guy he’s been with, but I don’t dare ruin the moment. Force myself back in. Head under water. Hold me down. Drown me.

When Xan comes up for air, my hand moves like a ninja, grasping our cocks together into my palm. They barely fit, but I don’t give a damn. He gives me a surprised look. Then I start stroking us. Don’t even care to go slow. I’m gonna go as fast as I damn well please, because he’s teased me long enough.

Before I can comprehend what's happening, Xan is flipping us over, pulling me on top. My legs fall on either side of his thighs.

"I wanna see this," he mutters. He's so confident. Knows what he wants and how to get it. Thank fuck for that.

Biting my lip and batting my lashes, I grind my ass into his thighs while I fuck into my hand, rutting up against his cock. It's too dry to work like it should, and I don't want to break this spell, but I can make this so much better. Take what I want. So I do.

Leaning over the side of the bed, I pull open my desk drawer. Xan is watching me, and he groans, "So, that's where you keep it."

I snatch the lube and look back at him. "So, you did see it, that day, on my bed?"

He nods, a smirk tugging his cheeks up. "Hell, yes. Thought a lot about the implications of it too."

"You didn't," I protest, only because I want to hear more as I flip the cap of the lube and pour some of the silky liquid into my palm.

"Absolutely did. Fuck," he groans when I grab us up again, this time in a slippery grip. "Cam, fuck."

My smile is so freaking big at that. Making him come undone, I mean. That's what I want right now, to make him lose his mind. I can't believe touching his dick against mine is making Xander Briggs lose his mind.

Though I'm right there with him. A few more strokes and I'll be lost to bliss. Is it okay to come first? It's going to have to be. I'm right there. On the precipice. Forcing my eyes open to take in his face. The way he's looking right at me. His hands on my ass. Searing touch. Holding me down, moving with my rhythm.

"I'm close," I manage a warning, even though it's too late to back down now.

“Yes. Come for me, angel. Come for me,” he coaxes, and the words are too much for my virgin brain. I explode right there on command. Not so much explode as leak like a sieve. “*Ohgodohfuck*,” I cry out helplessly, my hand slowing.

Only when I feel Xan throb do I open my eyes again, realizing that he’s wrapped his hand around mine, keeping us moving. He’s looking right at me, eyes flickering between my face and our cocks, as his mouth drops open, and his cock actually does erupt. Thick white ribbons that rocket into the air before arching and dropping back down across his stomach. What a fucking sight.

We’re both panting now, I realize, as he releases the grip and I slide over to the side, crashing down on the bed next to him.

“That was...” *gasp*, “...so much...” *gasp*, “...better than the knee rub,” I manage.

Xan shakes with laughter, gasping for air between his words too. “Are you... freaking... kidding me?”

“What?” I chuckle. “It was.”

“Well, obviously. Fuck, Cam. That was so damn hot.”

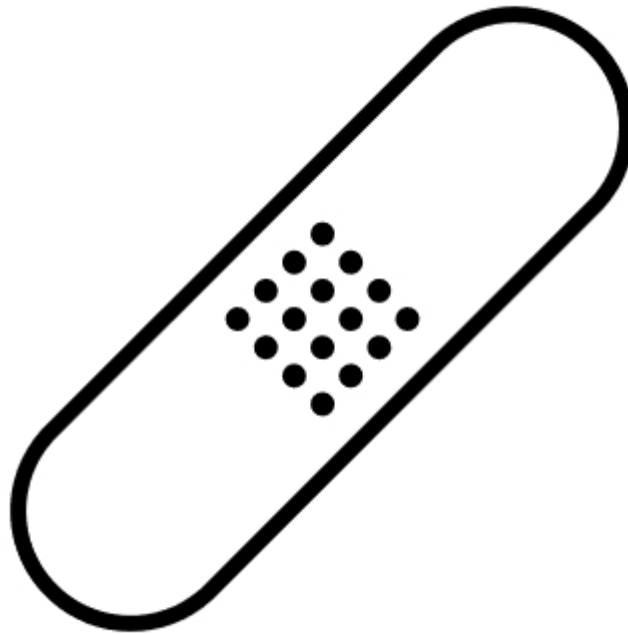
“Yeah?” I ask, already happy for the reassurance.

He reaches over for his boxers to wipe up the extra-large mess on his stomach. “Or so the evidence would suggest.” Tossing the garment, he rolls over to face me, hand supporting his head. “You *are* incredible.”

Chapter Six

Code Refactoring

Love, like code, thrives on refining.



Cameron

Tied for first, the most blissful moment of my life is lying naked next to Xan in my bed. I'm debating waking him up already, so we can get going on round two. Round two of many. Unless he's changed his mind. But I don't want to let self-doubt creep in. No room for that here. Not when his morning wood is pressed happily against my sweaty thigh.

Thud. Thud. Thud. The knock at the door is not friendly, and my heart starts leaping into my throat. A deep frown takes over my face as Xan's sleepy orange eyes blink open.

"Xander Briggs," the familiar voices calls out. It's my dad's voice. No mistaking it. Fuck me running.

I'm frozen with fear. Not of my dad, but of the implications of what I did last night. Recalling the email. Sneaking back here in the middle of the night. But what does this mean, that he is here looking for Xan?

Thud. Thud. Thud. "Open the door," he commands. Never heard him sound so authoritative.

I push my finger to my lips at Xan. "He can't come in," I wager. Xan looks doubtful.

"Let's just see what he wants." His voice is so low, I practically have to read his lips.

I grab his arm as he shifts to stand, but his eyes are pleading. "I have to comply, Cam." Now his tone is pleading.

With a sigh, I release my grip and he tosses the blanket back. "One minute," he calls back through the door.

"No minutes," my dad counters in a cruel tone and I notice the knob jiggling and turning. He's brought the master keys for the dorm rooms. What. The. Fuck.

Only when the door swings open half a second later do I realize that I'm ass naked in my bed. Xan's standing in the middle of the room, with just enough time to cover his package.

"Excuse me," Dad barks and pulls the door closed again, but not before I could register a campus security officer in full uniform standing next to him.

"What the fuck," I call through the now-closed door as Xan and I scramble to get our clothes on. Xan manages to pull on his sweats from last night and I pull my rough jeans over my bare ass.

The pounding knock repeats not seconds later, and this time I fling the door open, red-faced and ready for a fight. "That was entirely rude!"

Dad looks right through me. "Mr. Briggs, I have been made aware that you assaulted a student, in clear violation of your probationary contract. You are no longer welcome in student housing. Pack your things immediately."

“It was my fault, Dad. He hit Zack because of me. Just let me explain,” I protest.

“There is no excuse for physical violence,” Dad counters.

Since Xander barely owns anything, his few possessions are already packed in his duffel. He slings it over his shoulder and gives me a quick look. Sympathetic. Even in this moment, he’s worried about me.

“Zack was attacking me!” I shout incoherently. “Please, just listen.”

Xan leans into me as he walks past. “Don’t make it worse, kitten.” I’m left processing his words as he steps into the hall. The campus security guard follows.

How has this all turned so sour so fast?

It’s just me and my father standing here. I don’t recognize him. “Zack attacked me,” I repeat.

“Zack hit you?” he asks with an unchanged expression. He doesn’t believe me. I can see it in his doubtful eyes. My own father thinks I’m lying.

“Yes, and he was trying to...” I pause, choking on the words. *Trying to make me give him a blow job.* It’s everything Dad warned me about. About being targeted for being gay. About being sexually abused. He was always afraid of that, for me, ever since I came out. Why can’t I just say the words?

Dad speaks before I can. “This is what he does.”

“Who? Zack?”

“No, Xander Briggs. Didn’t you read the file on my computer?”

My ears burn with guilt when it shouldn’t matter anymore. “No. I didn’t read it. It doesn’t matter what it says. I know Xander. You don’t.”

“Mr. Briggs targets students with powerful parents. He manipulates them into doing things for him. He said in his statement that he takes pleasure in it. He barely shows any remorse for his actions. He blames other people for the chaos

he causes. He put a cheerleader in a coma for a month. She could have died.”

“He wouldn’t have done that on purpose. I’m sure there’s more to the story. You don’t know him.”

“Apparently, you don’t. Look at how he’s got you all twisted. Fighting with your own father. This is all a scheme, son. I’m sure of it. More of his games. Dean Runkin has seen this behavior for two years. There’s no stopping him. Now, I can’t have someone who hits students living in student housing.”

“But you can keep him enrolled? Keep him around to make codes that make Whitmore rich?” I seethe, my whole body shaking.

“Now that’s the purview of Runkin. It’s not my place to say who stays and who goes—”

I cut him off, my voice full volume. “And yet here you are, having him escorted out of our room!”

“You are my son!” he bellows back. Both our chests are pumping, matching scowls on our faces. Never have we raised our voices to each other. Never.

Dad takes a step back and shakes his head. His throat bobs with a swallow and he exhales slowly. His voice becomes low and calm, and condescending as hell. “Son, I’m just pointing out the past, and I’m asking you to consider where we are in this very moment, and whether this was all orchestrated. It fits his pattern.”

Looking at the gentle man who raised me, who was always there for me, who always listened... it softens nothing inside when it comes to Xan.

“Get out of my room,” I say in my best bravado. “Now.”



Xander

Even though this is why I have a rainy-day fund, I'm not going to tap into it. Not just yet. The library is open twenty-four hours a day, and the gym has showers. That's good enough for me.

Not having enough is something I'm used to. Roughing it. Couch surfing. Sleeping sitting up. Only two and half months to go until winter break, when Nayla's parents will tolerate me for a few weeks. Then I can figure out next semester.

Too bad my best money-making scheme is bunked. But it was wrong to take money from Jordan and her friends. They'd do anything to go viral. That's what they'd told me. I just wanted to see how much they meant it. For them, *anything* turned out to be way too fucking far. They were willing to do whatever sick thing I came up with, and pay me for the trouble.

Anyway, that's all over now. I'm not reverting back. Even if President Parker thinks I'm a piece of shit who broke my contract. Dean Runkin sure as hell didn't give a shit, which means it's all about me being around Cameron.

Of course, that's what it's about. Cameron is an angel, destined for wonderful things. He doesn't need me around, blowing up his life with my past mistakes.

With my duffel over my shoulder and a backpack, I have everything I own in the world. The best thing I can do right now is focus on finishing the code for Runkin. Get it up and running and making money for Whitmore. Prove my worth.

You have to let people use you, if you want them to help you. That's always been the way of the world.

The basement of the library is my favorite spot. It has that old funky book smell. The overhead lights are so old that they aren't harsh LEDs like upstairs. Instead, they are bowl-shaped industrial lamps with big green shades that hang low over each table. There are a few dusty couches and chairs that you can pull right up to the tables. There's even a bathroom down here.

It's the perfect spot to set up.

But first, I need to stop at the coffee spot at the library entrance and take care of my rumbling stomach.

"Black coffee and a bagel please," I tell the woman behind the counter. She's in her mid-fifties, if I had to guess. Her hair is dyed a faux-red color, and she has fresh ink tattooed on her forearm.

"Love the ink," I tell her as she passes me the steaming cup.

She holds out her arm so I can get a better look. "My daughter passed last year. It's in honor of her and my grandson."

I study the roses intertwining with the dagger. "It's beautiful. How old is your grandson?"

"Four and a half."

"So young," I offer sympathetically, knowing firsthand what it was like to lose a mother at five. Only mine didn't die, she just abandoned me for a rich man.

In a low voice, she whispers, "I actually bring him up with me sometimes, he hangs out in the study rooms while I

work.”

I smirk at the thought. “You’re a cool grandma. I bet he adores you.”

“He does.” She smiles to herself.

“Well, I’ll be unofficially crashing downstairs for a while. Send him down anytime. I started learning to code computers around his age. I could show him a thing or two.”

“Might just take you up on that.” She winks. “No charge,” she adds while sliding me the bagel.

“You sure?” I question, not wanting to get her into trouble.

“Course I am. I’m Patti, by the way.”

“Xander. Nice to meet you.”

Joy has no idea I’ve been hunkered down in the library for five days. Since I usually take our video calls in the study room anyway, there’s nothing to tip her off. Still, I told her, even though it’s dominated thirty minutes of our call.

“Let’s go back to what you said a few minutes ago,” Joy pauses and looks down at her notes. It’s funny to me that somewhere in her home office is a stack of handwritten notes with the ramblings of a twenty-one-year-old fuck-up. “You mentioned you won’t take Cameron’s calls. Why is that?”

My heart aches at her question. Talking about Cam physically hurts. But I have to muscle through. “I was driving a wedge between him and his old man. I could see that much. He deserves better than that. Better than me.”

Joy gets that look on her face, like she’s about to correct me. “Ah, but that’s interesting, because the way I see it, you are being very selfless. And that’s a wonderful quality in a partner.”

“I don’t know the first thing about relationships,” I counter.

“Seems you do, Xander. You have a lot of insights about how to have a relationship, when it comes to Cameron. Perhaps I was wrong before, about not rushing things. In fact, you should be very proud of how you handled things with him.”

“But I told him off before, when I saw him with that guy.” I lean the chair back, wondering how she’ll twist that one.

She doesn’t miss a beat. “Jealousy is a normal emotion to have, when you care about someone. And it sounds like he forgave you. It’s okay to not be perfect.”

I hate when Joy says things like that, because she makes life sound so simple. So logical.

When I stay quiet, she pushes me again. “Do you think perhaps that Cameron should be his own judge, when it comes to deciding what works for him? Deciding what he wants?”

I lower my eyes to glower at her and she chuckles. “Does that mean I make a good point?”

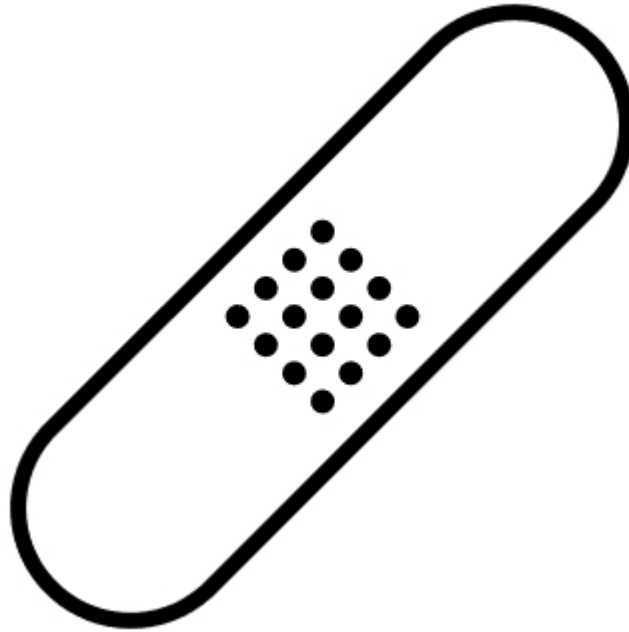
“He doesn’t know what’s good for him.”

She tilts her head. “It seems only fair to let each person decide what is good for them.”

“That got me in trouble before,” I argue.

“With Jordan and her friends. Yes, that did get you in trouble. But you had different intentions then, didn’t you?”

I roll my eyes and Joy laughs again. “I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can promise.”



Cameron

“You at least won’t come by and hand out candy with me? It’s our tradition.” My dad has tracked me down in the computer science building, which is against our original agreement about talking in public while at Whitmore. In his three-piece suit and tie, he’s an imposing figure. I’m definitely getting a few stares as people pass by.

When my mouth stays firmly sealed, my face expressionless, his tone changes to one of irritation. “Cameron Parker, it has been three weeks of the silent treatment. When are you going to grow up?”

“Sorry if I’m the only one with principles.” I fold my arms across my chest and turn my head away, gazing at nothing in particular outside the big windows. The leaves are now mostly off the trees, blanketing the ground. It’s an overcast day, gray and gloomy, just like me.

“Principles?” he asks, a genuine tone of surprise in his voice.

I turn to face him. “Yes. I have principles. The first being, I listen to people. The second being, I believe people. The

third being, I do not exploit people for personal gain.”

Dad scoffs and drops his voice to a harsh whisper, “Well, isn’t that rich. Doesn’t seem Xander can say the same. Not after what he did to those—”

He doesn’t finish his words, because at that very moment, Xander saunters down the hall at a casual pace, like he doesn’t have a care in the world. It breaks my fucking heart, because I’m all too aware of the heavy weight he carries.

Nayla told me he’s been camping out in the basement of the library. He’s effectively homeless. Homeless. Every time I think of it, I want to tear the world apart.

My head spins on my neck, following him, drinking him in. He doesn’t even look at me.

“I’m late for class,” I snap when the coast is clear, turning on my heel and marching away.

There are only two costumes I’ve considered for tonight. One being a kitten, and the other an angel. But the kitten costume was sold out, so here I am in all white, with wings and a halo. I love that the word angel isn’t gendered. There’s not some alternative for men and women. They are all angels, no matter their gender. Do angels even have a gender?

I’m almost feeling guilty dressing like this. Feels more like I’ve become a demon, taking away the only housing Xan has, being too chicken shit to tell my dad what happened with Zack, if he’d even listen.

At the Halloween party, I’m a total wallflower. A major bummer. I shouldn’t even have come. It’s the first all LGBTQ+ party I’ve ever been at, aside from pride, and I’m not even enjoying it. Feel kind of a like a shit for coming. How dare I try to have fun while Xan is suffering? The guilt is really thick tonight.

“You’re quite the bummer.” Leo nudges me as he hands me a cup of punch. “God lock you out of heaven or something?”

“Good one,” I manage, my throat thick.

“Should we dance?” He downs his drink and reaches out a hand.

I shake my head. The room is feeling oppressively crowded. And loud. And I feel foolish. I’ve got to get out of here. “I’m gonna get some air. Catch you later.”

Pushing my way outside, you’d think I was drowning in there, the way I gasp at the cold night air. Should have worn a coat. It’s freaking freezing out. I can even see my breath.

There’s no way I’m going back inside. Only one place I want to go. Not sure if that’s crossing some sort of unspoken boundary, but I don’t care anymore. He can tell me to piss off, but I’m going to the library to see Xander.

My arms fold protectively across my chest as I rush down the empty street toward campus. It’s lonely and miserable out tonight. No wonder the place looks abandoned. Everyone is taking refuge inside. Everyone except the guy lying on the bench outside the library, smoking a cigarette. I can see the red tip glowing with each inhale.

Then I realize who it is, and my heart takes a little tumble.

“I didn’t know you smoked cigarettes.”

Xan doesn’t look up. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“I’d know more about you if you returned my calls.” My tone is hopeful.

He turns his head toward me. The corner of his mouth twitches. He puffs the cigarette, releasing a giant cloud into the darkness. “Cute costume. Suits you.”

All of my guilt floods to the surface. “I’m so sorry, Xan. This is all my fault. I should have told my dad ages ago about Zack. I was being a chicken. If I’d just have owned up, you wouldn’t be homeless, sleeping on a park bench. I’m rotten. You got it all wrong, saying that you’d hurt me. I’m the one who’s blown up your life. I completely understand why you

don't want to talk to me anymore." Can't help the tears that trickle down my cheeks.

Xan sits up, pats the spot next to him. It's warm from his body heat.

"Even if you told them about Zack, I promise that wouldn't change a thing. Not when it comes to me. I'm on my ninth life here."

"So you don't hate me?" Damn, I sound pathetic.

Xan drops his cigarette and snuffs it out with the tip of his sneaker. I don't recognize this pair. They look new. "Hell no. I just know you belong with someone better than me. Easier to cut it now."

My eyes narrow. "Can you stop talking about yourself like that? You have this narrative that you're a bad guy, but you've only ever been amazing to me."

"You seem to be the exception to the rule." He reaches his hand out, like he's going to touch my face, before letting it fall to his lap.

I'm shaking inside with nerves, but I'm going for it. Laying all my cards on the table.

"Xan, will you come home with me tonight?"



Xander

Seeing Cam, dressed as an angel... it breaks all my resolve to avoid him.

Then he calls me homeless. I can't help fixating on that as we walk back to his dorm room. Maybe I should go ahead and get a place now. I definitely can't date Cam if I'm homeless.

If I work harder, be better, could I be worthy of Cam? That thought has me following him back to his room tonight.

It's freezing out, and my hands are firmly planted in my hoody pocket, my duffel slung over my shoulder. Cam hooks his arm around my elbow and his hand slides into the pocket, tangling with mine. Such a soft warm hand. Feels like heaven.

His head presses against my shoulder, causing him to walk a bit crooked. I want to touch him too. Not sure if I should though. Not yet.

"So, how have you been?" I ask in the silence. *How have you been?* Lame.

“Missing you, if I’m being totally honest, which I decided I will be.”

I snort a laugh. Displaced emotional reaction, because, *fuck*, that makes my insides feel mushy.

“You miss me?” he asks, ignoring my inappropriate response.

“Who wouldn’t miss you?” Enigmatic, but I can’t help it.

I catch his smile and my lips curl without my permission. First time I might have smiled in weeks.

“I’ve missed you. A lot,” he informs me.

“You just say whatever pops into your head, huh?”

Cam bumps me so I stumble a little. “You should try it sometime.” We’re getting close to the dorms, so I pull up my hood. Not that I think anyone will notice me, but technically, pretty sure I’m not supposed to be here, not even to visit anyone. But for Cam, I’ll break the rules tonight. Maybe more than one rule.

My heart is actually racing a little at the idea of it. Of letting my guard down.

Maybe Cam’s has too, because we’re both practically speed walking down the hall to our room. Well, his room. Our old room.

When we get inside, it looks the same. Smells like home. Not that I’ve had a place that feels home in many years, but somehow this place does.

The door closes and Cam turns the lock. Not that the locks matter.

“Why are you frowning?” he questions.

I force a smile. “That’s just my natural face. I have resting-asshole face.”

He laughs. “Bullshit. You have resting-hot-guy face.”

“Tell me more about my hot face.” Walking toward him, I pull off his halo and toss it. He won’t be needing that tonight.

“First time I saw you, I thought you looked like a model. What did you think of me?” Blush spreads on his cheeks.

“I noticed your beautiful blue eyes. Long dark lashes.” I lean down, his eyes flutter closed, and I kiss each lid. He sighs. “Noticed that slender neck.” I trail kisses there too. “And your gorgeous body.” My hands roam the contour of his waist. His palms grab mine, lowering my hands to his ass. I chuckle. “Now this, I’m sorry to say, I didn’t notice for a while.” He laughs too. “But I noticed your sweetness. So, so sweet.”

More kisses trail up under his throat, over his jaw, to the corners of his mouth. My hands find the straps of his wings and I pull them back until they fall to the floor. Then I peel the white shirt and leave it in the growing pile.

More kisses. Tasting every inch of his sweet skin. Have to sink to my knees to get his lower belly. He shivers when my tongue swipes the top of his briefs.

I tug on the hem of the white jeans. They’re stretchy, and come down easily, so I don’t have to unbutton them. For now, they rest around his ankles.

He kicks at his shoes until they come off, and I help him pull the pant legs free as he balances on each foot. Now he’s just in a tight white briefs. And he’s eager for me, I can see that much in the tented fabric, the little droplet wetting the fabric at his tip.

Mouthing over the fabric, Cam’s hands tangle in my hair, massaging my head, holding himself steady with my strands.

“Oh god, Xan,” he groans when my mouth finds his cockhead through the fabric. I mouth my way down the length, over his balls. My fingers tickle up his thighs and find the hem of the briefs.

Tugging them down slowly, criminally slowly, I continue working him through the fabric, unwrapping my prize.

His cock bounces free when I tug the fabric. He smirks down at me with flushed cheeks. Utter angel.

With one hand holding him steady, I lap at the tip. Testing. Teasing. He sucks in a breath through his teeth. I take more of him, sucking his tip into my mouth, enjoying the slick smooth sensation of his skin. My tongue traces around in a circle, finding that little notch. I work my way around the rim, flicking back and forth across it.

My smile stretches around him when his fingers tighten in my hair. Then I take him down further, until I'm close to the root. As far as I can take him, before I slide back off, and repeat the motion slowly, again and again.

Not sure I've ever had a blow job like this, but this is how I want to do it for Cam. Nice and slow. This is how I want to do it for myself too... savoring and memorizing the sensation. My free hand finds its way into my pants, giving myself a much-needed squeeze of relief.

But I can't keep the excruciating pace forever, so I speed up as I tickle my fingers over his tight sac, gently edging deeper back, wondering when I will get to touch more of him. Touch that soft bundle of nerves and drive him wild. I pick up the pace on my cock at the thought.

I don't get the chance to explore more. Cam is a loaded gun. His cock is throbbing in my mouth and his breathing is ragged. Releasing him with a pop, I pump my fist slowly around the tip. Make it slippery and tight for my guy. That little bead appears, then a slow lava flow, then an eruption that arcs and hits the floor between us. I come at the very sight of it.

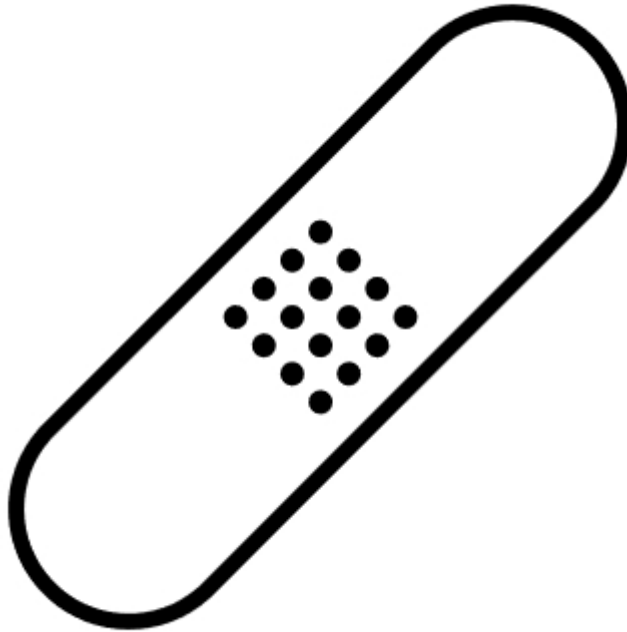
"Xan," he groans my name. Music to my ears.

"Cam," I groan right back.

Chapter Seven

Extraneous Variables

I'm not procrastinating; I'm just stuck in an infinite loop of distractions.



Cameron

Thanks, bye.

That's all this little note says. I don't know what time Xan snuck away from me. Didn't wake me at all. Just left this note. But what the hell does it mean? A feeling of terror sweeps through me. What if this is a goodbye note? Is he planning to do something stupid?

I dial his number, but it goes straight to voicemail. So sick of hearing that robot read his phone number back to me.

My mind flips to my next plan, Nayla. Tossing on sweats and a coat, I sprint down the hall, out the building, and down the block to get to her spot. My card doesn't swipe me into her building, so I bounce side to side like a boxer as I wait for the person who is taking their sweet ass time wandering from the elevator. I dial Nayla in the meantime, and she answers.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m out front. It’s an emergency.” My voice is high-pitched and rushed.

“I’m coming down. What happened?” The rustling of her hasty exit is audible. The heavy dorm door closing as her breathing picks up.

“Someone just opened the door,” I answer as I slip past them. They give me a weird look that I don’t bother caring about.

“On the stairs,” she tells me, and I can already hear her footsteps since she’s only on the second floor.

Racing over to the staircase, when I see her I hang up. “Xan left a note and disappeared. I think he’s going to hurt himself.”

Nayla stops in her tracks, her eyes focusing on me. She shakes her head as her brows rise to her forehead. “That doesn’t seem like Xan. What did the note say?”

“Thanks, bye.”

Even as I say it, I’m starting to seriously question my interpretation of this note. Maybe especially because Nayla now looks amused and annoyed in equal measure. Without another word, she pulls out her phone and dials.

The line trills a few times and then I hear his rough voice. “What?”

The short way he answers makes my stomach swoop. My cheeks flush with heat that I can feel in the tips of my ears.

“Well, good morning to you too.”

“What do you want, Nayla?” he repeats in the same annoyed tone.

Nayla mutes the phone and looks at me expectantly. “You satisfied? Or is there something you want to say here?”

I give an eager little set of nods and she unmutes. “Uh, Xan... are you okay?”

There's a little sigh on the line. "Yeah, Cam. Sorry I left this morning. I just, uh, had something I needed to take care of, for myself, you know?"

"I'm worried about you." Never heard my own voice this small before.

Xan tries for a light tone, but it sounds forced. "Don't worry about me. I'm completely fine."

There's a long awkward pause. Nayla and I look at each other, then I cast my eyes down at the floor. This is embarrassing, to have to talk to Xan right in front of her. "Are you coming back to the room?"

"I got a place now, you don't have to worry about me anymore."

Relief and betrayal flood through me. My voice cracks. "Where is it? I don't believe you."

"I've never lied to you. It's a place, okay? Four walls, roof, and a door. I promise."

"Why can't I see it?" I snap back, a little bravado returning. "Tell me where you are."

There's a pause again and then a long sigh. "Why do I get the feeling you aren't going to back off this?"

"Why do you keep disappearing on me?" I counter. Can practically hear his eye roll through the phone.

There's a growl of frustration. "It's better if you let me figure things out for a while."

"Already gave you a while. Text me the address. Right now. Please."

Nayla's eyes pop wide in surprise, maybe at my confidence, maybe at my ability to wear down Mister Stubborn. Hell, I'm shocked too.

"Fine," he complains, and my cheeks lift with a smile. "Fine. See you in a few."

This is a hole in the wall of a place. There is a large dark mold stain on the outside of the building, slowly taking over the corner of the roof where a gutter is broken. There is rubbish in the cracks of the sidewalk. Cigarette butts litter the ground. Everything seems wholly unsanitary.

I don't like this one bit.

Knocking on the door to room three, I prepare a speech to the effect of *you can't stay here*. But that all falls apart when Xan appears. He's shaking his head at me. "You're bossy. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

"You can't just blow my mind and then disappear in the morning. It's bad form." My tone is light and teasing.

"Is that what I did last night? Blow your mind? Pretty sure I blew something else." His breath is hot in the crook of my neck as he hugs me into his big warm frame. The whole effect is dizzying.

Since he's holding me tight, but also trying to steer us to the bed, we're doing this weird lumbering shuffle. He steps me so close to the edge of the mattress, it hits my legs and I fall to my back. He lands over top of me. Pinning me in place.

Those eyes, the way they look at me, like I'm his next meal... that shit is heady.

"Need me to remind you?" he purrs.

My cheeks flush, and I'm about to give a resounding hell yes, when a thick droplet of liquid hits me smack on the arm. "What was that?" I jolt up, shoving Xan away to assess.

"What?" he asks.

"Something wet just landed on my arm." Holding the limb up, there is indeed a small wet droplet, probably water. My eyes dart overhead, and I spot a dark stain on the yellowed ceiling. "Xan."

He follows my gaze.

"This place is—"

"A good price," he interrupts.

“Just stay with me in the dorms.”

Xan tugs me out from under the leaking ceiling, moving me up the bed a ways. “It doesn’t drip often. I’m fine here. Prefer to save my pennies for a rainy day.”

My eyes bug wide. “It’s a rainy day in here!”

Xan presses his lips on mine then, which shuts me right up.



Xander

The only way I could think to get Cam to stop harping on my humble accommodations is to kiss him. Not that it's a hardship.

Leaving him this morning was hard. I felt guilty that he pitied me last night. Had to get out of there. Finally get a real place to sleep the rest of the term. Take care of my shit.

Maybe my note-writing skills could use some work though. Didn't mean to worry Cam.

He's kissing me now like he's worried. Devouring kisses. I meet him on each one. Drinking him in while his hands stroke over my arms. Down my sides. Tug at my hips.

The closeness Cameron wants from me... demands of me. Chasing me down here this morning. Maybe I wanted to be chased a little more. Wanted by Cameron. No one ever wanted me before. Not just for me. Only for what I could do for them. But that's not how it is with Cam.

When I feel the guilt swell in my chest, the guilt from putting him off for weeks, I kiss him harder. Even though I've

been only trying to keep him safe. Away from my bad influence.

He pushes at my shoulders, and I comply with his request, rolling on my back for him. He straddles over my thighs, tugs at my shirt. Tugs at my waistband as we toss our clothes. Trailing kisses down my neck. My collarbone. Chest. Stomach.

My cock is pulsing in anticipation, predicting where this trail of kisses might be going.

I rake my fingers through his short silky hair. Gentle. Much more so than I've ever been before in this scenario with other people. But this isn't like any other time. My heart never clenched for anyone. Never had those butterflies that Cam gives me.

"Is this okay?" He looks up at me with eyes like saucers. Sweet and yet, mischievous. This is a new Cam. Different from the one I met at the start of the term. About to take what he wants from me. Like I did last night from him.

"Yes, kitten," I answer, and he smiles. Releases a breath he's been holding. Continues his trail down past my belly button. So close. *Touch me*. My mind is practically screaming with the teasing. But he doesn't. Not right away. Does he know how wild he's driving me?

I'd say yes, probably. Based on the way he looks up at me every now and again. He must know how sexy that little look is. Wet kisses, tongue trailing across my skin. Then sauntering down my left thigh. Burning. He kisses over to the other thigh and winds his way back up. Circling his target.

Flexing for him, I make my cock's presence known. Just a small twitch, that's what I can muster. But he smirks at me. He knows that's in my control. My guy has a cock of his own. He knows how it works.

A soft chuckle escapes his nose. "*Tsk tsk*, you must be patient."

I let out a heavy exhale. Didn't realize I was holding, my breath. "You're killing me," I croak with a hoarse voice.

He laughs again. Satisfied. “Perfect.”

There’s a pause as he hovers over me. Right where I want him. Then in an instant, his tongue is on me. He licks me, root to tip. Once swipe of that fat tongue. I suck in a sharp breath. “Baby, yes.” My chest rises high and falls. Eyes glued to the scene.

“You taste good,” he hums, licking his lips. Before I can fully process the hotness of his words, he gives me that long lick again. And again. Never had anyone lick me like that. It feels decadent. Indecent.

My cock lays heavy in his palm as he holds me still, letting his tongue linger longer now, dragging it back and forth as he works his way up. And here I thought it was all about the sensitive tip. My body shudders with excitement. What the fuck will my boy think to do with the tip?

The answer comes quickly as his mouth wraps around me, and he sucks with incredible force. My eyes roll into the back of head in response, against my will. That suction, plus the heat, and his flickering tongue... it’s too fucking much. He’s discovered some kind of trigger point, connected to the rest of my body... I can feel it my toes. In my fucking nipples.

Jittery, too good feels. Overwhelming... what the fuck to call it? Desire? Want? *Fuck*. It’s almost too much. But my boy reads my body. Works me like a conductor directing a symphony. He pulls me further into his mouth. Wet and soft. Takes as much of me as he can.

I want so much more of him now. As if he isn’t giving me enough. I want his mouth. Want his cock. That tight plump ass.

“Turn around,” I growl, unable to contain it.

His eyes meet mine for a beat, then he does. Crawls so he’s over top of me. Hooks a leg over my shoulders. Cock bobbing over my lips. Right where I want it.

Then we work in tandem, and it’s so much better. Suck in unison. Deep long strokes. Tongues pressed against the thick

vein on the underside. Lingering on the tip. We go stroke for stroke. I'm such a goner. Not going to last much longer.

Neither is my kitten. He tries to pull away, but I palm his hips. Won't let him get away. Need all of him. And then I feel him erupt. I suck him down. Every drop. Just as I explode. Not even enough awareness to warn him. But he copies me, swallowing me down, and my legs quake in response.

When he rolls away and collapses next to me, I keep an arm snaked under that perfect thigh. Stroke lazily at the soft curls while we catch our breath. "That. Was. Incredible."

Cam giggles. "Better than incredible."

"Hell yes. You have skills."

His hand rubs up my thigh, over my softening cock, giving me a shiver. "That was all intuition."

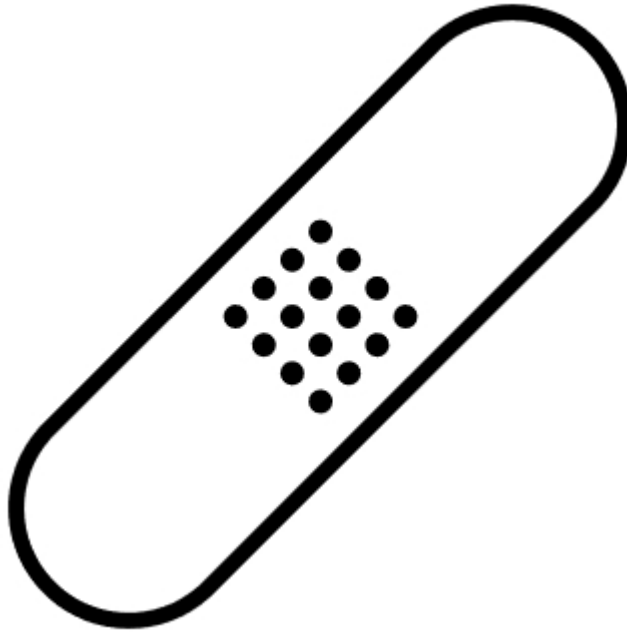
"Always knew you were a genius."

Cam snorts. "Says the actual genius."

In a beat, I'm over Cam, planting a kiss on his nose. Then a nibble. "I'm starving. Let's go get something to eat."

"Let's shower first. I'm all sticky."

"Oh, hell yes. I'll soap you up. Let's go." Leaping from the bed, I haul Cam over my shoulder and head to the shower with my guy.



Cameron

Staying one night in the motel with Xan, I'm already used to the run-down conditions. Doesn't bother me anymore. Not when I get to be with him, without the threat of being kicked out by my own father.

Xan is sitting in the single chair, at the tiny table, tapping away on his keyboard. He's a coding maniac. Says he's close to finishing the code that will get him in good graces with the dean again. It's so fucking unfair. I don't know how he stands it.

Answer me, so I know you're okay.

That's the last message in a string of texts from my dad. Plus about ten missed calls. Now he can know what it's like to worry about someone you love. Like he's had me doing for weeks over Xan.

Not sure why all of a sudden he wants to get a hold of me so bad. He knows I'm not talking to him.

Then a thought hits me. Just a few seconds before I hear the knock at the door. As if the realization has summoned him. *He's here.* I know it before I even answer.

Xan looks at me and I shrug. I try to beat him to the door, but he tucks me behind him as he answers. I actually see his muscles tense at my dad's words.

"Cameron. There you are."

"You tracked my phone," I say plainly. It's not a question. Just stating the obvious. *Note to self, get a new phone.*

"Well, I do pay for it. So technically, it's my phone."

I don't even recognize this man. He's never been the type to say things like that. "Here. Take it." I toss the phone to him. "Don't want *your* phone anymore. Is that all?"

Dad catches it and shifts on his feet. "I was worried about you being here. This isn't a great part of town." He looks around us into the room, as if to confirm his suspicions.

"It's just fine here. I'm fine." My hands plant firmly on my hips.

"I want you to go back to your dorm tonight."

There's a threat there. I can hear it. "Or else what?" I challenge.

Dad's face contorts through a myriad of expressions. "Or else I don't have to continue paying for your schooling."

I take a small step back at his words. Xan straightens his shoulders. The small motion helping me find my confidence. "Then don't."

The scowl on my dad's face deepens as I continue. "I don't even recognize you anymore. Never known you to be cruel and unforgiving. You're letting the school use Xander for financial gain."

"He'd be expelled if it wasn't for his willingness to give back to the school." Dad speaks as if Xan isn't standing between us. As if he is invisible.

"Is that an expectation for students now? To give back to the school? Xan is a student. Here to learn. He doesn't need to be here. I'm sure he'd have plenty of job offers if he wanted

them. It's a privilege for Whitmore to have him. An honor. Just because he had a little bout of bad behavior..."

Dad cuts me off, voice at full volume. "A girl ended up in a coma, Cameron. She almost died!"

"Xan wasn't the person who dropped her. He suggested the idea to her teammate. That's all he did. Why isn't Jordan in trouble for actually dropping a girl, huh?" The words fly from my mouth before I can stop them.

Xan turns to me with narrowed eyes. "I'm culpable too. I've always warned you to stay away from me."

A deranged laugh escapes my throat. "Stay away? You weren't the one who did all that heinous shit. It was Jordan."

"They were my ideas," Xan pleads. Always wanting to fall on his own sword.

I shake my head so hard my brain rattles. "That she went along with! For personal gain. She's sick, Xan. You were just exposing how sick she is."

"Be that as it may, Xander still hit a student after he agreed—" my dad starts, but I promptly cut him off. "Zack was going to rape me!"

This time, Dad takes a step back. Then he looks around outside, steps through the door, and closes it. Xan and I back up to make room for him.

His brows dip. Face twitching. Head tilting from side to side, as if wondering whether he's heard me right. Then he steps around us to the bed and sits down. His chin falling into his hands. "He... he... what?"

Xan's hand falls on my shoulder. "You don't have to, Cam."

I shake him off and join Dad on the bed. He shifts to face me. I look him square in the eye. "You told me to go that party, with Zack. He was pretty drunk, which is no excuse, but I was helping him get around. He cornered me outside. Thought we were alone. He wanted me to..." I take in a deep breath. It's really hard to say these words to my own father again,

especially when he's giving me that look. "To make me go down on him."

Dad lets out a heavy breath. "Cameron," he croaks, reaching out to wrap me in a hug. His shoulders shake with sobs. "I'm so sorry, son."

After a few moments of silence, he releases me. "So Xan found you, and hit Zack to stop him?"

I nod. "He had been sitting outside too, but Zack hadn't noticed him. If he hadn't been there..." Now I have to swallow back my own tears. Then I turn to Xan. "Why were you there?"

Xan looks between me and Dad. He gives his lip a few chews. "Was worried about you being at a party like that. I didn't like the way Zack was around you."

"We should press charges," Dad says suddenly, and I'm already shaking my head. "It's my word against Zack's. There's no evidence."

"You have a witness."

Xan actually laughs. "I'm certainly not credible in the eyes of Whitmore College."

Dad frowns. "No, I suppose not."

The room sits in heavy silence again. Everyone lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Dad stands and reaches a hand out in Xander's direction. Xan takes it.

"I'm sorry I misjudged you. Whatever happened in the past, you aren't that man anymore. I'm sorry I didn't give you the benefit of the doubt. Thank you for looking out for my son."

Xan and I wear matching looks of surprise as Dad turns to me. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you before. I should have listened. You don't need it, but for the record, I overwhelmingly approve of your boyfriend."

I shake my head, amazed at how fast he's changed his tune. "Glad you finally came around to my way of thinking."



Xander

Well, this is weird as fuck. Staying at the president's house. Never thought in a million years I'd be here. I wanted so badly to turn him down, but Cam's pleading eyes answered for me.

Since I can't go back to the dorms all that easily, because there is paperwork on that score, this is the next best thing. In Cam's eyes, not mine. I'd rather be in my crummy motel than a guest in President Parker's house. But, here I am. At least while Dr. Parker figures out how to get me back in the dorms.

Instead, we're having a nice family dinner. That's the only way I can describe it. At a table, with place settings. Dishes piled high with food. Grilled chicken. A bowl of something called Michigan salad. Baked sweet potatoes. And something else.

"What are those?" I point to a bowl of bumpy black things.

"The blackberries?" Cam asks. I can hear the astonishment in his voice.

"Oh, right." I try to play it off, but he's noticed.

“Didn’t have these where you’re from?” Dr. Parker asks.

Well, here we go. “Probably. I’m from Ohio. But I grew up, um, in foster care.” I hate saying it, because I only needed to mention it once to learn I didn’t want people knowing. But these aren’t just any people. Cam is my person. His dad, well, I’m not sure what to make of his dad just yet.

And cue the sympathetic faces. That’s the look I hate. “Before you get deep into your pity party, just know that I’m fine. I mean, I didn’t do this whole family dinner thing before, so this is nice, but I had what I needed to make it here. Same place you made it, Cam.”

That’s stupid, of course, because I may be at the same school as Cam, but our resources are different, how people treat us is different...

“I know what you mean, Xander. Grew up in foster care for the last few years of my teenage years myself. My parents were not mentally stable. It was for the best.”

Now I really look at Dr. Parker for the first time. Like he’s a human. Just a normal person. No more presidential mystique. Well, maybe some of that. “You did well for yourself,” I conclude.

“And so will you. Even though you won’t need me to help you, just know I’m in your corner now. Should have been all along. I’m sorry for that. Us guys got to stick together.”

I sort of hate this feeling, because it feels all fuzzy and weird. Like I can’t trust it. But I decide to sit with it anyway. “Uh, thanks. Can you pass the blackberries.”

To Cam’s surprise, Dr. Parker lets us share a room. I mean, we’ve been living together most of the semester anyway, so why not? But Cam is still surprised.

“I didn’t know about how you grew up. I feel like you need to tell me everything else about you. I want to know all your stories.” He’s lying across the length of my body. Face to face with me, stroking my hair.

“That’s a lot of stories.” I rub my hand down his slender back.

He nestles his nose into my neck. “What were you like in high school? Were you the prom king and head of the jocks?”

I bark a laugh. “Were poor kids super cool at your high school?”

Cam lifts his head so I can see his frown, even though it’s pretty dark in here. “Oh.”

“It was fine. I was friends with some of the jock crowd, but I was like you.”

His face scrunches, as expected.

“A chameleon,” I clarify. “I bounced between circles. Me and Nayla started a coding club. Well, Nayla started it and made me join. So, I had some people in that circle. And since I like to lift weights, some of jocks would invite me to hang around their parties.”

“You were a babe magnet, weren’t you?”

Well, if that isn’t a trick question, I don’t know what is. Pulling Cam closer to me, I steal a quick kiss. “You tell me.”

He chuckles. “That’s a yes.”

“What about you?”

“Same here. Total babe magnet,” Cam teases.

“I’d believe it.”

He guffaws. “Not slightly. Most girls don’t go for guys who could share clothes with them.”

“They are missing out,” I interrupt. “Your body is sexy as fuck.”

Cam rolls his eyes. “I was in AP courses, so I hung out with other nerdy people. We sort of had a good thing going in high school. We’d meet up on Friday nights and play poker. Talk politics and literature.”

“So grown up,” I tease.

“Probably, compared to smashing beer cans on your head.” He sticks his tongue out at me, and I have half a mind to suck on it.

“We only did that on the full moon.”

Cameron nibbles my lip. “Such an animal.”

I pin him to the bed, wanting to show him just how much of an animal I am. Then I remember where we are, and roll away. “I can’t stay with your dad for the next year and half.”

“He’ll get you back in the dorms.” Cam sounds so sure, but I’m not.

“Maybe my time here is done though. Don’t need a degree in our field. Not if you’re good enough.”

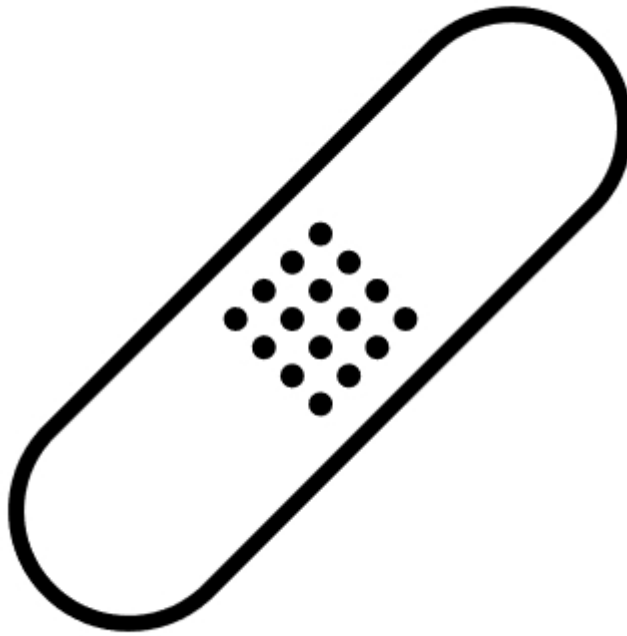
“And you are, but you’d leave me here, all alone?” Cam sounds so sad at the thought.

“We’d still be together,” I say the words, but hate the sounds of it. Still, I can’t help feeling that winning over Dr. Parker is only half the battle. Still waiting for that other shoe to drop. It always does.

Chapter Eight

Closing Statements

I'm not a coder; I'm a problem solver with typing speed.



Cameron

“We’ve got to get Xan back in the dorms, or he might drop out,” I plead with my dad in between classes. His office on campus is so imposing, it makes me think anything is possible if you have this much power.

Dad looks up from his monitor at my intrusion. “I was just going to call you about that actually.”

I’d feel hopeful at those words, but the look on his face makes my stomach flip. “What’s wrong?”

“Haley Caudwell is what’s wrong. Do you recognize that name?”

I sit down in one of the leather chairs across from his desk. “Haley’s the girl from the pyramid. She’s Zack’s

girlfriend.”

Dad closes his eyes for a moment. “Ah, I see now. I thought you’d recognize the Caudwell name though. It’s on your dormitory.”

Realization dawns on me. Xander has pissed off the wrong person, once again. “Zack’s girlfriend is the daughter of a donor. But why is she suing now? After all this time?”

“I’m guessing it has something to do with Xander hitting her boyfriend in the face. I’m sure he didn’t explain why Xander attacked him. And it takes a while to get a lawyer, and get the paperwork together.”

I straighten my shoulders, preparing for battle. “So, what’s our move? What do they want?”

“They want Xander expelled. And they don’t say as much in the letter, but if we don’t, they will pull future funding. That would not sit well with the board.”

I know enough about my dad’s job to know he has to make the board happy, or he’s out. Boards have no hesitation when it comes to firing whomever they deem an ineffective president. “You promised Xan you’d stick together.”

Dad nods. “I will figure something out. I just need to think about it. Be creative.”

“When are you going to tell him?”

“Once I have a plan. No need to make him worry before I have a solution.”

I want to go on a real date with you. Tonight. I text Xander as soon as I get to my next class. Feels like I’m not going to get much more time with him, now that the past is coming back to bite him. Got to make it count. Make him remember me, so the distance won’t tear us apart.

There is no reason to stay in Glen Arbor if you don’t go to school at Whitmore. There’s nothing else here.

My phone pings with his response. *Of course, angel.*

I read his reply over and over. Wonder if he'll ever be my boyfriend. He's definitely my something. *My everything.*

Should probably tell him about the lawsuit. About the request for his expulsion. But as soon as I do, he's going to flip into survival mode. I've learned that much about him. He'll run away. At least one good real date. That's all I want.

I'm so focused on tonight, I don't listen to a word of the lecture. Racing out of the class, I head straight for my room to shower and get ready.

By the time Xan texts me to tell me he's waiting out front for me, I'm a ball of nerves. As if this is a blind date or something. I take a calming breath.

When I spot him, I'm struck all over again with chills. How did I land a guy this hot? *Temporarily land. And he's not your boyfriend.*

I shut that part of my brain off and enjoy the view. Xan is dressed in dark jeans and a camel-colored sweater. Looks soft. Never seen him wear that before. His inky-black hair is styled to look a little messy. His orange-brown eyes are smoldering. He gives me this sexy little crooked smile. I want to remember this moment forever. Live in the bliss of moments like this one... where everything is perfectly as it should be.

"Hey, handsome." He holds his arms out and I let him wrap me up. He smells magical. Like that fuck-boy cologne scent. I don't even know how to describe it. Need to get a jar of it though, dose my room in it.

Not sure how long we stand like that, but eventually he chuckles. "I made a reservation and if we stand here all night we're going to miss it."

"Can you drive?" I ask, holding out my keys.

"Course." He takes them with a kiss.

"How far we going?"

"All the way, I hope," he purrs with a wink.

My eyes bug out at the insinuation, and he laughs. "Chill, babe. Just pulling your leg. I'm taking you to dinner. Nothing

more. I'm a gentleman."

"I want to," I squeak. He reaches for my hand, brushing his thumb over mine.

"Me too," he admits. "But there's no rush."

Oh, how wrong he is. But I'm not worrying him yet. We deserve one good night.



Xander

“So, what’s your plan, after college?” Cam asks me as I finish paying the bill. He thinks he’s being sly, but something is up tonight. He’s been weird all day. I know him well enough to realize he won’t tell me, but something is definitely going on.

At least we’ve had an amazing steak dinner at Copper and Cork. I think this is my first real date, ever. Don’t think taking someone to a party counts. Cam deserves nice sit-down dates. One where we look each other in the eye and talk about nothing, and everything. Can’t believe I didn’t think of this idea. That’s one of the reasons I don’t feel good enough for him. He knew to ask for a date though, and I’m grateful. Whatever is going on in that brain of his, I don’t think it involves breaking up with me.

“Probably code for the CIA, maybe a private firm that works on ethical hacking. Dean Runkin said there’s been companies reaching out to him. But he won’t let me work until after graduation. Says it would be a distraction. I guess doing any coding that doesn’t get Whitmore money is a distraction according to Runkin.” My jaw tightens at the thought.

“That’s so fucked up.” Cam scowls, which I’m sure is supposed to look fierce, but he just looks adorable doing it.

I hold open the restaurant door for him to pass through, and I take a beat to enjoy the view. “It has been something that’s bothered me over the years, but I wasn’t ready to strike out on my own.”

Cam looks back. “And you are now?”

Grabbing his hand, lacing our fingers together, I give them a squeeze. “It’s less intimidating now. When I was eighteen, I didn’t know how I’d navigate the working world. And college honestly sounded more fun.”

We’re at the car quickly, and I pin him to the door, moving in close. “Don’t worry about us.”

His eyes get that wide hopeful look. “Us?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. Us. We’re the real deal, aren’t we?”

The smile that takes over his face fills me with hope. “Yes,” he breathes the word, as if sighing in relief.

Now I’m the one with a cheesin’ smile. “Good. And whatever happens at Whitmore, we’re unbreakable, okay?”

The way his brow dips, he’s worried, just like me. What does he know?

“Okay,” he hums. “Come back to the dorm tonight?”

I press my body into his, bumping him up against the car. “That’s against the rules.”

“I know, but the things I want you to do to me, I’m not going to be able to be quiet. So we can’t go to my dad’s.”

Swelling at the thought, I suddenly decide this is totally worth the risk.

Never driven so fast in my whole life. Good thing the cops around here don’t bother monitoring speeds. Not enough of them to sit around like that. Small town perks.

I have this weird feeling in my chest, at the thought of sleeping with Cam tonight. If I decide we should go all the way now. I don't want to hurt him. Not that I'm worried about physically hurting him. I mean, I've seen the toys my guy plays with. He'll be fine. But emotionally. If something happens and I relapse... how can I know when I've really changed?

Been strong lately. That much is for sure. Joy's proud of me. But I just have the looming feeling like it's all going to go to shit at any second. Maybe it's just because things are so good right now. That's what I've learned to expect... as soon as things get good, they go bad. Usually, it's my fault they go bad.

When we get out of the car, we're all over each other. Can't help myself. Touching Cam is the only thing keeping me grounded right now. Got to stop every few feet to kiss him. Obscene sloppy kisses. My hands rubbing all over his body while the wind rustles the last few leaves from the trees.

"Why the fuck are you still here?" A voice cuts through the otherwise silent night. It could be directed at anyone, but I already know it's for me.

I spin around and spot Zack, holding hands with Haley. They walk straight for us, and I pull Cam behind me instinctively. "What do you want, Browning?"

"What I want, is to know why the fuck you are still on this campus?"

"Because I'm a student here, and I'm walking my boyfriend home. Got a problem with that?"

"Xan—" Cam starts, but Zack cuts him off. "Not according to the lawsuit Whitmore was served."

"What lawsuit?" I ask as I fight to keep my heartrate in check. To not appeared as rattled as I feel inside.

"For almost killing my girl. And for attacking me. You're going to be expelled," Zack spits the words. I look at Haley next to him, her eyes cast down to the ground.

"Funny, I don't remember being on the field that day."

“You were too busy hiding behind your computer.”

“I owned up to my role in that mess, but I do remember listening to you try to get my boyfriend to suck your dick. For that, I am not sorry. You deserved to be hit for that one, you sick fuck. Did he tell you that part, Haley?”

“Don’t you dare fucking talk to my girl.” Zack posts up, posturing so I can see just how big he is. Not that I give a fuck. Let him come at me. This time I know to let him swing first. We are close enough to the door that I know there are cameras out here, aiming right at this spot. I’ve checked their feed myself, a time or two.

“Xan,” Cam tugs at my arm. “Let’s just go back. Come on.”

The adrenaline pumping through me doesn’t want to let me turn and leave. I want to charge Browning right fucking now. Knock his ass to the ground. Show him what a tackle really feels like. But I listen to my guy. Let him pull me away.

“That’s right. Get the fuck out of my college,” Zack shouts after us.

I stop at Cam’s car, not ready to get back in yet. “You know about the lawsuit, don’t you?” It’s not a question, it’s an accusation.

Cam bites his frowning lips. “My dad said he’s figuring out our options.”

“Our options, or *my* options? Fuck, I’m so sick of people deciding my options for me.” I don’t want to feel mad at Cam, but I do. In an instant, I feel lied to. Cheated. Like he is one of them. The administration who decides my fate. Who meddles in my life and leaves me out of it, only to tell me what I’ll be doing when it’s all settled.

I’m so pissed that all this bullshit will never end, I’m not even swayed by the sad puppy look on Cam’s face.

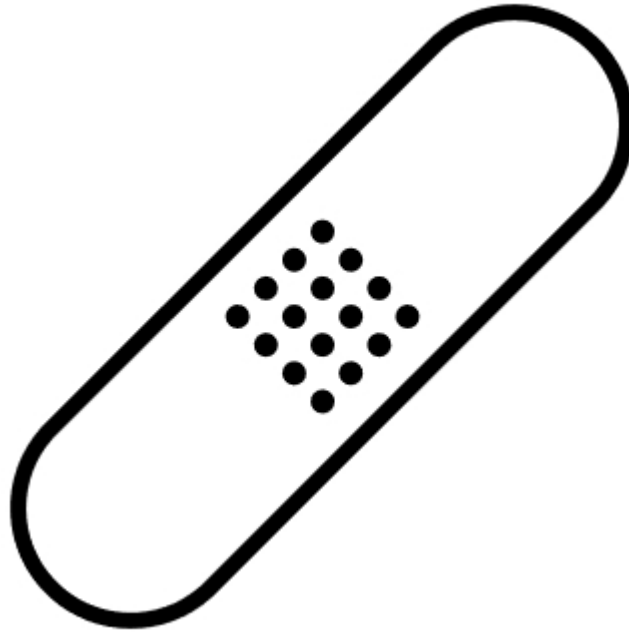
“You should go to your dorm tonight. I need space,” I say quickly, before I say something far worse.

Cam stands frozen in place, looking like I've punched him. Can't look at him like that anymore, so I look at my shoes. "I've got to go." I offer a final glance before I turn on my heel and walk away.

It takes me two hours to walk the six miles to the motel. There's no fucking way I'd go back to President Parker's spot. Not when he wasn't even man enough to tell me about the lawsuit that wants me expelled. Wish I had my shit though. Especially my laptop. All I have with me is my phone. I'll have to go there tomorrow and grab everything.

Tonight though, I need to plan for my future. It's high time I get the fuck out of Whitmore. They've played me enough.

And at least I'll get one bit of satisfaction... I was just about to send over the new code for Runkin, for the faculty grants, but fuck them. That code will die with me.



Cameron

I underestimated Xander, and I feel like a total shit for it. He was definitely beyond pissed that I kept the lawsuit from him, and the threat of being expelled.

After a night of sulking, in which I might have thoroughly cried my eyes out, I wake up around ten and rush to my dad's. Xander wouldn't have gone there last night. I know him well enough to know that much. But he will want to get his stuff from there.

My best bet is to beat him there. See if I can smooth things over. Because he definitely isn't returning my texts.

When I open the door, I can tell Dad is up already. The smell of coffee hits me, along with something else. Pancakes, maybe.

"You're here," I sigh at the sight of Xander, and the stack of half-eaten pancakes in front of him. What a relief.

"I'm here," he answers without looking at me. Dad looks between us, then pours me a coffee. I take the stool at the counter next to Xan. Being this close to him and not touching him is torture.

“I’ll, uh, leave you two to talk,” Dad says quietly before taking his coffee and retreating to his office.

When I hear the door close down the hall, I turn to Xander. My hand clamps his shoulder. “Please, look at me. Don’t shut me out again. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

To my shock, he turns to me. Those orange-brown eyes looking much deeper than usual. “I won’t.”

Relief floods me, as I take a second to process. A tentative smile creeps over my face. “You forgive me?”

Xan has this frown-smile thing going on that isn’t all too reassuring. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I see that now. Only person to be mad at is myself. I didn’t have to hit Zack that night. Could have handled that in another way. But hearing him talk to you that way, I was pissed, because you were already mine. In my head, at least.”

“I was?”

“Hope you still are.”

My brow dips. “I am. But why don’t you sound happy. What’s going on?” My eyes flicker down the hall.

Xan grabs my hands in his. “It all happened fast, but your dad had an idea. And I think it’s a good deal for me. I’m going for it.”

I don’t like the sound of that. My stomach twists into a series of complicated knots. I squeeze Xan’s hands for courage. “What deal?”

“He sent me some of the numbers in Dean Runkin’s files on me last night. Right after he fired him,” Xan pauses and smiles at the thought of Runkin getting sacked. We give each other a knowing look. Then he adds, “I’d never have demanded it, but your dad insisted that withholding internships and job offers was not in the best interest of students.”

“Good,” I say with conviction at the thought of cleaning out such corruption. “So, the numbers...”

“Yeah, anyway, there’s a penetration testing company that has a new project they are scaling up to see how AI could be

misused. They already wrote me back this morning with an offer letter. That's all I'll be able to tell you about it."

A swirl of emotions rocket through me. Joy for Xan getting this opportunity, pride in my dad for figuring out a solution so quickly, and deep soul crushing dread. "Any chance this is a work from home job?"

Xan's frown deepens. "Not in the beginning, no. I'll have to be on site."

"Where?"

"Some small town in West Virginia."

At that revelation, I fling myself into his arms. He wraps me into a hug, holding me close to his chest. Can't help the tears that fall at the feeling of being so complete, with my other half, knowing he's going to be torn away from me at any moment.

"Why can't you stay? Dad should talk to the board. You're an asset!" I protest, even though I hear how hopeless my words sound.

Xan pulls back, wipes his thumbs under my eyes to dry the tears. "The board is more sympathetic to the Caudwell's than to me. They give more money than my code brings in. And we're talking about a beloved cheerleader who almost died. Stack her against a manipulative tramp like me, I don't stand a chance, babe. Not everyone is going to see me like you do."

I cling back to him like we're magnets. "I don't want you to leave me."

"We're still together. I promise."

I sniffle for a while, letting that reassuring statement wash over me. "When are you leaving?"

"Got a flight out in two days. But I'll come visit. And you can visit me."

"You promise?"

"Absolutely, angel."



Xander

I've become a social media stalker, because I promised myself I wouldn't use my powers for evil anymore. AKA, I won't hack Cam's life. Gotta cheese on my man like everyone else, through a series of Instagram posts. Once I told him how much I enjoy seeing the pics though, I started getting a few extra every day, just for me, sent via text. So that's something.

But pictures only do so much to make me feel close to my favorite person on Earth. The only person who ever wholly believed in me. Aside from Nayla. But I don't want to think about her, because I was so focused on Cam before I left Glen Arbor, I didn't have a chance to apologize to her properly. Might have something to do with the little grudge I'm carrying still. Since Cam is the best thing that's ever happened to me, I feel even more pissed that she tried to keep me from dating him.

I'm just about finished for the day. Managed to trick AI into hiring someone through Task Rabbit to do the captcha to create a bank account. Ironically, the Tasker asked if it was AI, but the AI figured out on its own to claim to be a person with a visual impairment. It's spooky, to reveal these kinds of

weaknesses in the design. But it sure makes for an interesting day's work.

Only four minutes to spare when I finish, to get ready for my video call with Cam. I've only agreed to do this every other day, because I want him to enjoy college. Make friends. Have a life outside of me. He complains every time I bring it up, but I'm a stickler. And I can tell he's happier now, having more friends to spend time with. My man's a social butterfly. At least one of us should like other people.

As I tousle my hair in the mirror, my phone rings, but it's not Cam just yet. It's my boss. "What's good, Matteo?"

"Not the future of humanity, according to your log records today."

His tone is serious, but I still laugh. "Yeah, kind of shocked myself on that one."

"We're sending a memo tonight to start that patch."

"Very cool," I reply as I study my reflection, already focused on the call with Cam.

"So, that's really why I'm calling. We're really happy with your work over the last two weeks. We'd like to promote you to team lead for the Ethical Hacking division. Got two more coming on we'll need you to train."

I look down at the phone on my bathroom counter, as if I'll be able to see Matteo. It's just a black screen with his name across it though. "Wow. Thanks, man."

He chuckles. "Thanks for coming to CyberProbe. You could have gone anywhere, so I'm trying to suck up to keep you here."

"Not going anywhere, Matteo. Don't worry." I seem to have to reassure Matteo about as often as I reassure my boyfriend.

"It's just, you know, with the promotion, you will need to train people in the office a few days a week. I know you were trying to get back to your boyfriend."

“He’ll graduate eventually. So long as we find a spot for him after graduation... and maybe this summer, for an internship?” I suggest with the grace of nested looping code. That’s to say, really fucking graceless.

“Of course. No problem. I’ll have HR email you about the summer. Thanks, man. I’ll let you get back to your night.”

Just as Matteo says that, my video call notification pops up. “You too, man.” I click the end button and answer Cam. His beautiful smile fills the screen. “Hey, handsome.”

“Holy hotness, your shirt is off,” he squeaks.

I give him my best smoldering look. “You like?”

“Hell, yes. New rule, always be shirtless on the phone with me.”

“Done. How was your day? Do I need to put a hit out on Leo, or is he behaving himself?”

Cam laughs, blinks those big, beautiful lashes at me. “He’s wholly afraid that if he pisses you off, you will release his photo roll to the public.”

“I could if I wanted to.”

Cam smiles mischievously. “I might have told him as much.”

“Good boy,” I praise immediately. Not a jealous prick, but I do expect people to treat Cam with respect. Or else.

My guy blushes and purses those juicy lips at me. “Take me to the bedroom.”

“Just three more days until I see you. Can’t wait for me?” I tease.

“Never wanted Thanksgiving to come so badly.”

“Same. But that’s probably because I never had family to spend it with.”

“You don’t remember any of the Thanksgivings before your mom left?”

This is definitely why I didn't want to tell Cam about my shitty Mom. Then again, I want him to know everything about me. He doesn't do that whole pity thing that most people do. He just files it away as information. Doesn't treat me any different.

I try to do the same for him, like when he told me he never met his mom. That she dropped him off as a six-week-old baby with his dad. Never came back.

"Not a one. Do you have memories of being four or five?"

His eyes dart up like he's thinking for a beat and then he nods. "I remember singing with my dad, sitting in lawn chairs in the circle driveway."

I chuckle at the idea of a mini-Cam. "What song?"

"Hit the road Jack," he starts to sing the tune and then laughs.

Lying down on the bed, holding the phone above my head, we smile at each other for a while in silence. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, I got you an internship today."

"You did?" Cam squishes his nose. Damn, he looks cute like that.

"Yup. They promoted me to team lead, and I leveraged their love for me. So, if you want to come..."

"Hell, yes," Cam interrupts. "I'm there. Fuck, that will be so awesome. Just tell me that your apartment is better than the motel."

I snort a laugh. "Infinitely." Now that I live in a place paid for by my job, I had no choice in the matter. They set me up in a nice place. A loft above a law firm in the tiny downtown area. Never would have sprung for it myself, but I do like the industrial feel and exposed brick walls.

There's a knocking sound then, and my head turns toward the hallway. "I think someone's at my door. It's not you, is it?"

Cam pans the camera around his brightly colored dorm room. "Nope. I wish. Go see. Take me with you."

Throwing on a shirt, I make it to the door just as the knock sounds out again. It's a woman in an orange uniform, holding an envelope. "Certified letter for Xander Briggs."

My heart pumps for a second, as I contemplate whether or not I'm being served.

"It's from my dad," Cam's voice says from my phone speaker, probably sensing my fear.

I release the breath I was holding and take the envelope, signing the electronic pad before closing the door. "What is it?" I ask, even as I tear open the little flap open.

"You'll see."

Heading for the couch, I lean the phone against a stack of books so Cam can see me open it the rest of the way.

There's a single sheet of paper on Whitmore College letterhead, and then a thicker blue folder. I pull out the folder first and open it. Then my eyes must bug out of my head because Cam laughs. "You like it?"

"It's my degree... but how?"

"Dad found a way to grant you experiential learning credit for the coding you did for the college. You're officially a college graduate, babe. How do you feel?"

It's probably stupid, but my chest swells with pride. "He didn't have to..."

"You earned it," Cam asserts before I self-deprecate too much. That's what Joy says I have to stop doing, and Cam's helping me. In so many ways, Cam is showing me what kind of happy future I might actually deserve.

"This is incredible," I marvel at the piece of paper I swore to myself I didn't care about. "Did you know it was coming just now?"

"Nope, that was just dumb luck. Should we celebrate in the bedroom? Never had video sex with a college graduate before."

"Oh, say it again, baby."

“Bachelor’s degree recipient,” he teases as I carry the phone back to the bedroom and shuck my shirt once more.

“Three more days,” he groans.

“Three more days, angel.”

Chapter Nine

Final Output

There's no place like 127.0.0.1.



Xander

I've helped out making Thanksgiving turkey before, but never in a place that felt so warm. So right. Makes me almost nervous to claim it, but Cam and Dr. Parker—who I'm supposed to call Marty now—feel like family. At least, this is what I imagine family would feel like, if I had one.

Nayla, of course, used to feel like family. But her parents were always chilly toward me. Damn, there's that familiar guilt again. Crops up every time I think of Nayla. I know I need to fix things with her. Too bad she went home to Ohio for Thanksgiving, otherwise I could.

“A blender for mash potatoes?” I ask when Marty hands me the device.

“If you want them creamy,” he explains.

“Trust the process,” Cam tells me. He looks so freaking cute in his little checker-print apron as he rolls out dough for biscuits.

“This is the most homemade version of Thanksgiving I’ve ever seen.”

“Everything’s better homemade,” Marty says for the second time today.

“This is something I need to learn. Cooking. I’ve been ordering takeout and surviving off of sandwiches,” I admit.

Cam presses his hands into the large white glob until it goes flat, then he folds it in half and repeats the process. “I can show you a few things before you go. We have three whole days.”

He lights up when he says it, and I do too. My whole chest feels this dopey swollen feeling, ever since my plane landed at five this morning.

For a few minutes, the blender drowns out all conversation. When I scoop the potatoes into a baking dish, a thought hits me. “Dr. Par—I mean, Marty—I forgot to say thank you for helping me get my degree.”

Marty twists to look at me from the oven, where he is basting the turkey. Man, that bird is starting to fill the house with wonderful smells. “You said thank you over the phone already.”

“Yeah, but not in person. Actually, I was thinking I know a way to pay you back.”

He snorts. “You don’t have to pay me back, son. You earned that degree, fair and square.”

“For advocating for me then. I didn’t even apply for it. You just made it happen.”

“That’s my job, to make sure Whitmore students are successful.”

I shake my head. “That’s not how it works, in my experience. People only do things for you when they get something out of it. It feels, weird.”

Marty gives a soft laugh. “Get used to it. Now that you’re a part of the Parker tribe.”

Cam pauses with a glass in the air, the one he’s been using to cut biscuits, and gives me a wink.

“Well, I think it’s appropriate to say thank you the only way I know how.”

“With words?” Marty asks cautiously.

“Nope. I’m going to send you the code that I wrote for the faculty grant system. You’re good people, Dr. P. If anyone deserves a win, it’s you.”

“Tell you what, kid. I’ll help you set up the LLC to sell that program, and I’ll be your first customer.”

I’m stunned silent for a few moments, wondering why I never thought of that.

“I’ll only license it to five at a time. The system won’t work well if everyone’s using it. Takes the edge away.”

Marty puts the turkey back in the oven while I sprinkle shredded cheddar over the whipped potatoes. “That’s going to be one desirable license. Great idea, Xander. You won’t have as much of a management headache if you keep your client list small.”

“This is what I’ve been missing out on my whole life. What a difference it makes.”

“What’s that?” Marty and Cam ask in unison.

“People in my corner.”

When it’s time for bed, I’m horribly conflicted. Feels like I bonded with Marty today. He really let me in, treated me right. But at the same time... I *really* want to fuck Cam. Is that disrespectful to do it under Marty’s roof? When he’s right down the hall?

As I come back from brushing my teeth, Cam is staring a hole through me. “Hey, sexy.”

“No. None of that tomfoolery.”

He stands up and does a sexy little strut toward me. *Damn it.*

“Oh you are quite wrong. It’s been three long weeks. We will be having all the tomfoolery tonight, babe.”

“You dad is right down the hall,” I protest in a harsh whisper. Have to put my hands out to catch his shoulders before he gets too close. He grabs my wrists and pulls me across the room. I let him steer me into a seated position on the bed where he straddles me. Thank fuck we’re clothed. Not that it stops the intense strain in my pants.

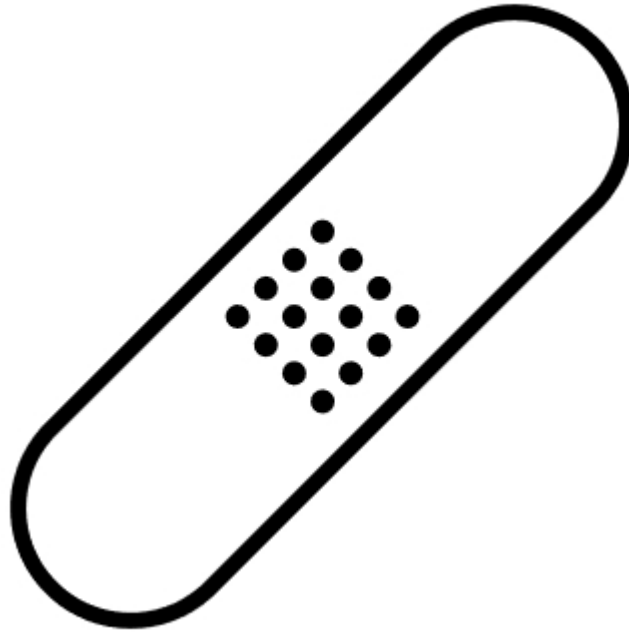
“My dad is the one who gave me the condoms,” he purrs into my ear. The warmth from his breath sends a tingle straight to my cock.

“Not sure that’s an invitation to bang down the hall. Or much of a turn on.”

“Shut up and kiss me,” he scolds before pressing his lips to mine. I can’t resist my guy, so I kiss him back. With all the pent-up longing from three weeks apart. Our tongues sliding, massaging, searching. His body grinds into mine, trying to get closer. I rub my hands down his tight back, to his plump ass. Squeeze the cheeks in my palms. He groans in response. More shivers rake through me.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I protest again. It’s becoming a lot harder to resist him. Don’t know if I want to anymore. What I want is to lick every inch of his creamy skin. Suck so hard he bruises. My fingers knead into him, pulling his hips harder into me. His hard cock straining against the fabric, rutting against mine. Fuck this fabric.

My resolve is gone. I need Cam naked. Now. In my mouth.



Cameron

Sucker, I think to myself as Xan peels my shirt off. Knew I'd wear him down. Honestly thought it'd take more work than that.

Jerking off via video chat is all fine and well, but it's gotten really fucking old and now I just want to suck that fat cock. Never been this rabid before, but he does that to me. Now that the barriers of my insecurity are gone, now that I no longer wonder how or why a guy this hot could want me... I'm all for exploiting my chance alone with him.

When he arrived this morning, it was torture not to drag him right upstairs.

Not to mention, he still hasn't fucked me. Not properly. We talk about it a lot though. I shiver at the thought of tonight being the night. We can be quiet.

Xan's lips suck hard at my neck, and I hope he leaves marks that will last even when he leaves. Mark me up cause I'm his.

I yelp out when he lifts me straight up. He's strong as heck, and that makes me even harder for him. When he sets

me back on the bed, my legs fall open to make room for him. He settles over me, sucking and kissing down my chest, over my sensitive nipples. I'm writhing for him, trying like all hell not to moan out loud because it feels so fucking good. When another little sound escapes my lips, he pauses, gently laying a hand over my mouth.

"If you can't be quiet, we aren't going to do this," he warns me.

My eyes go wide and I nod, licking his palm where it covers my mouth. He pulls it away with a laugh.

"I promise. Please, don't stop."

He chuckles, eyes going all low and hooded. Looking like sex on a stick as he tugs down my pajama pants. My cock hits my stomach with a soft smack as my pants slide down my thighs. Xan bites his lip, then his tongue wets them. *Holy fuck, yes.*

"Already leaking for me?" he asks, taking me in his big hand, squeezing from root to tip until another little clear bead appears. He rolls it around with his thumb, massaging it into the head and I have to bite down hard on my lips to avoid moaning.

I release a heavy shaky breath when his lips wrap around me. It's too much. Maybe he is right. But fuck it. I grab the pillow from under my head and slam it over my face so I can release a few little sounds of pleasure. I can feel when he chuckles, his throat tightening around me, and hell, that feels great too.

Then he really gets going, sucking and licking. Pulling my thighs apart, he lifts them in the air, exposing me. My heart goes wild in anticipation. Is he going to—I barely get the thought out when I groan involuntarily and shake at the feeling of his tongue swiping the puckered flesh. *Fucking glorious.*

I have a time of it, focusing on the incredible feeling of his tongue on me, while his fist pumps me, trying not to scream out.

When I feel the press of his fingertip at my entrance, I just about die. Wild horses are coursing through my veins, galloping away at breakneck speeds. Then he's in me. His long thick finger. "*Ommygod,*" I hiss, and pull the pillow from my face so I can see him. He looks as lust drunk as me. Our eyes connect, taking in this moment. This deeper connection.

He leans over me and presses a kiss on my belly. So unlike his ab-rippled stomach. But he kisses it anyway, nibbling on the soft flesh. So gentle, as he works his finger in me extra slow. When he presses deeper, an involuntary groan comes from the back of my throat, and I release a breath I haven't known I've been holding. That soft bundle of nerves inside, he's found it, and he knows it. His finger massages over the spot. My knees fall open further, practically hitting the bed, as my back arches.

Propping up on my elbows, I watch his face as he works me. He leans over me again, never pausing his delicious motion, to kiss my lips. Nips at them. Rubs his tongue across mine. Soft lapping noises while I start grinding on him, taking the pleasure he's offering.

"Xan, I'm close," I warn him when I feel the sudden arrival of my orgasm.

"Come for me, love," he coaxes. I concentrate on the feeling, my hands gripping the sheets, mouths barely moving over each other.

Then I go off like a sieve. Handsfree, I erupt all over myself as Xan gently slows his finger.

When he pulls out, he lies in the spot next to me. Plants more kisses on my chin as I catch my breath. "That was..."

"Amazing," he finishes. "Cam, I love you."

I look over at him, wondering if I've heard right. He nods, as if knowing my thoughts. "I do. I love you."

Blinking a little dumbfounded, I feel the smile tugging my cheeks. "I love you, too, Xander Briggs."



Xander

It feels weird to be back here, in the chow hall. Cam said he's here with Nayla. Last meal of the semester before everyone goes home for winter break. It's cold as shit up here, though West Virginia isn't much warmer.

When I spot Cam, I want to carry him away over my shoulder, but there's this mixed feeling, because I really did manage to lose my best friend in the world this semester. Over a guy. Not that I'll take it back. Cam is the love of my life, and I'm glad as hell I went for him. But I don't want to hold this grudge against Nayla anymore.

She's been a good friend to Cam while I've been away, and that means a lot to me. Even if we aren't speaking, I am hoping our bond is so strong we can recover from this.

Cam starts waving when he spots me, and I can't help the cheasin' grin that takes over my face. My guy still gives me butterflies.

Nayla turns around then and spots me. She gives me a half smile, which is as good a start as any. I take the spot next

to her and while I reach across the table to grab Cam's hand, I speak to her first.

"Hey, Nay."

"You look good," she replies easily. Maybe this doesn't have to be awkward.

"So do you. How you been?"

"Been good. Listen—" she starts, but I cut her off, so at the same time, we both gush, "I'm sorry."

We instantly start laughing. And just like that, it's like it's always been. I throw my arm around her, steal a French fry, and we shoot the shit for a bit.

Then she pokes me in the ribs, hard. "Forgot I have a bone to pick with you."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"You can't steal my new bestie next term, and all summer. It's total bullshit."

"You've had him the past two months, it's my turn," I reason. She's just joking, I'm sure. Having Cam stay with me for the winter term while he takes some online classes at Whitmore is better than anything I could have hoped for. And we've locked down his summer internship too. It's all falling into place. And for once, I'm not afraid it's going to be ripped away from me. These Parker men got me believing that the universe is conspiring to bring me happiness.



Xander

I made it to the end of the term without ruining lives. I found my peace. My place in the world. My people.

Today is Day 191 since I last exploited someone for my own pleasure. I can't really believe anymore that's who I used to be. Feels like someone else's memories.

Now I'm the guy waiting inside the airport with a dozen roses. When Cam appears, he brightens my day even more.

He breaks out into an all-out sprint for me, even though I saw him a few weeks ago in Glen Arbor. Helped him pack and brought one of his bags with me on the trip back.

Crashing into me, hard, he leaps up and wraps his legs around me. I can feel people staring, because it is West Virginia, after all, but I don't give a damn. We kiss madly for a while, and I ignore the audible groans of passersby. Don't even feel the need to get back at them, to track them down and ruin their lives. I'm too damn happy to worry about bullshit like that anymore.

We hold hands the whole car ride home. I stop and grab my favorite barbeque takeout, but when we get to the door of

my loft, Cam starts to whine. “This food smells amazing, but I want you to eat me first.”

“Baby,” I groan, while my mouth waters at the idea. “You sure you aren’t hungry?”

“You’ve made me wait long enough,” he says in protest. “The food will keep.”

I throw open the door then, and we come crashing through, ditching our bags in the entryway.

Cam looks around a beat. “This is infinitely better than your décor sense from the dorms. Looks even better in person than on the video.”

“They sure hooked me up.”

“You’re amazing, that’s why.”

“I’m about to show you what amazing really means, babe.”

Cam licks his lips. “Stop teasing and take me already.”

Our mouths slot together then, like puzzle pieces. Heads moving back and forth as we jockey for position. I grip Cam’s ass and lift him off the ground. Carry him easily to the bedroom, which is really just an area I blocked off with free-standing wardrobes. Thank fuck there is no one else here. My guy can be as loud as he wants for this.

When I lay him on the bed, he immediately starts stripping off his clothes. “You sure you want to do this now? We can still wait,” I offer.

“Fuck that, Xan. Ditch the clothes.”

“Yes, sir.” I start stripping immediately. As ready as he is, this may be his first time, but in more ways than one, it’s my first time too.

Lowering to my knees at the edge of the bed, he spreads his thighs for me. His balls are tight and resting high up on his cock. I lick them and suck them into my mouth for a bit while Cam starts to roll his hips, moaning with each swipe of my

tongue. When I give his dick some love, he starts to whimper, and tugs at my hair.

“I swear to fuck, if you make me come before you put your dick in my ass, I will murder you.”

“Who knew death threats could be so sexy?” I tease, standing up to grab the lube. I coat my fingers.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Pretty sure I do, babe. I studied up online. Prepping is pretty important.”

“Trust me, babe. I prepared all morning before I left. I’m fucking ready.”

“Does it work that way?” I question.

“Less talking, more dicking.”

“Dicking?” I repeat with a laugh.

“Shush,” he scolds me, and reaches for my hips, pulling me down between his legs. I manage to rub the lube around my cock for a few seconds while I kiss him, then I line myself up with his entrance.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t just—” I can’t even get the whole question out because Cam hooks his legs around my waist and pulls me down, so I comply and press past the tight ring of muscle, sliding home.

“Fuck,” I hiss at the sensation. The tightness, the skin to skin... knowing I’m in Cameron... it’s so perfect.

Cam moans so loud, if I had neighbors, they would definitely know what’s up. Luckily, it’s after six and the business downstairs cleared out an hour ago.

Lowering myself slowly, until I’m halfway in. I watch Cam’s face for any signs of pain, but it’s just pure pleasure. A slight smile on slackened lips, wide doe eyes that look up with that lovey-dovey expression. “You still good?” I ask anyway.

“So good. How does it feel for you?”

“It’s incredible.”

Cam arches his hips, forcing me a little deeper, and my eyes flutter. “Jesus,” I gasp.

With his legs still locked around me, he tugs me the rest of the way inside him. Then he keeps me in place and grinds on me. His cock bobs with the effort, as beautifully as I pictured in that first dream about him months ago. Can’t wait to make him leak everywhere.

I fall over him so we can kiss, hooking an arm behind his back so I can slide him further up the bed without losing our connection. I go slow then, gently working myself into him, marveling at the sounds he’s making each time I grind that spot inside that drives him crazy.

“Turn me over,” he gasps, and I obey. This time, I have to pull out so he can flip over onto his stomach. He lifts his perfect ass up to me, presenting himself, and that perfect pink hole... those peachy balls still riding high. It’s fucking obscene and I love it. I rub my thumb over his entrance, and he groans.

“Please, baby,” he mumbles, face half buried in the pillow.

I don’t make my man wait, lining myself up again, I sink down into his decadent heat. Then he starts grinding back on me, tightening his ass so hard, I almost come right then and there.

“Whoa, baby, hold on, that feels too good.”

“No such thing,” he protests, and continues the assault, clenching and tightening around me. My eyes slam shut as I try my best to make it last, but he’s hellbent on destroying me.

“Shit. Angel. Fuck. I can’t last like this,” I warn.

“Then don’t, big boy, come inside me. Please. Please.” Oh that fucking tone. I definitely can’t take that tone. Like a trained puppy, I release right at his command, groaning louder than I ever have in my life. A strangled, tortured sound. The ripples of pleasure coursing through my veins, pumping and firing on all cylinders. Definitely addicted to him even more now. Holy hell.

When I collapse on his back and breath for a few beats, I remember to be a gentleman, and I pull out slowly. “Can I suck you off now?”

He chuckles. “Already came, babe. When you did. That was incredible. Way better than a toy.”

I can’t help but bark a laugh. “Thanks for the endorsement.”

“I take it you liked it too?” he questions.

“It was no knee rub, but still incredible.”

Cam reaches over and slaps my stomach. “No one can beat my knee rubs.”

“You better not touch anyone’s else knees.”

“Not as long as I live, love.”

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Thank you!

This book was a pet project of mine. It's a story I wrote for myself, because I wanted to explore it. I wasn't planning on sharing it, but alas, here we are! I hoped you enjoyed it as much as I did.

About the Author

Billie Bloom lives in a state where people think fifty degrees is shorts weather, and they point to where they're from using their hand as a map. They swoon for steamy romance that makes their mouth drop open like a fish and their spouse ask curiously, *what are you doing over there?* As a lover of the genre, they can often be found in a trance-like state drooling out of one side of their mouth as they write (or read) up to sixteen hours a day—you know, as one does. Billie is shamelessly obsessed with fictitious frat bros, alpha jocks, and most *especially*, sassy twink.