



STATE

OF



MIND

RUNNING IN CIRCLES BOOK 3

E.M. LINDSEY

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BOOK 3

E.M. LINDSEY

State of Mind  
E.M. Lindsey  
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Content Warnings: This book contains mentions of past violence, relationship abuse, abuse recovery, narcissistic parents, PTSD, and on-page panic attacks.

## STATE OF MIND

*“Whatever happens in the future, whatever we become in life,  
know you’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”*

Taking up shop in a former kosher bakery, Wilder Torres aches to find out who he is beyond his dark past.

He hides his scars under long sleeves, and his nightmares behind a soft smile, and he’s very careful not to let anyone close. And then he meets Luca Moretti, a stranger sitting on a park bench, looking as lost as Wilder had once been.

While Wilder knows the risks in letting himself be vulnerable again, he can’t deny wanting Luca. Because after all, isn’t moving on and embracing who you are nothing more than a state of mind?

**Running In Circles is the former series On The Market, and this novel was previously titled Love Him Steady. It has been completely revamped and re-written with names, places, characters, and major plot points changed.**

**It contains cupcakes, homemade pasta nights, found family, a slow burn into love, and as always, a happily ever after.**

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# CHAPTER 1

HIS BROTHERS USED to always joke that he had the baby complex, because he was supposed to be the baby. His parents had treated him like a little king up until he was three when his mother's illness turned out to be another screaming, shitting, angry baby with red cheeks and a full head of dark hair. He remembered feeling betrayed, staring down at the ugly little squirming slug in the bassinet feeling like the world had betrayed him. People stopped looking at him, playing with him, giving him attention.

And all for what?

The red-faced lump who didn't know the four whole letters of his name the way Luca did?

It got more complicated though, when his parents came home and tried to explain to all the siblings that Adriano was deaf. Luca didn't quite know how to process the word, and being three, even his mother's simple, "It means he can't hear you," wasn't enough. Luca still didn't like him right away. He still wasn't sure that this was a good idea.

It didn't last, of course. With all of his other siblings off to school, Luca spent most of the day with the baby and watched him grow. He learned to help—he learned to take pride in filling in the spaces where his chubby little hands would fit. He could feed Adriano and hold him sometimes—if he was very careful and had a pillow on his lap. And Adriano started to get bigger, and Luca managed to coax his baby brother's first smile out of him—and then his first laugh.

Adriano made him feel important after that, because he was attached. Because he loved Luca more than anyone else. Because Adriano cried and sometimes only Luca could soothe him.

It didn't take long for Luca to start truly understanding the difference in his sibling. He reacted to lights, and to heavy sounds, and to things that made the floor vibrate. He made loud noises because he didn't know he was doing it, and it annoyed everyone but Luca.

Adriano was bright-eyed and so *smart*, and everyone overlooked him because they didn't want to learn how to speak with him in sign.

But Luca did.

He enjoyed being Adriano's link to the rest of the siblings. Where his brothers and sisters got all the attention, it made him feel important. He enjoyed being the big brother with strong fists that could threaten little asshole kids down the street who mocked the way Adriano laughed and the way he sounded when he begged Luca to push him on the swing higher and faster.

It wouldn't last, of course. Luca would have no idea how fast things would change when Adriano stepped into the world of porn—but then again, none of their family did.

Life was mostly a struggle for money before Adriano became a star and his career took off. Six kids and two parents were crammed into a three-bedroom house in La Mesa, they rode the bus everywhere, and his mother prepared pasta dishes made from boxed casserole kits and sauce from the jar while quietly mourning her inability to live up to her mother's expectations.

Adriano's first big check had changed everything. His first video pulled in six figures and offered more money than his parents had ever seen in the entirety of their marriage. And it was just the first of many.

Adriano showed up, asking Luca to interpret, as he presented Pietro with enough money to leave his shitty,



ambulance chasing practice and start something that would light a fire in his gut. He bought Luca his first condo and his first art gallery. He sent the girls to Florida, he sent Gio and his wife to New York. The money kept coming, and Luca kept taking, and suddenly, he didn't have to try anymore.

'This feels wrong,' he told Adriano one night when his brother was trying to hand him the keys to a new Bentley. 'You can't keep giving me this shit. I didn't even do anything.'

Adriano had just laughed though and pulled him into a hug, because Adriano was always freer with his affections than any of their other siblings. He was the baby, but he held Luca like he was younger, and smaller, and waited until Luca's body went relaxed in his embrace. 'You spent your entire childhood taking care of me. This is the least I can do.'

Except, it never did feel right. He'd lie in his bed with sheets that cost more than his first car and stare up at the ceiling and wonder what the fuck any of his life even meant anymore. He'd stopped trying, but then he was forced to wonder if he'd ever really even started.

And maybe his sad, sorry little life was his own fault. Pietro had taken what Adriano offered him and made something of himself. He used it as just a place to jump off and held his own, and his real wealth had come from his own hard work. And what did Luca have? He was the patron of a handful of art galleries, he owned an expensive car, a posh condo steps from the water, and constantly entertained a crowd of so-called friends who were with him only because he was free with his time, and his cash, and his booze.

He was miserable, and he was lonely. But more than that... he was empty. While his siblings had worked hard for what they had, Luca had simply allowed them to give—allowed himself to take—and that was where it ended. In the quiet moments, when he was alone in his condo with his too-expensive furniture, paintings he didn't understand, and the bottles of wine more expensive than his college rent, he hated himself.

Deep down, he knew that made him more of a bastard, because there were so many people just blocks away that would have given a limb for even a fraction of what he had, and he somehow found it in himself to lie on his bed and stare at the ceiling and wonder how he could stop being such a shallow prick.

And it only got worse when Adriano abandoned his entire life, disappeared, and came home practically married to an adorable baker with a crooked smile and a sea of freckles across his cheeks. And Luca wanted to laugh, at first. He wanted to pull his brother away from this man who clearly didn't fit and ask him what the hell he was thinking. And he almost had, the first night Adriano brought Noah home for Sunday dinner. And then he watched Adriano watch Noah—like the man hung the moon and lit the sun, and he knew that whatever those two had was important. And he knew it was something he would never, ever have. Not as the person he'd become.

Two years passed, with Noah and Adriano together, and it killed him to watch a little bit more each day.

His envy was cruel, and it was vicious, with sharp teeth and jagged claws. He was grateful that they were in LA, that Noah's schooling and Adriano's work kept them busy and occupied. Luca's envy often felt too close to hate, and his brother deserved happiness without complications. It was easier to like his Tweets, and to send him the occasional texts, and to keep himself apart.

Luca's coping mechanisms had never been particularly healthy, and he was aware of that as he buried himself further into more bottles of wine and familiar arms belonging to people who would never truly love him and in throwing cash at people whose attention could distract him from the ache in his gut. He was well aware that no one in his life was permanent, and no one in his life cared about him for the person he was instead of the zeroes lining his pockets, but he'd take what he could get. But something had to give. He was feeling a desperation unfamiliar to him, and he knew if he

didn't address it soon, he'd do something reckless. That, he knew, was the last thing any of his family needed.

"Luc?" came a soft voice to his right. The room smelled like wine, sweat, and sex, and his body was deliciously sore from their late-night acrobatics. "Why are you awake?"

Gabrielle was probably his longest friend—or at the very least, his longest fuck-buddy. They'd been introduced at a gallery showing, and he was drawn in by her quiet snark about modern art, and they spent the night sitting in the rafters sharing a bottle of cheap gin and all the cheese he managed to sneak off the buffet table. At the time finishing up her undergrads with her sights set on grad school. She desperately craved rising above the expectation the world had for a daughter of immigrants—her sights set on Stanford, and Luca had truly liked her. It was no trouble at all to pay the tuition, no trouble at all to make sure she didn't want for much, if anything, while she worked her ass off to become someone he could never be. And he understood why she stuck around. Maybe she liked him a little as a person, and she was one of the few people he trusted with his vulnerable spots and existential crises. Maybe it wasn't much, and it most certainly wasn't forever, but it was something, and he needed her right then.

Luca turned his head to stare at her with a soft smile. Gabby had fallen asleep after his tongue had given her three screaming orgasms. After she was out, he crept into the bathroom and got himself off, then curled back up around her in bed to stare at the wall until the sky started to lighten along the horizon.

Luca reached down and brushed a stray curl behind her ear. "I haven't slept."

"Jesus." She pushed up on her elbow and narrowed her eyes at his alarm clock. "Does that say five? Like *a.m.*?"

He shrugged. "I've stayed awake longer, babe."

"You're going to die. You're too old for that shit." She flopped back down and buried her face in his pillow. "What's wrong?"

And he knew she was no stranger to his occasional, who the fuck am I, freak outs. She'd suffered all his late-night calls and 2 am runs to the Taco Stand for the thirty-eight-cent chicken soft tacos that always, *always* gave him food poisoning. But usually, somewhere between worshipping the porcelain throne on his knees and chugging down a gallon of room temperature Gatorade, he found himself again.

This time, after Adriano brought home Noah, it felt more profound.

"I don't think I can do this anymore," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Gabby let out a small chuckle and turned her face toward him. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Yes." He leaned over and kissed her full, plush mouth, not caring much that she tasted like he imagined a dead raccoon might after binging on a Joe's Crab Shack dumpster. "But it doesn't matter, because you're going to forget all about me. You're going to be an amazing attorney. You're going to make waves, and get rich, and I'll just be the guy somewhere in his sorry little condo saying, I knew her when."

"It took your brother like seventeen years to have even half that," she reminded him—and he hadn't forgotten.

He even missed when things were simpler—when he was some kid at UCSD on too many loans and too few grants. But he'd liked living in the dorms and eating stale ramen straight from the pack. He missed when his friends were genuine, when he had nothing to offer anyone except himself and maybe a little bit of stale weed and old pizza when he was assistant manager of the little shop near campus. Once upon a time, he was just a guy who didn't have much. Once upon a time, he had nothing for people to use.

"I have to get the fuck out of here," he told her as he unwrapped her from his embrace. "I need to... I need to get away for a while."

Gabby laughed quietly. "Well, I saw *that* coming." She kicked her feet until the sheets slipped from her body, and he

was momentarily distracted by the curve of her hips. He liked those quiet, unsuspecting parts of her body that no one ever paid any mind to. Like the top rib near her under arms, like the spot just below her belly button, like the backs of her knees, and the dimple below her ankle. She stretched her arms wide, and he ran the tip of his first finger between her naked breasts. “It was only a matter of time. You can never let Adriano one-up you.”

“I—” he started, flustered. “This isn’t about him.” He rubbed a hand down his face and forced himself to acknowledge the truth of how he was feeling—without his usual mask of arrogance, without his usual dismissal of anything real. “Gabby, I’m miserable.”

“You’ve been miserable your entire life, babe.” The honesty of her words was sharp and stabbing, but he deserved it. Sitting up, she grabbed him by the hair, kissing him slow and soft. “What’s different about it this time?”

He didn’t really have an answer. It was impossible to put words to the red-hot, searing fire in his belly. It was small now, just a single, flickering flame deep inside him, but he knew it was only a matter of time before it erupted into a wildfire, consuming every inch of him. He needed to get away from the people he cared about so none of them would be caught in the destruction.

“I don’t know,” he finally answered, “but I’ve made up my mind.”

She lifted both brows, her forehead wrinkling with one single crease. “Where are you going to start?”

He wasn’t quite sure about that, either. But his brother had been singing the praises of Savannah for two damn years now. Every time he and Noah went back to visit, he’d come home and wax poetic about the someday when they moved back there—after Noah was done with school, after Adriano was ready to retire. Luca had hated that place at first, but now he was starting to wonder if maybe there wasn’t something there for him to find—if he gave it a chance.

And if not...well. There was an entire world out there. He'd seen a lot of it, but maybe he could find more beauty with fresh eyes. But he had to start somewhere.

## CHAPTER 2

*'We named you Wilder, because you are our wild boy.'*

*You are the child we dreamed of having the day we agreed to marry each other. You spent nine months never letting me forget you were inside me, and the moment you were out, you looked at me with these big, brown eyes, and I knew you were mine.'*

IT WAS a single entry in his baby book—the first hour of his life with a Polaroid photo of himself nestled in a bassinet with a shock of dark hair and his thumb in his mouth. The photo was dated—a mark of the late eighties with the ancient medical equipment and the Care Bear blanket that had kept him swaddled. A nurse had taken the photo, and she had pasted it into the book that night as he slept. His father had been the one to tell him this story after he found the book, when his questions flicked over his fingers, 'Did my mother ever love me?'

The answer was yes. For a moment, she did.

It was irony at its finest that he was too young to remember what might have been the only kind words his mother ever said about him. They were written in the book, memorialized as maybe a way of mourning that she had lost the one child she had desperately wanted.

Twenty-four hours after his mother had looked into the face of the one child she had been dreaming about, the nurses returned with a smile and a certificate with a little bunny on the front declaring him an outsider.

*'Today I passed my hearing test.'*

The very birth of him had denied her the child she'd been wanting since the day she married her husband. Twenty-four hours of life and would remain then and forever, a constant reminder that he was never going to be enough.

His sister had come along after that, three long years of waiting for the child his mother could finally call her own. Wilder had been raised no different than a Deaf child, but to her, he was an outsider.

He was an interloper who had defied generations of genetics that produced a legacy of Deaf Pride long before they had even the hint of rights and privileges and jobs. When spoken language was drilled into them by angry-faced hearing teachers forcing them to sit on their hands and repeat the mimic of sounds until it resembled English, his parents had raised their hands and declared they would not be defined by the hearing.

'Never my children,' his mother would say. 'Never them.'

She didn't like him, but she was determined to raise him with the same cultural values as everyone else in their long legacy of Deaf identity. It was the one thing about his childhood he didn't regret.

Wilder's voice was used for unintentional sound—crying, laughter, screaming at the top of his lungs as he ran through



fields. And no one ever noticed, and it never mattered.

But he was an outsider. The Deaf school wouldn't take him, and with good reason, but it forced him to endure a culture he just fundamentally didn't understand.

His mainstream school sent him to hours of speech therapy, and the teachers there were frustrated because he was capable of spoken English, but it didn't make any sense to him. He would sit in lessons for hours and try to repeat the things they told him, and he didn't know why, because it was so much easier to just sign.

He was tired of being punished, tired of being forced through sentence after sentence until his throat hurt, and his hands ached from squeezing his fingers tight so he wouldn't reply with his hands. He wanted it to stop, wanted to go to school with his sister, with the other Deaf kids because that was where he belonged.

Except, that *wasn't* where he belonged.

“You're hearing, and you need to learn to function like a normal person,” his speech pathologist told him when he finally found the words to make her understand why he was so damn miserable. He was five, and he was so alone, and he was so lost.

“Normal people use words like this,” she said.

He still didn't understand, and if that's what normal was, he didn't want it.

If this was normal, then normal was bad.

Normal was wrong.

He was in college by the time he realized that his mother's opinion of him was not the *rule*, it was the *exception*. He wasn't allowed to play with the other hearing kids Deaf parents had. CODA was a filthy word in his house—a word that meant wrong, and broken, and unchangeable. He used to fantasize about waking up with all of his hearing gone and he'd cry, and his mother would hug him, and finally, things would make sense.

He would be wanted, he would fit in, he would have a place in his family.

By the time he learned that her opinions were small, and cruel, and reviled amongst her peers, the damage was done. At Deaf events on campus, he met CODA who frowned when he asked how they managed through all the pain.

Deaf adults gave in to their urges to hug him—total strangers offering affection where he'd been starved of it so desperately his entire life. They sat him down and told him that *she* was wrong, not him. That there is a line between lamenting that cultural divide between yourself and your child—and the abuse that he suffered at her hands.

It made him feel sick to understand that his entire life had been a lie. It made him want to tear his hair out when he finally had words to label her for the way she had treated him for most of his life, because none of those words changed anything. Abusive—she was abusive, and he was abused, and it didn't matter, because nothing would erase the damage she'd done.

His freshman year was a mess after that. He found his way into the LGBTQ+ club, found his way into the Deaf club. He searched for somewhere that made him feel like he could finally put those shattered pieces of his identity together in a way that gave him form and structure—but he felt too fragile to trust himself.

He was lonely. He knew, deep down, he pushed people away out of fear, because there was no telling who was hiding cruelty behind a kind smile and a handful of careful words. He avoided thinking about things like therapy and doctors and help, because it would mean having to re-live the last nineteen years of his life, and he wasn't strong enough for that.

Wilder was trying to be braver, but there was no way to hide his vulnerability. He didn't know how to stop himself from acting like every bit of kind attention was a gift. And it was only a matter of time before someone took advantage.

It happened in a bar—one of the few on campus that often 'forgot' to check IDs at the door. He and a couple of his

friends from his Chem class were nursing beers and trying to look like they were older and more mature. Wilder thought maybe if he could pretend just enough, someone would be willing to look past all the battered and bruised bits of his insides and find patience enough to love him in spite of it.

He caught a set of small, blue eyes across the bar. Thin lips curved into a smile, long fingers traced a circle around the rim of a pint glass. Wilder was hooked, and there was no one around at the time with enough experience to tell him that someone like Scott—someone with dead eyes and a cruel mouth—was only going to ruin him.

Men like Scott were predators, they made it their mission to recognize those subtle signs of someone who wouldn't run—someone who had been conditioned to be grateful for the scraps they were given.

Someone like him.

It only took a few words, a few compliments, and Wilder was gone. Scott went home with him, and somewhere between their first and third date, he stopped leaving. And it was good at first—just enough to disarm Wilder. Just enough to convince him that all he needed in the world was Scott in his bed at night. Wilder had been desperate for someone to validate his existence, and Scott fucking him into the mattress—no matter how rough it was or how much it hurt—did just that.

But it didn't last. The scraps of kindness evaporated and left behind Scott's temper, and his possessiveness, and his paranoia. Wilder managed to graduate by the skin of his teeth, because Scott wouldn't stop accusing him of flirting with the other students, the TAs, and the professors. His grades dropped, but he scraped together enough credits to walk that May, his parents and sister missing from the crowd, and was welcomed afterward by the coldness in Scott's eyes.

And yet, he stayed.

He got a job, and they got a new apartment. Scott spent Wilder's money—keeping them constantly broke. He was out all night and came home angry and made Wilder pay for

whatever had gotten him worked up. The carefully hidden bruises became more visible, the too tight grips became violent. He lived with it—his health failing. He was dizzy all the time, his ears ringing all the time.

He couldn't eat, his insomnia raged, and every time he brought it up to Scott, the man just laughed and told him to suck it up. The unease in his gut grew to full-blown terror, and it formed into a quiet, unacknowledged belief that Scott was probably going to kill him one day.

And still, he stayed.

He had no idea why, no matter how often he asked himself. He knew he should pack his bags and run as far and as fast as he could. But he had nothing. Scott had met his parents once, and his mother had told him across the table in sign language that Scott didn't understand, if he continued in the relationship, he had no support. His mother had made him choose in that moment, so he had.

Scott had gone home triumphant, and Wilder had gone home an island.

In the end, he was both right and wrong.

In the aftermath, Wilder didn't remember much about the night Scott had almost killed him. He knew there was a fight, and he knew there was something cold and vicious in the way Scott looked at him.

After that, there was pain.

He woke up on the little triage bed in the ER. His eyes felt heavy, like they were coated with sleep, and there was a funny, heavy, buzzing sensation in his ears. He knew he should be hearing the beeping from the monitors that were strapped to his body—just like he knew there should be pain from the places on his arms and thigh wrapped tight with gauze—but everything was just absent.

“Mr. Torres, I see you're with us now.”

Wilder heard him, but only just, like the man was speaking under water. “I...there's something wrong.” His mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

The doctor gave him a sympathetic look as he stared at the chart. “How much do you remember, Mr. Torres?”

He swallowed again, and his tongue got stuck to the roof of his mouth. It took him a moment to pry it away, and he coughed. The sound was heavy, muffled in his ears, and he wondered what the hell actually happened. “I was home with my boyfriend...and he...” His throat went thick with unshed tears, and he turned his face away. “What’s wrong with me? What happened?”

“Well, for one, you had a nasty blow to your head, Mr. Torres. It resulted in a mild concussion.”

At least that made sense. He nodded, and then the world swam, and he panicked, grabbing the handle on the bed like he might topple over as the room turned upside down. “I’m so dizzy, and I feel...I can’t...hear well.”

“Part of it is the concussion, but part of it isn’t,” the doctor said. “We did a CT scan and found some nerve damage in your ears. Have you been experiencing vertigo lately?”

“A few years now,” Wilder admitted. He swallowed a couple times, like it might clear things up, but nothing happened. “Did I fall?”

The doctor pulled a face, and though Wilder couldn’t hear it right then, he imagined the man hummed. “I’m afraid not.” The doctor turned his head sharply like he heard something, then his shoulders rose and fell with a sigh. “There’s an officer outside who would like to speak with you about last night.”

Wilder felt panic rippling through his body. “What? Why?”

“You were stabbed.” The doctor’s tone was firm, matter-of-fact, rising above the humming buzz in his ears. “Your neighbors found you in the hallway. You have six stab wounds and a concussion, Mr. Torres. You nearly bled to death.”

He shivered once, then twice, then suddenly it was like he’d been plunged into icy water. The room went foggy, he lost his breath, and the rest of his hearing faded out. He didn’t come to until he was being wrapped in a heated blanket and a

straw pushed through his lips, and even then, it still felt like he was gasping for air.

Greedily, he drank cool gulps that soothed the ache in his throat, and he clutched at the blanket with trembling fingers. Sound came back, in fits and bursts until it settled into that weird, underwater fog from before.

A nurse was speaking, but her voice was too soft. It was a low hum of syllables and tones, but no definition. Still, it was soothing, and he let her push him back and prop up the bed, so he was halfway to sitting, and he felt a bit more like himself after that.

He could feel the wounds now, though, and the throbbing at the back of his skull. He rubbed it with careful fingers, then stretched his arm to see where the gauze covered at least a foot of open flesh. His arm ached, his skin felt tugged and stitched tight, and he knew without a doubt he wasn't getting away without scars.

“How?” he whispered.

The doctor looked up. “The police will have more details than I do. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it so bluntly. You went into mild shock. Just let me know when you feel ready to talk to them.”

Wilder licked his lips, his tongue still a little too dry, and he swore for a second he tasted blood. He wondered how long he'd been in there, how long he'd been out. He wanted to know how his neighbors found him, and if it was Scott who left him there to...

But *of course* he had.

“I think I'm ready,” he said, forcing the words past his lips. “I need to get this over with.”

The doctor raised a brow. “Are you sure? Mr. Torres, I understand that this is a difficult situation, but you have every right to take a moment.”

Wilder shook his head, then fought off another wave of vertigo. “I need to...I need to know.”

The doctor gave him a scrutinizing look, then turned on his heel and walked out, pushing the curtain behind him like a billowing cape. It settled, and the nurse fussed with his machines and said more words that he couldn't understand. It was easier to ignore her, to close his eyes and attempt to remember what the hell happened that night, because although he knew Scott was capable of terrible things, something in him hadn't expected to end up here.

There wasn't much though, just images, feelings. He remembered yelling at him, saying he wanted it to be over. He remembered Scott's furious brows and his fingers reaching for him. He didn't remember the knife, though, or the blow to his head. It was like a black, empty hole existed where the pain began.

An officer entered a moment later—a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark brown skin, full lips, and soft brown eyes. He approached the bed but didn't get too close, and his voice was a low rumble in his chest. "I'm Officer Daniels. Are you okay to talk?"

Wilder nodded. "Yes. I'm...I think so."

The officer sighed, then looked down at his tiny notepad that fit into the palm of his hand, and he began to write. "Your...is Wilder Torres?"

"Yes."

"And...twenty-two...old?"

"Yes."

The officer tapped his pencil on the pad of paper, then reached behind him and grabbed a chair. "I'd first... to ask if...you... questions?"

Wilder felt a sudden wave of frustration even though he caught the gist. "What happened to Scott?"

He watched the officer's eyes narrow. "...arrested last night...down the street..."

Wilder held up his hand. "Can you move closer and maybe speak up a bit?"

The officer stared at him for a long moment, then shifted his chair closer and cleared his throat. “Is that better?”

And it was. Wilder let out a small, relieved breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on.”

Daniels shook his head. “I understand. Are you able to answer some questions about last night?”

Wilder bit his lip, then nodded. “I don’t remember much.”

“What about events leading up to the attack?” Daniels asked, and Wilder felt another chill of panic race through his limbs.

He forced himself to breathe through it, to dig deep into the long years he had been under Scott’s furious, vicious control. He thought about years’ worth of bruises on his arms, the occasional too tight grip around his throat, the way Scott would look at him like he actually got off when Wilder was hurting.

He knew what it was. He’d been fighting the truth, fighting the reality that he’d gone from one destructive, toxic home to another and still hadn’t run. He felt like a coward, and the reality of it threatened to choke him. He was terrified to admit it to Daniels, because he was going to ask the question Wilder had no answer for.

Why did you stay?

There were a hundred, a thousand reasons, and none of them would make any sense.

Wilder felt something hot on his cheek, and he realized then he was crying. Daniels’ gaze was soft, and he leaned a little closer when he spoke. “I understand this isn’t easy.”

Wilder shook his head. “I just...I feel so...” He sniffed and rolled his eyes away. “I feel so stupid.”

“I don’t like admitting how many times I’ve had this conversation,” Daniels told him. “With men who are made to feel weak and cowardly for admitting that someone has hurt them. But I need you to understand one thing.”



Wilder blinked, giving the man his full attention. “Okay,” he whispered.

Daniels cleared his throat, and though Wilder’s hearing was going in and out, through waves of fog, he heard his tone plain as day. It was honest. And it was safe. “I believe you. Whatever happened, I believe you.”

It was nothing short of a miracle that Wilder’s sudden and intense desire to break down didn’t consume him entirely. He managed a thick swallow and a barely-there whisper of, “Thank you.”

Daniels nodded, not quite smiling, but almost. “Do you think you can talk to me about Scott Spriggs and the relationship you two had?”

And for the first time, Wilder knew he could.

## CHAPTER 3

WILDER HELD his wrist with his free hand to keep the dropper from trembling as he slowly added the banana essence to the mixer. It was a delicate thing, a make-or-break moment where he'd either have something delicious, or he'd have to throw another batch of wasted ingredients into the bin and start over. His overhead prepared for waste, but over the last few years, Wilder had grown into an unforgiving perfectionist, especially with his bakes.

Most days, standing in the too-warm kitchen of his Savannah bakery, people like Scott Spriggs and his mother were nothing more than a distant memory. At best, a fading ghost—the impression of toxic energy left behind from a life he had abandoned.

The moment Officer Daniels had left his hospital room and he was transferred into inpatient recovery, he made a decision about his life. Enough was enough. He'd lived under the heel of too many angry boots, and there was no need for it. Not anymore. Refusing to deal with the trauma his mother had caused had led him straight into Scott's arms, and he wasn't going to make that mistake twice.

He'd nearly paid with his life, and he'd gotten away with nothing more than a handful of ugly scars and progressive hearing loss—and both of those were nothing more than proof he had survived.

He'd taken his trauma, his increasing deafness, the rift with his parents, and his fear of ever being touched again, and he threw them all into something new. Weeks after he was released from the hospital, he set foot on the community

college campus with a bag on his shoulders and a firm set to his jaw, determined to find something that made him feel like he could breathe again. Something that had no connection to his former life. Something that could redefine the man he'd become, shaped by the events of his past, controlled by himself and himself alone.

He started with culinary classes on a whim, but after fucking up his seventeenth poached egg, he was ready to put his spatula through the wall and never look at a boiling pot of water ever again in his life. He didn't even fight it when the teacher, eyes full of pity, laid a hand next to his on his prep table and said just loud enough for him to hear, "I don't think this is for you."

And it wasn't.

He finished the culinary class scraping by with a C, and while he knew he should throw in the towel and never look at the inside of a kitchen again except to open and microwave ramen, he decided to go forward. He was anything but a quitter, now more than ever with a fire in his belly to prove to himself that he was capable of being something else. And even if he failed spectacularly, he found triumph in how hard he was trying.

The next class, it turned out, was baking.

He walked through the classroom doors with a cheap cake decorating kit from Michael's, and somehow, his life was transformed. He wasn't terrible at decoration, and he could pick up the technical side of creating a frosting swirl. He had a knack for flavor combinations, and he managed gluten-free bakes that didn't taste like they'd come right from the floor of a sawmill.

Suddenly, the world started making sense again.

He could stand in the kitchen and bake, create new flavors, and lose himself to the rhythm of whipping ingredients to make something beautiful, and he wouldn't need to *think*. He wouldn't have to feel the echoes of his mother's disapproval for his entire existence, he wouldn't have to feel the crushing

weight of his PTSD, or feel the tingle in the scars Scott left behind.

He was just Wilder—quiet and reserved and a little scared. Unloved and starved for touch, but he wanted it that way.

It was years later, with thousands of miles between him and the people who had hurt him, and he was more himself than he had ever been in his life. Enclosed in the walls of a former kosher bakery, he put his mark on the people in the city—and they made him feel like he belonged there. They gave him space, and peace, and sanctuary where no one ever had before.

As Wilder eased the dropper to the side of his bowl, the light above the swinging door flashed. It could only mean one thing, since Whipped was two hours from opening and Dmitri was an hour from his shift. He didn't bother moving, because only one other person had keys to the front door, and a minute later, Jayden Bruster swaggered in with a grin on his face.

“Guess what I heard.”

With his hearing aids off, Wilder couldn't make out most of what he'd said, but he had long-since learned to read those words on Jayden's lips.

Wilder sighed and reached to his ear to turn them on, then he pressed both hands to the wooden baking table. “Who'd you catch on a date this time?”

“No, I didn't catch someone. I have news,” Jayden said. He grabbed a stool and set it down next to Wilder, reaching a finger for the frosting before Wilder caught him by the wrist and gave him a flat look. Jayden scowled, but wrenched his arm away and shrugged. “Are you going to guess what it is?”

Reaching for a spoon, Wilder scooped up some of the frosting on the side of the bowl, dipping his own finger before passing it over. It smelled right, but he wasn't sure yet. “Is there any chance in hell I'm going to guess right?”

“Probably not.” Jayden shrugged, then shoved the whole spoon into his mouth before his eyes went wide. “What is this?”

“It’s going to be banana cream pie,” Wilder told him. He tasted the frosting. Not quite there, but almost. Too little flavor was still fixable, and he had a pot ready to start his custard filling. ‘Tell me,’ he signed as he reached for the dropper again, then hip-checked Jayden out of his way. Three drops were enough, and he turned the mixer back on, which forced Jayden to lift his hands, the spoon hanging from his lips.

‘Adriano’s brother is in town.’

Wilder had met Adriano three times over the last two years he’d been in Savannah—the first time was the day Wilder signed the lease for the bakery, and the next two had been over holidays when Noah had returned to spend time with his brother. He liked having Adriano there—it filled in some of the emptiness he felt leaving his small Deaf community behind, but he didn’t regret his choice to settle in Savannah.

He also didn’t know Adriano well, so the idea that his brother was around didn’t mean much.

‘And?’

Jayden rolled his eyes. ‘A hot porn star’s brother comes into town? That doesn’t interest you?’

Wilder turned the mixer off and grabbed another spoon to test it. Close enough, he decided, for an experimental bake. “Did he say why he’d be here?”

Jayden shook his head. “Knox and I ran into Nellie yesterday. The guy rented out the entire fucking top floor of Augustin House.”

Wilder knew about the old Victorian house that had been transformed into apartments upstairs, with small shops and a salon below. Jayden had lived there for a while before he moved in with Oscar, and Wilder liked the place, but it had always been a little too posh for him.

He’d grown up simple—easy. They farmed their own vegetables, and chickens laid their eggs. He’d never been impressed by the idea of wealth.

Whipped did well, but he wasn’t swimming in cash. He made enough to exist happily—to not worry where the money

for his bills was coming from. He didn't have to check his bank account when he shopped or when he filled his car with gas, and that was plenty. His biggest splurge was the fancy hearing aids that were four grand a piece—the kind with Bluetooth so he could listen to his classical music on electric guitar, and he could filter out screaming babies—and Jayden, when he wanted to spend the afternoon complaining.

But he wasn't rich. He didn't want to be rich. And Adriano's wealthy brother held no real appeal for him.

"You're being boring," Jayden said after a minute.

Wilder rolled his eyes. "I'm working. Go bother Knox—he'll probably be more interested than I am."

"He at least appreciates the aesthetic of porn stars," Jayden said, hopping off the stool.

Wilder looked up with a quirked brow. "Is his brother a porn star?"

"Well no, but you know, because of Adriano, he probably knows some. I bet he's had sex with a few," Jayden said, waving his hand. "See you tonight?"

Tuesday—wine night with Jayden and Knox at the Tavern since it was always one of the deadest nights. Five years ago, if Wilder tried to even consider sitting on a patio under the stars in some coastal historical city in Georgia, drinking wine and talking about nothing—he would have laughed.

He would have laughed, and maybe cried a little, because there had been many years he thought he'd never be able to feel normal again.

Even with therapy, even with medication, things had overwhelmed him for so goddamn long. And now, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to trust his heart—to be vulnerable with another man—but he had this. And it felt like enough.

"I'll be there. Pick me up?"

Jayden gave him a mock-salute, then let himself out.

Grabbing the frosting, Wilder shoved it into the walk-in, then turned to the stove to start his custard. Dmitri would be in

soon, and the shop would open. And it would probably be dead, because Tuesdays were always dead, but it would be routine. It would wrap around him softly and comfort him with its steady presence, never defying expectation, and never letting him down.

Savannah was a sanctuary, and he knew he would protect that with his life.

## CHAPTER 4

LUCA PUSHED his sunglasses up high on his head, staring around the empty space. Dust was thick in the air, floating in glittering specs through rays of sunlight that filtered through parted blinds. It was furnished in light florals and dark wood, like someone had given his nonny an endless budget and access to all of the 1978 Sears home furnishing's catalogue.

He could hear Nellie, the realtor, pacing the hallway talking in low, irritated tones, and he fought back the urge to eavesdrop. She reminded him of Gabby in a lot of ways, and it was in this moment—hours and hours on the road and now standing in a room he'd rented sight unseen that he missed her like a physical ache.

The trip to Savannah had been planned, even if it had been mostly in his subconscious. He hadn't been able to escape the idea of that city since Adriano had come home with endless praises on the tips of his fingers.

He'd taken the road in slowly, savoring the curves and bends of the road as it twisted through forests.

It was surrounded by heavy woods on all sides until the road burst open to reveal a city trapped in time that looked like it had come right out of a tourism handbook. He had second thoughts, then thirds, then fourths, but eventually he forced himself to follow his GPS down small on-way downtown streets until he reached the little dirt parking lot leading to the home he'd be renting for the next several weeks.

He closed his eyes for a second and tried to picture Adriano in that space. He hadn't been brave enough to ask



Adriano where he'd spent his time. Hell, he hadn't been brave enough to text his brother and tell him he had packed all his shit and booked a rental in Savannah for three months.

He knew, deep down, Adriano would have only encouraged him to go, but he wanted to try and claim a little bit of wholeness and peace for himself, without Adriano holding his hand.

He was starting to doubt again, though. Augustin House was some of the most expensive lodging Savannah had to offer—the place cost a mint, but it was simple, and it was as old as the city was.

Luca usually divided his time between his beach house in Malibu and his little cottage near Pietro in Napa Valley. He told himself he needed to shed the trappings of that life which had left him hollow and lost, but he wasn't ready to go back to his early years of struggle and wanting.

He didn't want to feel like that broke teenager hip-checking vending machines for stray Reese's Cups and hoarding lost change he found on the sidewalk so he could get burritos on the weekends with his friends who never had to worry where their pocket money was coming from.

And he knew it was too easy to forget—that he was too quick to erase those lean college years where he had to choose between keeping the lights on and going out with his friends on Thursday nights. He liked his life, and he didn't want to lose all of it. He just didn't know how to fill the aching gaps inside him without letting it all go.

“Well?”

Luca turned at the sound of Nellie's voice, and he pasted on a smile that felt more like a grimace. “It's...”

Her cheek hollowed like she was biting it to fight off a smile, and when he didn't finish his sentence, she lifted a brow at him. “I know a nice hotel if this isn't up to your standards.”

“I don't want to stay at a hotel,” Luca said, waving his hand at her. “I mean, I'm sure they're all great, but I want to

be somewhere that I have time and space to myself, you know?”

“Right,” she said. “So...here, or...?”

He had a feeling she didn't have much more than this, and he wasn't sure it was worth wasting any more of his time hunting around for yet another thing that was going to be impermanent. “Here's great. Thank you, Ms. Fitzgerald.”

Her smile softened, and she beckoned him to the kitchen area where she laid out the lease for him to sign. “Can I ask you something?”

He braced himself, because he knew it was coming. He and Adriano looked almost nothing alike—his baby brother had outgrown him by the time he was sixteen, and Adriano's body had been carefully sculpted and shaped for his job. Luca had always been more on the waify side, no matter how many hours he dedicated on weights, and eventually he gave up trying. He took after their mother more than their father anyway, with his black hair and thick brows.

But Nellie also knew who he was—and he had to assume a lot of the town did as well. “Sure.”

“How are Noah and your brother doing?”

He froze, pen poised over the signature line, because that wasn't what he was expecting. Adriano was a porn star, but he was also a social media celebrity, and his deafness set him apart from others. Luca knew his brother both hated and capitalized off it—and it had primed Luca to field personal questions about what it was like to have Adriano as a brother.

He hadn't expected the genuine question or the honesty in her tone. “Uh. They're good.”

Her face softened. “I actually didn't get to meet Adriano more than a couple of times while he was here. I was going through some family shit.” Her brow dipped in a faint scowl, and he bit back his desire to pry. “Anyway, we miss Noah.”

Luca signed his name, then set the pen down and pressed his hand to the paper. “He and Adriano were pretty caught up in getting settled, so I didn't get to know him well.”

She lifted a brow. “Hasn’t he been there for almost two years?”

Luca barely managed to keep himself from wincing. “Yes, but he’s in school so they moved to LA. It’s not as close as people might think. Adriano usually texts though, and he seems happy. And Noah seems like a good guy.”

“He is.” She said it sharply, like a simple, immutable fact—and Luca had to wonder what it was about the soft, shy baker that had everyone in a goddamn tizzy.

Was it something in the fucking water, or...

“Anyway,” Nellie went on, “we’re all glad he’s happy, but we miss Bubbe’s.”

Luca blinked, pretty sure that was Noah’s old bakery. “Someone else runs it, right? He mentioned something about some guy...taking over?”

Nellie gave him a long once-over, then shook her head. “He and his brother sold it off before Noah left. It’s a place called Whipped now.”

“What is that?” His first thought was kink club, but he wasn’t entirely sure Savannah, Georgia had a dark side. At least, not compared to what he could find in Hollywood.

Though if he was being honest, he wasn’t entirely disinterested in seeing what the other side of the country had to offer.

“Gluten-free cupcakes,” she said, and he allowed himself a tiny spark of both relief and disappointment. He probably wouldn’t have been able to resist temptation, but he knew it was better if he did. Nellie grabbed the paper he finished signing and pulled it toward her. “I know this isn’t usually your scene—which I guess is what you were looking for according to your email?”

Luca shrugged. It was true, but he was starting to doubt himself. “Something like that.”

“Savannah is a good place, but it’s not for everyone. And believe me, I know our reputation to most of the world.

*Georgia peaches*,” she said in a heavy, affected southern accent like she was Scarlett O’Hara. “But trust me, this place will surprise you if you’re not careful.”

He took half a step back, because it almost sounded like a threat. Her eyes were soft though, and there was something in them that was almost like pity. In spite of how much he probably deserved it, it still stung.

“My family wasn’t always like this,” he said after a beat.

“This?”

“Rich,” he clarified. “My parents both worked nine-to-fives in retail, but then Adriano started making a ton of cash in college. Then my oldest brother started up his own law firm, and things just snowballed. One of my brothers went off to New York—and he works in finance. My sisters both live in Miami, and they own a clothing line together. And I…”

He stopped, because what was he? A failed mogul?

Someone who was getting ready to sign papers to sell off two art galleries that didn’t mean jack or shit to him? A man without passion, without point, without any sort of real future—just money in a bank account he hadn’t even earned?

It made him feel like an even bigger asshole.

“I don’t judge people just because they don’t live like I do,” he said quietly.

Nellie’s mouth turned up in the corners, and she laughed gently. “We are who we are, Mr. Moretti, and even if you do judge us, that’s not going to change anything.”

“Fair,” he said, ignoring another small sting.

“Don’t beat yourself up if Savannah isn’t for you.” Nellie gathered up the papers and then tucked them against her chest with a curled arm.

This time, her words sounded like permission to second-guess his life’s choices, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to be let off the hook that easily. He’d come there to find himself—somehow. He’d come to retrace his brother’s steps and maybe find some way to look at himself in the mirror again and see a

whole person instead of some cardboard mockery of the man he might have become.

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Luca stared around the apartment—the little kitchenette with the two-burner stove, the small fridge, the row of pans that had seen better days. There was a stack of take-out menus that were looking more and more appealing the longer he stood there, but the Wi-Fi up there was shitty and after waiting for the first webpage to load, he gave up and considered the little grocery market not too far.

For all that he had been spoiled by convenience for the last two dozen years, he knew he hadn't lost his touch in the kitchen. One of his tried-and-true seduction techniques had been his mother's caponata, and that had gotten him more blowjobs than six martinis and a hit of molly during his first year with more than one zero in his bank account.

Not that he wanted to go out of his way for himself, but maybe the first step in his journey was shedding the part of him that had been catered to for so damn long. He cooked when he wanted to impress these days, not for the necessity of it, and the idea of getting down to basics made him a little tingly inside.

Grabbing his keys, Luca locked the door behind him, then took the stairs two at a time. He was four steps from the landing when his foot hit the edge, and his entire body hit the ground before he realized he was even falling. Pain lanced up his side, the wind knocked out of him, and he was suddenly aware of every single forty-two years of his life right then as he laid there on the floor.

“*Verdammtter Mist!* Did you just stroke out?”

Luca couldn't see where the voice was coming from, but it sounded like it was in the direction of the sharp-smelling salon

that was just to the right of the front doors. He gasped for a breath, then his lungs started to open, and he pressed one palm to the floor as he righted himself.

He wasn't stroking out—not yet, but his humiliation had him on the edge. “Uh.” His gaze darted around as he rubbed a palm over his ribs, and eventually he spied a man peering from behind a low reception desk at the front of the salon.

“Do I need to call an ambulance?” the man asked. His voice had a rounded accent to it, thick in the back of his throat like he was maybe German.

Luca stared at him, a small scowl on his face as he took a cautious step forward, then another. The man was watching him—brown eyes wide, shoulders tense like he might need to spring into action. “It was four steps. I think I'll live.”

“I don't think I've ever seen anyone fall like that before in my life,” the guy said with a small laugh. “Including me.”

Luca's scowl deepened, and he walked over, laying one hand on the desk. “Is humiliating guests your thing?”

“Depends on why you fell,” the guy said with a shrug. He bit his lip, then extended his hand with a grin. “I'm Raphael.”

Luca took his hand without thinking, then flushed that he'd let the man get the best of him. “You know what...”

“There's a hospital up the road,” Raphael interrupted like Luca hadn't started speaking. He took his hand back and laid it on the desk. “I know one of the attendings who works there. He's kind of a mess, but he's actually good at his job if you need him to look at your ribs.”

Luca considered it for half a minute, but he wasn't sure he wanted some southern MD fucking with his body. As it was, he really didn't think he was hurt—apart from his pride and maybe a little bruising. “I think I'm good.”

“Tell the triage nurses you want to see Aksel Alling,” Raphael went on. “If you change your mind.”

“I won't.” Luca backed up, then patted his pocket like maybe he'd be able to feel through his jeans if he'd cracked

his phone screen. “Uh...see you.”

The guy didn't respond, and Luca rolled his eyes before he headed out the door, trying desperately to ignore the burning ache in his side. At least it had been a single person who had seen his mortifying fall, but he also had a feeling this Raphael person wasn't going to hold his tongue for long. And that was all he needed—a place that should be his sanctuary looking at him like he was some bumbling moron who didn't know how to walk down stairs.

Luca kept his blushing to a minimum as he found the little market, trying not to wrinkle his nose at the lack of artisan and organic. But at least it wasn't a Kroger, and they had a decent produce selection. Considering it had been actual years since he'd made pasta by hand, he bypassed the idea of fresh and scoured the dry aisle, finding what he needed to get him through at least the next week then hurried through the self-check.

He took the long way back to The Augustin, mostly to avoid the inevitable long evening by himself in a strange place because he'd yet to meet anyone but Nellie, and he wasn't quite sure how to do that in a place like Savannah. But he knew he had to be an adult about it, so he forced himself back to that little dirt parking lot and turned off the car.

Hooking all the bags on his arm, Luca managed to get to the front porch before letting half go. They dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, and he nudged the Manor door open with his knee, coming to a stop in the doorway. The salon's open sign was dim, but Raphael was still there behind the desk, a pen in his hand, a smirk on his face.

“Successful trip?”

Luca rolled his eyes. “Something like that. I'm guessing you wouldn't want to be useful for once in your life and help me upstairs?”

Raphael hummed, then pushed back in his chair, and it took Luca only a second to realize that it was a wheelchair. And he wasn't going to be helping him up the stairs, because there was no elevator. “Tell you what,” Raphael said with a

tiny smile, “I’ll guard the rest of your groceries if you do the leg work.”

“I,” he started, but the way Raphael’s brows furrowed stopped him.

“Yeah, I get it,” Raphael said with a touch of impatience. “You didn’t notice, you’re sorry, you feel bad. I might not be the nicest guy, but I’m not an asshole. If Savannah adhered to ADA rules better, I probably *would* be able to help you, but,” he gestured toward the banister and shrugged.

Luca bowed his head, then took a breath. “Just make sure no racoons take off with my shit?”

Raphael chuckled softly. “Go. You look like you could use the work-out anyway.”

“Wow. Thanks for that.” Luca’s cheeks heated, but he took the stairs—one at a time this time and dropped the bags on his little scrubbed wooden table before heading back down. Raphael wasn’t in the foyer anymore, but when Luca stepped out, he found him parked by the side of his car.

“Are you rich?” Raphael asked as Luca approached.

He gave him a pointed look. “I drive a Bentley, and I rented the whole top floor of this place. Yes, I’m rich.”

Raphael blinked in surprise, then threw his head back and laughed. “I kind of expected you to say something like, I’m not rich, I’m comfortable.”

Luca rolled his eyes. “I *am* comfortable. And rich.” He bent over for the last of the bags, then held the door with his hip and waited for Raphael to wheel back up the ramp and roll past him back into the foyer. “Is that going to be like a *thing* here?”

“A thing?” Raphael repeated.

“I’m a dickhead because I have money?” He was being overly defensive—and he was well aware. Mostly because he did feel like the dickhead with money. He was a dick, he had money, he was trying to figure out what the fuck life meant in



the place that offered his brother happiness like Luca had never seen in his life.

He just didn't know how to get started.

“If you're a dickhead, no amount of money is going to change that,” Raphael told him, then winked. “Just like how I'm an asshole and the fact that I have cerebral palsy doesn't make it worse. Mostly. Depending on the person.”

Luca allowed himself a tiny snort. “Fine. Fair enough. You win.”

Raphael gripped his wheels and pushed back, then grinned. “You should come get a beer with me tonight.”

Luca stared at him. “A what?”

“Oh, sorry. Is that not a rich people thing? So, beer is this process where they ferment wheat...”

Fighting off the urge to flip the man off, Luca dropped the bags again and leaned against the desk, and Raphael rolled behind it. “I know what beer is. I just, uh... guess I didn't expect an invite.”

Raphael shrugged. “It's nothing formal. A few people usually go after work. You met Nellie, right?”

Luca nodded. “She rented me the place.”

“She'll tag along. We drink at the Tavern about a block up the road from here—on Liberty, but it's more than just booze. I usually get there around eight. You can't miss it.” Raphael gripped his wheels, gave himself a push back, then turned and wheeled all the way to the back where he disappeared around the corner.

Standing there confused and unsure, Luca stared at the salon until the lights went out, one by one, and the hallway darkened. The conversation was clearly over, especially when Raphael didn't reappear, so he gathered up his groceries and hooked them all back on his arm. It was silent then and oddly lonely as he made his way to the apartment where the last of the evening light filtered in through the window.

Raphael didn't seem to have invited him out of menace or mockery—but Luca wasn't used to it. He had carefully cultivated his circle of friends—he was adored, used for his money and his name, and sometimes for his brother. And he was liked because of it, but none of that was truly him. Now, if he wanted people to like him, he'd have to be himself.

He just had no idea who the fuck that even was.

## CHAPTER 5

WILDER STOOD BESIDE KNOX, near the edge of the bar, his foot tapping in an unheard rhythm as they watched Jayden try to charm the bottles of wine out of Sonia, who looked more amused than she did anything else.

“Why are we here, exactly? I thought we were going to drink at Oscar’s tonight.”

Knox snorted a quiet laugh. “We were, but last week someone puked on his expensive throw rug, so Oscar’s refusing to have anyone over. And anyway, I overheard Jayden and Talia talking—they have a bet going about whether or not Talia can get Sonia to give in and let her set up the food truck in her parking lot on Wednesdays.”

Wilder sighed, not quite in the mood to be in the Tavern at all.

He looked forward to their wine nights, because it meant getting away from the tourists and hanging with his friends in a safe space.

Then the door to the Tavern swung open and a group of people entered, Raphael leading the way in his wheelchair.

Raphael was one of the reasons Wilder was glad he’d branched out with his bakes. His cerebral palsy had come with a side of epilepsy which made his diet complicated. Wilder didn’t entirely understand Keto, but he knew it was no carbs and no sugar, so he’d spent time perfecting a few treats that Raphael could indulge in, and the two had become something like friends over the past few years.

Wilder's circle of friends was still small, but knowing people like Raphael, even as acquaintances, only made him feel more at home. He looked past him to see Raphael's other friends, people who didn't shop at Whipped, who rarely looked his way—and then he saw someone new.

Someone *very* new, in fact, and very out of place. The stranger hung back, looking awkward with his hair impeccably styled and a thin, gauzy scarf wrapped around his neck in spite of the summer evening heat. He wore a white tank-top with a jean vest, and his legs were perfectly outlined in his artfully torn jeans. Wilder might have guessed he was in college if it weren't for the faint crow's feet at the edges of his dark eyes, and just a hint of grey at the temples of his near pitch-black hair.

He looked a bit lost, his eyes wide behind his glasses, darting around, almost like he was searching for an exit. Wilder felt sorry for the man—in all honesty. He was tall, and he was gorgeous, and he looked like he would never, ever belong in a place like Savannah.

Wilder knew what that felt like—those achingly long weeks as he scrubbed all traces of the Leib brothers from the shop. And it wasn't because he didn't want to preserve something old and important to the city. He had been just so damn desperate to have something that belonged to him—and only him.

It had taken a while—it had taken blood, sweat, tears, and shouldering the comments that his cupcakes were good, but Adam and Talia's food was better, and how much they missed Noah's face in the window. He sucked it up and went by each day with a smile and a straight back, and suddenly Savannah became home.

People stopped comparing him to what was, and people started treating him like he belonged. He felt wanted—as himself—for the first time in his life.

“Do you know who that is?” Wilder asked as Jayden slid up to them with two bottles of wine. It wasn't enough for the night, but it would get them started.

Jayden's eyes followed Wilder's gaze, then his mouth stretched into a grin. "Yes. I told you about him. Adriano's brother?"

Wilder frowned until it dawned on him. "Oh my god, he's...he's..."

"Right?" Jayden asked. "God, their entire family is fucking *delicious*."

Wilder rolled his eyes, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Jayden he was wrong—because he wasn't. Adriano was sculpted beauty, which came with the territory of making adult films. His body was for sale, and he kept it pristine. But even under the weightlifting and strict diets, Adriano had a sort of simmering allure—hot and almost untouchable.

Of course, Wilder knew that was just his look. Noah touched—a lot. And most people who saw them together didn't totally understand, but the more Wilder had gotten to know them over the years during their visits, the more he had come to understand the appeal of both sides.

His brother, though, looked nothing like him. There was a passing resemblance in the cut of his jaw and the brown of his eyes, but he didn't have the same confidence. He held his head up like owned the place, but Wilder had been good at reading body language for years—and he knew false arrogance and insecurity when he saw it. The poor man was teeming with it.

"What's his name again?" he asked, stealing another long look before turning his attention back to Jayden.

His friend lifted his hand to spell, 'Luca,' in slow letters.

*Luca*. It was fitting. He looked like he belonged in an art gallery sipping wine and staring at a canvas with a piece of string tied to a nail or something. It almost made him laugh, but he knew that wasn't fair. Luca and Adriano both came from very different worlds—just like Wilder had. Wilder's upbringing just helped him fit into a place like Savannah a little more than the streets of Malibu.

'Ready?' Wilder signed.

Talia nodded. "I won the bet."

“Does that really count if you have to give her a profit percentage?” Knox asked, and Talia simply grinned and held the wine bottles up by the neck.

Knox muttered something under his breath as he held the door for them, and even if Wilder could have heard him over the crowd, he wouldn't have understood.

Talia replied with a snappy tone, but Wilder missed the conversation as his eyes trailed back over to Luca—who was hovering in the back of his booth. He had his hand around a martini and a smile on his face. But though he was surrounded by people, he looked absolutely and completely alone.

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“YOU'RE IRRITATED.” The words slipped out before Wilder could stop himself, but instead of Talia getting annoyed, she just let out a small snort of laughter and shook her head.

“Well spotted.”

They had been sitting side-by-side with their feet in the pool for a while, sharing the last dredges of Jayden's winning bottles, not saying much. Knox had disappeared early on, and then Jayden got bored and went to hunt down his boyfriend, which left Wilder and Talia who were only just starting to creep into friendship.

Talia was, by nature, an acerbic person. She hadn't warned Wilder off, but she hadn't been entirely welcoming at first, either. Wilder understood—on some level.

“You know how Oscar and I have been toying with the idea of joining forces with a new food truck?” she said softly.

It was something Talia had been talking about for the last few months, so he nodded.

“I had a meeting with him this afternoon and—” Talia rubbed her fingers through the back of her hair, and she huffed through her nose. “We're not seeing eye to eye on an issue right now.”

Wilder cocked his head to the side, putting his right ear a bit closer to Talia since he could hear a fraction better that way. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Talia turned her face up toward the sky. “Have you met Paxton?”

Wilder wrinkled his nose, because yes, he had. Noah had cautiously suggested Paxton as an employee when he was taking over the business, but at the interview, something didn’t sit right in his gut. He couldn’t put his finger on it—and it was more than the fact that Paxton got a little too friendly during their meeting. Wilder generally followed his instincts when it came to who he trusted, though, and it was an easy pass.

He knew Paxton had gone on to work for Oscar, and he wasn’t surprised that Talia took issue with it. “I have. He applied to work at my shop, but I turned him down.”

“Smart,” Talia murmured, almost too low for Wilder to hear. She seemed to catch herself, and he cleared her throat, turning toward Wilder. “Sorry.”

Wilder waved her off. “It’s fine.”

Rubbing a hand down her face, she let out a small, frustrated sigh. “Oscar thinks his flirting is harmless, but I think maybe he doesn’t get it. I’ve watched Paxton. He’s... targeted. He was crossing lines with Adam about two years back, but I set him straight.”

Wilder’s mouth stretched into a small grin. “Did he learn his lesson?”

“I don’t know,” Talia said. “He’s left us alone. He asked Oscar out a couple of times, but Paxton knows he’s married. I don’t understand why,” she stopped and looked away for a second. “I heard a rumor about a year ago—I don’t know if you remember that guy getting fired from the paper.”

Wilder’s brows dipped. The details had been vague, and he’d been trying not to involve himself in gossip, so he avoided it. “Not really.”

“The details were private because I guess it involved a minor. Anyway, Paxton seemed to, uh...know more than he

should?” Talia grimaced. “Sorry, this is so fucked up. I just have a problem with this kind of rape apologist shit.”

“Did he...”

“He just went off about how maybe the kid involved was leading his rapist on,” Talia said, her voice almost a low growl. “When I confronted him, he waved me off and said he was just joking, but I don’t think he was.”

Wilder’s stomach twisted, the idea of it hitting too close to home. He got lucky after he escaped Scott—most of the people in his life believed him, but not everyone. He knew that fear. He knew what it was like to face the idea of sharing his trauma and then being told he was a liar. Or that it was his fault for not leaving sooner. He rubbed at the scars on his arm through the sleeve of his shirt and allowed himself to feel grateful he had gone with his gut about Paxton.

“What did Oscar say?” Wilder finally asked.

“He said he’d keep an eye out. He doesn’t like to make waves,” Talia answered, then leaned back on her arms. “He will—when it’s important. He would never let anyone get hurt, but sometimes I think he goes too far.”

“And he thinks you go too quick?” Wilder offered, and at that, Talia gave a genuine laugh.

“You have siblings?”

The thought of his sister—their rift, how long it had been since he’d spoken to her—it stung in that moment. She had been the apple of their mother’s eye, but he still missed her. “I do.”

“I trust my brother,” Talia said. “I just don’t trust that little weasel.”

“It’s a good thing you’re here, then,” Wilder pointed out.

Talia nodded, but she didn’t look as confident as she wanted, and Wilder felt bad. All the same, he let the conversation slip away. Silence settled, and the night calmed them both. The wine rushed through his body, leaving him



comfortably buzzing and feeling like he didn't want to be anywhere else in the universe.

The world was fucked. He knew the darkest parts of it—and he'd survived. And he was finding something a little bit close to happy.

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The next morning, Wilder noticed the lights flash in the kitchen just a few seconds before the door opened, and Dmitri poked his head around the corner with a hesitant smile. He'd been working at Whipped for a year—was better behind the counter than he was with the bakes, but he was trying, and Wilder loved that about him.

Dmitri had come in the day Wilder hung the help wanted sign in the window, looking for something full-time, which meant that the two part-time workers Wilder had wanted to hire would have to condense down into one. He made okay money—better in summers with the tourists, but not enough to support a full staff.

Still. Dmitri was determined, and he was full of a fire Wilder had once seen in himself.

“I think I can do this,” Dmitri had said, his hands clenched. “I know what you've probably heard about me...”

Wilder leaned forward and winked. “Probably not much.”

Dmitri stared, then his cheeks darkened with a flush.

“Oh, was that a joke, or...?”

“My dad always made really terrible Deaf puns whenever he was trying to calm someone down,” Wilder told him with a wink. “I mean it, though—I don't really do gossip here, okay?”

Dmitri nodded. “Well, if you hire me, you'll hear about it. I was adopted, but my parents...” He shook his head. “I don't remember when they were okay. They split up when I was

two, and my dad got to keep me, but then he got all —” he waved his hand in a circle. “Messed up? My aunts tried to help him out, but he took off when they wanted him to go to rehab. I had some anger management problems when I got back to Savannah.”

Wilder heard the ache in his voice—the desperation to be more than the people had painted him out to be. “How are things now?”

He shrugged, eyes darting off to the side. “They could be better. Some stuff happened with my best friend here and people kind of blamed me for it.”

“Is he the one who had the incident with Antoine?” Wilder asked—because he knew about that.

Dmitri looked down at his hands, flexing them. He looked older than his age—far older than twenty, with the weight of the world on his shoulders. But Wilder could sense something more about him—a sort of inner light that just needed space to shine, and he wanted to force the people in Dmitri’s life to give him that.

“I’m not judging you,” Wilder said quietly.

Dmitri shrugged, still staring down at his lap, which made it hard for Wilder to understand him, so he leaned forward and strained his ears. “People think it was my influence. Owen was a good kid before he took off. But they don’t know what really happened. He was working at the paper and his boss,” he stopped abruptly, and his cheeks flushed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t... uh... This isn’t really my place to say. But he was angry, and it wasn’t his fault.”

“I understand,” Wilder told him, leaning a little closer. “Believe me.” Dmitri looked at him then, a sort of hunger in his eyes, and Wilder nodded. “From experience. I know what the trauma is like, and how it can make you feel this sort of bone-deep, visceral hatred for anyone and anything that let you down.”

Dmitri bowed his head and closed his eyes for a long moment. “I don’t mind taking the blame for what happened.

The people in this city never really liked me anyway, and he deserved better.” He looked up, then let out a small laugh, and his cheeks bloomed with color. “God, sorry to dump this on you. This is like the worst interview ever.”

Wilder waved him off. “We’re good. I promise.”

Biting his lip, Dmitri shifted in his chair, then laid his hands on the desk. “My life is weird. I’m the adopted, ambiguously Asian kid of these white, addict parents and people don’t get it. They expect me to like...you know, be this stereotype. To play violin and be good at math and know, like, Mandarin. And when we moved to Albuquerque people thought it was hilarious that I grew up in Georgia—they acted like it was the Bible Belt or something. I never really fit in anywhere.”

“I know what that feels like too,” Wilder told him, and when Dmitri looked skeptical, he shrugged. “I was born hearing. I didn’t start going deaf until I was in my twenties, but my entire family is Deaf. Every single one of them. My mother wasn’t a good person. She spent most of my childhood making sure I never felt like I belonged, and it wasn’t until I was in college that I realized not every kid like me was treated that way. By then...” Wilder shrugged, feeling the sting of old pain, “the damage was done.”

“That sucks.”

Wilder laughed. “Yeah. It did. But I found somewhere that made me feel welcome and wanted.”

“Here?” Dmitri asked him, and he looked so damn hopeful, Wilder didn’t have the heart to tell him the rest—to tell him how he’d clawed his way to some semblance of okay just to get up every morning and face the sunrise. He didn’t tell him about Scott, or the nights he spent lying in his bed with the covers wrapped around him, thinking it would be easier if he just didn’t wake up in the morning.

Because the journey to where he was now—the man sitting in his chair across from his new employee—was long. And it was damn near impossible. It was hard-fought and impossibly won, but he couldn’t promise that to Dmitri.

“I wouldn’t give up Savannah for the world,” was all he could say.

But it was enough. And here they were, a year and a half later, and somehow Wilder was even more at home, and Dmitri had lost some of the heavy weight on his shoulders from where he’d been carrying his own little world.

“How was last night?” Dmitri asked as he reached for an apron. Most of the cupcakes had been baked—they just needed frosting and decoration, and Dmitri had mastered that.

He grabbed one of the icing bags and the spinning stand, pulling the tray of cinnamon chocolate ones toward him as Wilder went back to the banana creams. “It was fine. Jayden lost a bet and Talia got us wine, and then Knox disappeared after like an hour, probably to either get laid or stalk Roman and Aksel even though he refuses to tell us why he’s so obsessed with them.”

Dmitri rolled his eyes. “Wow.”

“I try not to pay close attention to everyone else’s business,” Wilder said with a half grin. He took his cupcake and gently rolled the frosting in his pile of crushed almonds that surprisingly tasted like graham cracker crumbs.

Dmitri’s mouth moved but Wilder didn’t hear him, so he assumed it was either a groan or a sigh. “Part of me can’t wait to turn twenty-one so I can drink with y’all, but it also feels so pointless. I mean, what’s left for me, you know? Gambling and drinking?” He swallowed thickly and ducked his head. “I don’t ever want to be like my parents.”

Wilder set his cupcake down on the display tray and then reached for another before he caught Dmitri’s gaze. “You won’t be. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

Dmitri shrugged. “I guess. I mean, it doesn’t matter. It’ll just be nice when people stop seeing me as some idiot kid.”

“You’re not an idiot kid,” Wilder started, but he stopped because he knew Dmitri just needed to vent. “So, did you see the new guy?” he asked quickly, changing the subject.

Dmitri laughed as he grabbed another bag of frosting. “You mean Adriano’s brother?” When Wilder nodded, Dmitri rolled his eyes and grinned. “Who hasn’t seen him. He had some diva tantrum at the bar last night and screamed at my aunt when she brought him a salad because it had pine nuts on it. She said he wasn’t drunk or anything either—just an asshole.”

Wilder winced, biting the inside of his cheek to keep his opinion to himself. But he knew Luca wasn’t going to endear himself to anyone in this city if he behaved like they owed him. “Do you know why he’s here?”

“Sonia said it’s some dumb white-boy, eat pray love shit. He’s trying to find himself. That’s what he told Raphael, anyway.”

Wilder blinked. “In *Savannah*?”

Dmitri burst into laughter. “I guess? I mean, I don’t know what he plans to find in himself renting all of Augustin House and insulting the kitchen staff at the Tavern but...whatever.”

Wilder felt a pang of sympathy for the guy, but only a little. This wasn’t the first time some lost, lonely soul wandered into Savannah looking for more than it had to offer, and it never ended well. It nearly killed Antoine—and Wilder even had a small part in that when the guy nearly choked to death on a berry from his cupcake.

And frankly it had been Antoine falling head over heels for Fitz—literally and bruisingly—that had saved him from himself.

Luca strolling in wanting the city to cater to him—to offer him something that wasn’t organic—was going to be a disaster. Wilder had never been the kind of man to enjoy watching train wrecks, but he was curious to see how it would go. He only hoped it wouldn’t ruin the poor man, who really did look totally lost.

## CHAPTER 6

DMITRI TOOK OFF AROUND NOON, and the shop was dead, so Wilder took his tea outside and moved to sit on the top step when he glanced across the street and saw someone huddling on the bus bench. The man was wearing all black, with long sleeves and a familiar gauzy scarf under the June sun, and Wilder felt his heart ache a bit for him.

He didn't like to pity people, but Luca Moretti seemed to be begging for it as he sat there like a starving puppy, arms clenched tight around his middle. On a whim, Wilder turned back inside and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, then spied his spare vanilla cupcake sitting out by the microwave.

He snagged it, then pushed the door open with his hip and glanced both ways across the road before crossing the asphalt, stopping a few feet from Luca's knee. The man didn't look up, but from the way he stiffened, Wilder knew Luca knew he was there.

"You look like you could use this."

Luca's shoulders hunched, and Wilder thought maybe he heard mumbling, but he couldn't be certain.

"I don't mind the sulking, but I'm also hard of hearing, so if you could sulk where I can see your mouth, it would help you get your point across."

Luca's head snapped up, and his gaze zeroed in on Wilder's hearing aids, then on his face. 'Sign?' he asked with one hand.

Wilder shrugged. “If you want.” He waited until Luca shifted over, then he sat, leaving a foot of space between them. “I can hear you like this, but I’m also fluent.”

“My brother thinks my ASL sucks, but I’m better at it than most of the people in my family.”

Luca’s voice was lighter than he expected—a little harder to hear, but not impossible this close. It would be, some day, he knew. Voices would go the way of the birds, and of song lyrics, and people talking on TV—lost to a sort of rumbling white-noise.

“I’m used to voicing here,” Wilder said. He offered out the water, and Luca took it, but he didn’t open the bottle, instead setting it between his feet. “You should drink that. The dehydration here is sneaky thanks to the humidity. You won’t notice until you’re passed out and someone’s calling an ambulance.”

Luca sighed, but he didn’t move to obey.

“Especially if you’re hung over.”

At that, Luca’s cheeks pinked. “Everyone thinks I was shit-faced last night.”

“Word has it, you yelled at the Tavern’s kitchen staff,” Wilder pointed out. “And the owner.”

Rolling his eyes, Luca flopped backward on the bench. “I was confused why they’d put pine nuts on a salad without mentioning it on the menu. I’m allergic—like, *seriously* allergic. The entire dish had to be re-made, but then I panicked because if they didn’t list the ingredients on the menu, I couldn’t be sure that they’d be careful enough.”

Wilder softened just a fraction. “You didn’t need to be a dick about it.”

“Yeah well, in case you haven’t heard, that’s apparently my thing,” Luca spat. “I tried to get a sandwich at the Italian food truck, and he said they were out. Of everything.”

Wilder’s lips twitched. “Is that so?”

“Then that Rugelach place,” he started, pronouncing it entirely wrong, “said they were closed for lunch and slammed the window in my face.”

Wilder bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing, because it wasn't entirely fair. But he also understood how his city could quickly become an army, ready to rise at the defense of anyone who posed a threat. Of course, Luca didn't seem like much of one to him. He was rich and spoiled, but he was lost and confused. He was a stray—really, and Wilder had always had a soft spot for those.

“You must be hungry.” He held out the cupcake and waited for Luca to take it. When he did, he reached over and plucked the cherry from the top, then held it out. “Eat this first, though. The last time a newcomer tried to bite into my cupcake without eating the strawberry first, he almost choked to death, and I don't see any wayward fireman here to save you. And I cannot do Heimlich.”

Luca stared at him, almost confused, then leaned forward and plucked the cherry from Wilder's fingers. With his teeth. They were white, sharp, and polished, and they grazed his skin as they drew the bit of fruit away from his hand.

Wilder's heart thumped wildly in his throat from how utterly and intensely unexpected it was. His gaze searched Luca's face almost desperately, but he found no mocking, and no seduction. Just something quiet and a bit off kilter.

“It's good,” Luca said, then peeled the wrapper from the side of the cupcake.

Wilder cleared his throat. “So, what are you doing out here besides starving on a bus bench?”

Luca sighed and bit into the cupcake. His eyes went wide with surprise, then he chewed a bit before swallowing. “I don't know. Booking a plane ticket, I guess.”

Wilder spied his phone on the bench next to him, and he frowned. “Giving up that easy?”

Luca scoffed. “This was a stupid idea. Me coming here,” he said, and took another bite and swallowing before he went



on. “Adriano left California and he was fucking miserable. The last time I’d seen him was in a parking garage, and he looked ready to throw himself off the cliffside of our brother’s vineyard. Then he disappears for three months and comes back practically engaged to this baker from some southern belle of a city, and the guy looks like he just spent six weeks in the presence of Jesus.”

Wilder almost choked. “Uh. That’s *not* what happened.”

“Oh,” Luca said darkly, then picked up the water and took a long drink. “I know. My friends very much enjoyed forwarding me those videos they made. But the fact remains, this place changed him.”

“And that’s important to you?” Wilder asked gently.

Luca balled up the wrapper, then shoved it into the pocket of his vest. “I fucking want that. I want... God, I want whatever *this* is to mean something.”

“That’s very vague,” Wilder pointed out, and Luca scowled so deeply, Wilder held up his hands in surrender. “I just mean, that is not a goal. Finding something that means something sounds like words on a Dove chocolate wrapper.”

Luca’s cheeks went faintly pink. “I want to be happy.”

“That’s... closer,” Wilder said, and he tried for a smile. His pity was only growing for this poor man—someone who probably had at least five years on him, but no depth at all. He had a feeling though, that all of Luca’s shallow soul was entirely for lack of trying. “What do you want to make you happy? Good sex?”

“That’s not what Adriano and Noah have,” Luca said, then flushed. “I mean... well, that’s not all they have. I didn’t ask about their sex, obviously. But you should see the way Adriano looks at him.”

“I have,” Wilder said gently. “It’s gorgeous.”

“People have that here.” Luca gestured across the street to the Tavern which was quiet on that late afternoon, hours before the dinner rush. “I want to know how.”

“I don’t think it’s Savannah,” Wilder said. “I mean, maybe it is, a little. But it’s also them.”

Luca bit his lip, then stared down at his hands. “And that’s why I should take off. Believe me when I say I’m not the sort of person who is going to get a happy ending like that.”

The words made Wilder’s gut twist uncomfortably. He was bitter—understandably so—and he was jaded. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to trust anyone else to fall in love, but he liked to believe that most people deserved happiness. And most people deserved to be loved. “You might be too hard on yourself.”

Luca scoffed quietly. “I mean, I already fucked up. I humiliated myself at the Manor by falling down the stairs, and I’m pretty sure Raphael only invited me out that night so he and his friends could make fun of me...”

“That doesn’t sound like him,” Wilder said with a frown.

Luca shrugged. “Why else would he?”

“Because he’s nice?” Wilder laughed when Luca looked so confused by the concept. “He really is a nice guy. He probably felt sorry for you.”

“God,” Luca said, dropping his face into his hands. “That’s even worse. Why can’t this be like the movies, you know? Like I rent some place in the middle of nowhere, I do some farming shit, things start to make sense. *I* start to make sense...”

Wilder reached out and gently touched his arm. “Life isn’t the movies, and you’re not in the middle of nowhere.”

“I know, but...”

Wilder paused, holding back a slight laugh at the thought running through his head, and he waited for Luca to look at him. “If you really want to try and find yourself on a farm, I might be able to help with that.”

Luca froze. “How?”

“I know a guy. He’s got some animals—it’s nothing big. You won’t be roping cattle or anything. I mean, it’s Savannah,

not the wilds of Montana.” Wilder’s lips twitched again. “But maybe it’ll help?”

Luca chewed on his lower lip, then sighed. “Okay. Right now, or...?”

Wilder laughed. “I have work. I don’t close up until six, but how about tomorrow? I’m closed on Thursdays for Market prep, but most of my stuff is already done so I could spare a few hours in the morning.”

Luca nodded, looking suddenly bright and elated. Wilder almost felt bad because he knew that spending half a day at Will’s farm was only going to prove that his indie film bullshit idea of finding himself in the dirt under his nails was only going to break his heart, but Wilder knew he had to do it. Luca seemed like the kind of person who needed to learn lessons the hard way, and Wilder had never shied away from that.

And apart from that, he also had a feeling Luca was a good person, underneath the confusion and defense. He had kind eyes—a lot like his brother—and his rough edges could be smoothed out with maybe a little attention and a little care.

“Are you allergic to anything?” he asked after a beat, and Luca rolled his eyes.

“Pine nuts.”

Wilder bit back a laugh. “I remembered that part. I mostly meant animals.” Luca shook his head, so he dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone, opening up a new contact. “I’ll text you, and I’ll be by to pick you up probably around nine.”

“Oh. Early,” Luca muttered.

“It’s a ranch.” He took his phone back, then shot off a quick smiling emoji before tucking it away in his pocket. “I could be making you do this at sunrise—I mean, if you wanted to do it right.”

Luca pulled a face. “I’ll get to bed early.”

Wilder stood, then bent over to pick up Luca’s empty water bottle, and he smiled. “See you bright and early.”

Luca's body deflated, but there was still a light in his eyes, and Wilder suddenly realized he didn't want to see that dimmed.

## CHAPTER 7

LUCA STARED at the mess in the kitchen sink with a sigh, lamenting that there weren't housekeeping services to make it disappear. And really, this was what he'd asked for. Self-reliance—and more than that, hard work. A little sweat, a few tears.

Maybe more than a few, if he let himself think about recent events.

The night before had been fine before he'd almost poisoned himself with the first bite of his salad, and he'd been gripped with panic when he realized his epi-pen was sitting in his shaving kit at the Manor, which would have taken too damn long for anyone to get. There was a fire station across the street, but he didn't trust a place he didn't know to be well equipped, and he wanted to find himself there, not die from anaphylactic shock in some tiny little bar.

He knew it was fear and anxiety that had set him off, then faint humiliation—again—when everyone at the bar was staring at him. So, he did what he did best—he stuck his nose in the air, told everyone to fuck off, and then he'd disappeared.

He hadn't expected the actual cold-shoulder the following morning, but by the time the cupcake baker found him, he knew his time was up. He'd been just seconds away from hitting the purchase button on a ticket home when the man had sat beside him. And Luca wasn't entirely sure what to do with everything the guy said to him, but he thought maybe the universe was giving him a sign.

Wilder was sweet. He was unlike most people Luca was used to dealing with. He looked late twenties or maybe early thirties that had aged well with laugh lines and soft eyes, and a gentle sort of beachy wave to his dark hair.

His voice was heavy with a sort of internal confidence that Luca knew he was lacking, and he outright admitted to pitying Luca for his sorry existence—not that he could blame the guy. He was just getting tired of being this caricature of himself, but he had no way to stop it without figuring out who the fuck he even was.

Once upon a time, he might have been an accountant. In school, he was good with math, and there was the thought of an MBA on the horizon. But he'd stopped after his bachelor's, and he'd gone to work at a pizza parlor, and that paid his shitty rent and gave him beer money—and it was all fine until Adriano showed up with his first seven-hundred-thousand-dollar paycheck and dropped more cash in Luca's account than he'd ever thought he'd see in his life.

Pietro taught him how to invest, and Adriano taught him what good art was supposed to look like. And Luca bought expensive clothes and designer shoes and hung out with people ten years younger than him because he thought it made him look good. He funded Gabby's law school entry because she was going to be so good at it, but also because she liked to fuck him without strings.

And that was who he was. In that moment, to that day, that's who he was.

His stomach twisted in on itself, and he turned his back on the dishes. He'd managed a weak pasta, though his sauce had promise if it marinated in the fridge for a few days. But he wanted to be more than a man with a fat bank account, soft scarves, and a good marinara recipe.

He locked the apartment behind him, feet snug in Birkenstocks that made him look like a tool—though he didn't give much of a shit considering his reputation couldn't be worse right then—and he took the stairs carefully. He meant to sneak out the front door when Raphael wasn't looking, but

Luca's heart stuttered when he found the other man standing leaning on a forearm crutch, his other arm folded over his chest.

"He lives," Raphael said.

Luca's cheeks flushed. "Look, I've already been told that I'm not wanted, so if you're standing here to rub it in..."

"You look like a man who needs a pedicure."

Luca's throat went tight. "What makes you say that?"

"Because your entire body is one long line of tension, and a foot massage can help that." Raphael leaned over the desk and came back with a second crutch, hooking the cuff on his arm before turning. He moved into the salon a bit farther, then turned when he realized Luca wasn't following. "If I promise to put up the closed sign, will you come along?"

Luca walked to the doorway, then stuttered to a halt. "Not to be a dick, but..."

"*Oh je,*" he moaned, turning all the way. "I'm not here to mock you or to embarrass you. You did that enough for yourself last night."

Luca felt his blush all the way to his toes. "So, what is this?"

"Kindness? Have you heard of it?" When Luca didn't move, Raphael walked all the way back, let go of a crutch, and clawed fingers into his shirt. He tugged Luca all the way in, then slammed the door, locked it, and reached for the little button on the open sign.

"Happy?"

Luca dragged a hand down his face. "Fine."

Raphael seemed satisfied enough, and he started back to a small room with two pedicure chairs and two short rolling chairs. He pushed his crutches against the wall, then straddled the lower chair and attached the liner and the magnetic drain before turning the water on. "Saddle up, cowboy."

“God, please don’t,” Luca begged, but he finally walked into the room and eased up onto the chair before leaning over to roll up the cuffs of his jeans. “Why are you like this?”

“Like what? Sweet, adorable, kind?” Raphael asked with a grin. He scooted over with his legs to a little cupboard and began to take out white packets of pedicure tools. “Or do you mean massive pain in the ass?”

“The second one. But...also the first?” Luca eased his feet into the water, hissing at the temperature, but after a moment, he felt knots in his calves start to ease.

When he dared to look back up, Raphael was back at his feet again, looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face. His eyes, a sort of soft blue, were narrowed. “People really aren’t nice to you?”

“People are nice when they want something from me,” he said with a shrug. “They’re nice when I have influence. That’s just how life works.”

“Not always,” Raphael said quietly. He turned the bubbles on, then pushed his hands into the water and grabbed both of Luca’s feet, digging his fingertips into the arches. It hurt, and he gasped, but suddenly his muscles went lax, and he sagged back against the massager that wasn’t moving. “Good?”

“Very,” Luca breathed out.

“I don’t normally do this. The owner, Jayden, he has me do his toes sometimes, but I don’t have fine motor skills with my fingers, so I could never get the polish right. But I’m great at the massage.”

“I can live with that,” Luca groaned when Raphael pushed his fingers in again. “He should let you do this always. Why don’t you?”

“Because touching most people’s feet is disgusting. But you seem like a clean man.”

“I’m glad you think so highly of me,” Luca deadpanned, but even as he said it, at the sight of Raphael’s little smile, he almost gave one back. He sank back a little more when



Raphael pulled his left foot out, and he opened one of the packages to begin on his cuticles.

“You have good feet. You get pedicures a lot, don’t you?”

“Every four weeks. I don’t usually do polish.” He groaned as Raphael set the tools aside and poured oil into his hands, digging in deeper than he had in the water.

“Shit. Remind me to tip you a hundred percent.”

“Of zero?” Raphael asked with a small laugh.

Luca opened his eyes. “What?”

“I don’t charge for this. This is not my job. I answer phones, and I deal with the bullshit that Jayden doesn’t have the patience to deal with. I like *that* job. This is for friends only.”

“We just met. And I was a massive asshole.”

“Yes,” Raphael said, dragging fingertips from his ankles to his knee, then back down again. “You were. I don’t think it was on purpose.”

“Everyone else did,” Luca said softly as Raphael lowered his foot into the water and began on the second. “I don’t handle fear well.”

“What were you afraid of?”

Luca swallowed thickly. “There weren’t pine nuts listed on the menu.”

“So you said. Loudly. To Sonia and then to the chef,” Raphael said with a small smirk. He dug into the edges of Luca’s nails, then reached for the oil again.

“I’m allergic,” he said after a beat. “*Really* allergic. I have an epi-pen, but I realized it was here—in my fucking shaving kit, and I was starving, and I panicked because I knew I couldn’t order anything else in case the kitchen was contaminated.”

Raphael’s hands stopped for a beat, then resumed the massage before easing his foot back into the water. He leaned

on the bowl, then grabbed Luca around the back of his calves and held tight. “You should have just said.”

“I was humiliated. Again. And panicking...and I don’t—” Luca heard his voice break, and he wanted to punch something—or maybe just give in and cry. He did neither, even though his throat ached like it was on fire. “I don’t belong here. I tried to leave, but that baker—Wilder—he stopped me.”

Raphael choked for a second. “He *stopped* you?”

“I was booking a ticket.” Luca leaned forward and shifted his feet in the rapidly cooling water. “I was sitting on a park bench like some pathetic kicked puppy, getting ready to confirm my purchase, and he shows up with a bottle of water and a goddamn cupcake. And somehow, he talks me into going to a *farm* tomorrow.”

Raphael stared at him a long time, and for a moment, Luca thought he was going to laugh, but the sound never came. Instead, he reached in the bowl, pulled the drain, then set Luca’s feet on a fresh towel before he started to pat them dry.

“Did I say something wrong?” *Again*, he added to himself.

Raphael looked up with soft eyes and shook his head. “No. I like Wilder.”

“Oh.” Luca sat back and tried to shift away from Raphael, who grabbed him by the ankles. “It wasn’t like that. He definitely wasn’t interested.”

Raphael’s eyes softened along with his smile, and he shook his head. “That’s not a surprise. The man has lived here for three years, and he’s never so much as looked at anyone that way. But that’s not what I meant.”

Luca sagged with relief, but he wasn’t really in a place to explore that feeling any deeper.

“I just mean he’s a good person.”

“That seems to be going around,” Luca said, and there was a touch of bitterness in his tone that made Raphael look directly at him. “That’s not my life, you know? That’s not where I came from.”

With a sigh, Raphael finished drying Luca's feet, then pushed back and reached for his crutches to stand. "See that room right there," he lifted his crutch and jabbed it toward a door at the far end of the room. "That's the lounge. Go sit down, and I'll bring something to drink."

"Like alcohol?"

Raphael chuckled. "Do you want alcohol?"

The truth was, yes. He did. He wanted to lubricate his awkward sober social skills with expensive gin, but that was what he was trying to escape. "Something else," he said, then slipped his feet back into his Birkenstocks and shuffled away.

He felt a little boneless and fatigued, but in the way a good massage had always done for him. It felt odd to not have any obligations in this moment—to shed his usual desire to impress someone long enough to want to stick around. The urge was still there, but he'd already humiliated himself beyond reason in front of this man, and Raphael still wanted to be his friend.

He knew he would drive himself up the damn wall if he continued to worry about it, so instead, he pushed through the door and found a quaint little sitting area with a sofa, love seat, coffee table, and a mounted TV. There was an essential oil diffuser in the corner that was turned off but still smelled faintly of rose, and the soft, yellow lights at the top of the ceiling were more soothing than the harsh fluorescents in the main shop.

He eased himself down into the soft leather, and he felt the cushion form around him gently. It was oddly decadent, and he wasn't expecting it, but he decided to indulge in that moment as his eyes closed and the rest of his body relaxed. He barely heard when Raphael moved back into the room, the clink of his crutches and the soft shuffling noise of his feet.

The sofa moved gently when Raphael sat, and Luca opened his hand but not his eyes when something humid and cool touched the back of his wrist. "You can't sleep here tonight. Your rent fee doesn't cover the salon."

Luca snorted, then finally looked at the bottle in his hand—something pale and fizzy with Turkish letters he recognized only from his month-long excursion to Istanbul when was attempting to procure art for his global display. He cracked the top and took a sip, and was startled by the sharp, subtle pear flavor. “This is good.”

“It better be. One of my friends ships it to me,” Raphael said. “It’s expensive.”

Luca squirmed. He wasn’t used to being the man people lavished with gifts—even something as small as this. He was never the person in that position to be pitied for his circumstance, and it was becoming a small, festering wound in his belly.

“Can you go upstairs at all?” Luca asked after a beat.

Raphael raised an eyebrow. “I’m not going to have sex with you.”

Choking on the swallow he’d just taken, Luca swiped his hand over his mouth in an attempt to regain some dignity. “I’m not *hitting* on you.”

“Not your type?” There was a slight edge to his voice that made Luca’s defenses rise.

“I... Are you trying to pick a fight?”

“I just don’t get you.” Raphael leaned forward and put his drink down. “You’re rich and gorgeous, you show up here saying you want to find love...”

“Wait, you *want* me to fall in love with you?” Luca felt rising panic until Raphael rolled his eyes.

“No,” he said plainly, then he laughed. “I don’t want you to fall in love with me.”

“Good, because I don’t plan to. And you’re completely wrong about me. That isn’t why I’m here.”

“You said you wanted what your brother got,” Raphael pointed out.

At that, he dragged a hand down his face before he put his own drink down and turned to face Raphael better. “That’s not what I meant. I wasn’t lacking in sex or relationships back home. I’m not looking for a Noah.”

Cocking his head to the side, Raphael drummed his fingers on his knee and met Luca’s gaze long enough to make him uncomfortable. “Do you even know what it is you want? Because my guess is no. My guess is you showed up here looking for answers to questions you weren’t even brave enough to ask yourself aloud.”

Luca bit the inside of his cheek, and he felt a bit too seen right then. “Why do you care? You don’t know me. Hell, I can’t even tell if you like me.”

“I like you. I mean, I feel sorry for you, but I like you.”

“That helps,” Luca said dryly.

“It is what it is.” Raphael let out a sigh and then reached for Luca’s knee, giving him a gentle pat. “Sometimes we earn pity. Maybe it’s a good way to motivate you into something more. Something better.”

Leaning his head back, Luca groaned softly. “Honestly?” he asked, and Raphael nodded. “You’re right. I don’t know what the fuck I’m looking for. I just...my brothers and sisters have these full lives. Even before Adriano met Noah, he had a good life. His boyfriend was an epic shithead, but Adriano never defined his worth by what people thought about him.”

“And you do?” Raphael’s voice was soft, and Luca had no defense against it.

He swallowed against a lump in his throat, and it took him a moment to answer. “It’s all I’ve ever had. Before any of us had money, I was totally content to work some bullshit pizzeria job. I was heading toward thirty and making just enough to cover my rent in some shitty apartment, and I was happy with it. I didn’t ever bother to want more, you know?”

“That’s not the worst life in the world,” Raphael pointed out. “Some might say it’s the life I’m living.”

“I just, I never had any passion. Adriano over-compensated for the years we spent barely above poor, and Pietro followed in his footsteps when he started making his own cash.”

“Sounds like it was a gift.”

“Yes,” Luca said, “but I didn’t do anything with it. I bought expensive cars and clothes, and I invested, and I tried to pretend like I understood art and culture. I was that douche on reality TV who doesn’t do anything with his life but has a platinum card with no limit while my siblings went out and made something of themselves.”

“And you think you’re going to find the answers to why you were lazy here in Savannah?” Raphael asked, and there was laughter in his tone—a bit mocking, but not entirely cruel.

“It’s somewhere that made a difference for my brother,” Luca defended.

Raphael sighed and shifted over, laying his hand on Luca’s arm and holding tight. “I think Adriano was ready for whatever change he needed. I’m not convinced you’re there yet.”

Luca’s entire body sagged, and suddenly he felt closer to tears than ever. It felt like Raphael was ripping away his one chance to find something that made his life feel like it mattered. “He should have let me go home.” His voice was a soft whisper, and he couldn’t even bring himself to say Wilder’s name. Wilder, the man who was indulging him in his fucking madness tomorrow morning.

“I disagree.” Raphael gently pulled his hand back, then took a long drink from his bottle. “I think you decided something real, for the first time in your life, and right now you need to learn patience.”

Luca scoffed, but only because the truth hurt, and he wasn’t sure his wounded pride could take anymore blows for the day. “Thank you.”

Raphael laughed. “I’m sure you don’t mean that.”

Luca did though, and he sat up straight and looked him in the eyes. “Yeah, I do. No one ever told me what I needed to

hear. They just blew smoke up my ass so I'd keep them swimming in pocket money and booze. That life sucked, and I need to maybe be uncomfortable for a while. So, thank you. Okay?"

"Okay," Raphael said softly.

Luca rubbed at his eyes, the ache still there, but they were dry. "I wish I could invite you up."

"Well, for the record, I *can* go upstairs. I have cerebral palsy, and most of the time I prefer my wheelchair because my legs are very stiff and spastic. But I can go up and down stairs on my crutches when I need to. It has to be really worth my time though, and I meant what I said when I told you I don't want you to fall for me."

"*For the record,*" Luca shot back, though his tone was softer and defeated, "I wasn't inviting you up for that reason. A new friend just told me I need to make changes, so I'm trying this new thing where I don't use my money or blow jobs to get people to stick around. I make a really good marinara sauce though, so I thought you might want to come up for dinner one night."

"I fucking love pasta," Raphael said, and maybe there was something in his voice just humoring Luca, but there was also something a bit more. "I can't have gluten though. I have to manage my seizures with keto."

"Give me ten minutes on google," Luca swore, because he was feeling a little bit desperate to hang on to the one solid thing he'd built in that last day. "I can make it work."

Raphael bit his lip, then he smiled. "Okay. I trust you. But if you have questions, promise to ask first."

"I swear. Later this week?"

Raphael's grin softened, and he nodded. "I'll bring the wine."

## CHAPTER 8

WILDER WOKE with an all-too familiar pressure in his ears—a rushing sound like water rising and rising until it fell with a roar like a waterfall. And the entire room went silent. He lifted his hand, rubbing his middle finger and thumb together by the shell of his ear, and he could hear something—faint and far off. Which meant he knew what was coming next.

Rolling onto his side, the world swam, but instead of correcting itself, the room began to rock like he was on a boat over stormy waters. Side to side, then around.

And around.

Logically, he knew it was his eyes dancing, shaking from side to side, which threw off his entire equilibrium. It meant more of the cochlea was dying, another bout of rushing white noise took with it a decibel of his hearing.

Another collection of sounds gone.

He remembered the day he lost the birds. He had already moved to Savannah, and it was a morning a lot like this one, with spinning rooms and shaking eyes, and eventually a bout of nausea that took forty-five minutes to clear up. His hearing returned in small bursts until he could hear the coffee brewing as he stood next to his percolator, and he could hear the sound of his bare feet tapping along the wood floors.

He didn't think much of it, until he was outside with Jayden on the bench near the fountain in the park square—both of them drinking some of Adam's intense Israeli coffee.

“God, do the birds really have to be this loud?”



And for a moment, Wilder thought he was joking, until he looked over at a group of finches fighting over what looked like an old pile of kettle corn someone had abandoned at the Market. They must have been loud—they must have been obnoxious, and Wilder had lost them. He waited a while—a few days, straining his ears every time he set foot outside, but there was nothing left of them except the movement in the trees, and the way they begged at his feet in the alley for cake crumbs.

He mourned those small losses—in his own private way. He'd never wanted to complain about it, never wanted to admit that there were things he didn't want to give up. People already looked at him with pity, and admitting that there were things he wished he didn't have to live without seemed validated every time a hearing person would tell him, 'I love music so much that if I ever went deaf, I'd probably kill myself.'

He never did have a response to that. It was hard to decide what to say when a person said death was preferable to the way he existed. So, he'd smile, and he'd walk away, and he wouldn't talk about how much he wished he could put on his old nineties playlist and let the lyrics of his angsting teenage soul remind him that things were better now.

Things had settled after the birds, but he couldn't help wondering what he was going to lose next as he laid there, watching the ceiling spin alongside the fan. His stomach twisted, but he breathed through the nausea.

The vertigo eased a little as he threw his arm over his eyes and regulated his breathing—in through the nose, out through the mouth. It rarely lasted over an hour. He'd be late, but he'd still have time for Luca, though he honestly would be surprised if Luca hadn't talked himself out of the excursion by now.

He knew Will's little ranch wasn't going to give that man anything. The animals didn't hold the secrets to the universe. At best, Kevin the peacock was hiding a bit of sociopathic tendencies and a thirst for human blood—but even that was

generally curbed by a handful of bird seed and a few pieces of dog kibble.

Luca was searching for something that didn't exist in Savannah.

Wilder normally wouldn't involve himself, but something in Luca's face compelled him to help. Maybe it was just that he was the lost man once. He was the one who had wandered into Savannah without any fucking clue what to do with himself, and now he was this. He had integrated into something like a family—far better and kinder than his own had ever been. And the least he could do was pay it forward.

And he certainly didn't mind looking while he did it.

Luca was a disaster, but a gorgeous one.

Taking another breath, Wilder peeled his arm away and saw that the room had mostly righted itself. His ears didn't feel as full, and he could hear himself walk as he stood up from the bed and made his careful way into the bathroom. A hot shower usually got him the rest of the way there, and as he stood under the spray, he let the warmth ease him into a state of relaxation.

His cock stiffened a little, and he dragged the heel of his palm over his length, drawing it the rest of the way hard. It had been years—seven, to be exact—since anyone had touched him. He'd been twenty-two the night Scott had put his hands on Wilder for the last time, and before that, it had been so long since he felt any pleasure from anyone.

It hadn't been that way at first, but by the time Scott was being carted off to jail, Wilder had lost all sense of what it was like for a partner to want him to feel good. He liked taking care of himself, though. He liked wrapping his hand around his cock and stroking because he knew himself. He spent years recovering from his wounds—physical and mental—and he refused to lose his own sexual awareness to the monster that Scott had become.

He was no stranger to toys now and no stranger to jerking off. He knew how hard to hold himself, how fast to move his

hand. He pressed the side of his head to the wall, bracing himself on his shoulder, then used his other hand to gently cup his balls and roll them in his palm. His temperature rose, and his lips parted with a soft gasp he could feel but not hear.

The water drowned out most of what noise was left to him, but he didn't care. It was warm, it was comfort. He liked the man he was, and that was erotic in itself. His hand moved faster, his eyes squeezed shut, and just before his orgasm lifted and crested, Luca's image flashed behind his eyelids.

Just a quick moment of him there, cheeks pink from the sun, head bowed, long fingers peeling away at a cupcake wrapper.

Wilder came with a soft cry rippling along his throat as his come painted the walls, and he took a startled step back at what he'd done. He couldn't remember the last time he'd come to the vision of anyone else. He had carefully trained himself to enjoy sensation—refusing to let his mind be occupied with another body, because that was where Scott had taken advantage. He'd become Wilder's entire world, and Wilder had worked his ass off to make sure that never happened again. It meant cutting off sexual desire from other people, and it had worked.

Until now.

Until it hadn't.

His fingers shook as he washed himself, then the wall, and he stepped out of the shower and wrapped in a towel like it could shield him from the sudden world-shaking thought. He might like Luca. Maybe not as a person—the man was a mess, and he didn't know what was behind all of that chaos. But he was good looking enough that Wilder had been dragged out of his self-imposed sexual isolation long enough to notice.

It was terrifying and dangerous. He should probably text and cancel, except...

That was the last thing he wanted.

Dressing in jeans and a t-shirt, he sprayed himself with sun block, ran a comb through his hair, then snagged his phone

and moved to the kitchen for coffee. His adrenaline had settled into something softer and more manageable as he set the mug under the pod stream, then he flicked on his phone screen, and his heart twisted in his chest.

He kept in bare contact with his father and a bit more than that with his sister—but when she texted, it was either that she was in trouble or there was drama.

Willow: Dad in for MRI, feel sick

Wilder: What did they say?

Willow: no result yet text soon

Wilder: Keep me posted.

He set the phone down and tried not to feel the old urge to panic and abandon ship, rushing back to their sides because his mother had trained him to respond when she needed a link to the hearing world. But he was done with them now. He had shed their bonds and reclaimed his life for himself apart from her claws and Scott's hands, and he wasn't going to give that up now.

His parents were older. Older parents got sick. If his dad was at the hospital, it was the right place for him to be. It was not his job to care anymore—and over the years, they hadn't bothered to even *try* and earn his help.

He knew the guilt would eat at him, but it was something he'd been working toward for years. The last time he'd even engaged his mother was when the farm flooded. She had been beside herself with worry, trying to force Wilder to leave his bakery and handle the mess. When he refused, he'd dealt with strings of texts that went from begging to telling him she hoped he'd never come home again, but he didn't give in. Eventually, she managed the insurance papers on her own, and it was tacit proof for both her and Wilder that he wasn't really needed. He could move on, and no one's life would fall apart.

And one day, he swore, he would stop letting her have any control over his emotional state. One day, there would be true

and actual silence between himself and his family, and he would be able to breathe easy. But for now, relying on his own strength was enough.

Wilder finished getting ready, then sent a text to Luca letting him know he was on his way. He waited a bit, to see if the other man was going to cancel, but he got a thumb's up emoji in response, so he shot a text to Will that he was leaving, then jumped in his car and headed over.

Wilder pulled up next to the sporty little ride that he knew belonged to the only man in the city who bothered to bring a convertible to Savannah during the rainy season, and he shook his head with a grin as he let himself in the main doors. The Augustin gift shop at the end of the hall was still dark and closed, but the salon doors were open, and he saw Raphael behind the desk, bent over, picking something up off the ground.

He waited until the other man sat back up, then smiled. "Morning."

Raphael set his elbow on the desk and laid his chin on his curled knuckles. "Dragging our guest out kicking and screaming?"

Wilder couldn't help a laugh. "He's not that bad, is he?"

Raphael shrugged. "I think there's promise—he just needs to figure himself out on his own. Not that I can judge. I think people gave me more of a pass because of the wheelchair."

Wilder wrinkled his nose, but he had a feeling it was true. The residents of Savannah meant well, but they fell on the side of over-compensation. None of them bothered to learn ASL, but Remi had set up a captions screen for the Fourth of July show the year before that attempted to auto describe the fireworks sounds. The teenagers found the gibberish hilarious, and Wilder felt both singled out and touched all at the same time.

They were better about it now, but he knew why Luca wasn't getting a pass from most of the historic district locals.

"Well, maybe today will change his mind."

“You mean if Kevin doesn’t murder him?” Raphael asked with his brows lifted.

Wilder chuckled. “Something like that.”

Raphael drummed his fingers on the desk, then met Wilder’s gaze. “Are you trying to convince him to go or to stay?”

“I—” And then he stopped, because before his shower that morning, he knew the answer. He didn’t think Luca was going to find what he was looking for in Savannah, but maybe the distance between his old life and now could help him find what he was looking for in himself. Or, at the very least, give the poor man some direction.

But now...

He wasn’t sure, because he didn’t know what *he* wanted out of it. And although small, Luca felt like a threat to the carefully crafted bubble Wilder had built to protect himself from ever being at risk again.

“He’s fragile,” Raphael said, so softly Wilder mostly had to read it off his lips, which was more difficult than most people, thanks to his accent. “He’s a good person, I think. Deep down.”

Wilder nodded, but he wasn’t sure he needed that sort of convincing. “I’m not going to hurt him. I think he just needs a dose of reality.”

“Well, I can’t argue there,” Raphael said with a smirk. “You text me if things go very wrong.”

Wilder laughed and rapped his knuckles on the top of the counter, then backed up and headed for the stairs. When he got to the landing, he saw the door to the main room cracked open, so he knocked and pushed in a little more, poking his head around the side.

He’d never been in Augustin House, except for the shops downstairs, and he was surprised to find the place really did resemble a little apartment. There was a kitchenette, something like a living room, and in the back, a bedroom that he could see through the open door.

Luca was there, bent over at the table tapping on his laptop, and he glanced over his shoulder with a slight flush. ‘One minute,’ he signed with his hand before resuming typing.

Wilder had forgotten the sheer comfort of having someone around him who spoke his language more fluently than Jayden’s fumbling attempts to learn through Wilder, YouTube, and osmosis. Wilder loved it about his friend—the effort he put into it, but Jayden’s brain wasn’t wired for languages that way, and often it was more of a struggle than anything else.

The way Luca’s fingers flicked through the air, the effortless sign like he was just using it, not trying to make it something specifically *for* Wilder—it left something warm in his chest. He’d avoided the Deaf community for years, still struggling with his right to belong after hearing for most of his life. But he felt a connection now, through Luca who had given space to Adriano in their hearing family to be Deaf. Luca was a reminder that not everyone was like his mother. That there was space for him, even amongst all the hearing people of Savannah.

Wilder breathed through those thoughts, pushing them aside, then his gaze roamed over the kitchen, which was a mess. It smelled a little stale and sour—like old dishes and tomatoes that were starting to rot, and there were sauce stains on the small stove, and a couple of half-eaten plates of dinner shoved to the side.

“You have a maid, don’t you?”

Luca looked up, his eyes wide and startled. ‘No,’ he signed, then flushed and shrugged. “They’re called housekeepers, and yeah, but not here. I know how to clean my own mess.”

Wilder glanced back at the mess, then at him again. “Do you?”

“I’ve been—” Luca started to defend, then he scowled and went back to his work.

“Busy?”

Wilder laughed when Luca glared at his computer screen, and since it looked like this was going to take a minute, he moved to the sink and began to organize the dishes. It was small and cramped, but he made space and got everything rotting shoved into the disposal, flicking it on and feeling as the vibrations under his fingers stuttered, then smoothed out as it all went down the drain. He rinsed everything and stacked it, and when he looked back up, Luca was staring at him with something like mortification on his face.

‘I *know* how to wash dishes,’ Luca signed.

‘Good.’ Wilder rinsed his hands, then swiped them on a dish towel before approaching the other man. ‘You can wash them when you get home. We should head out, Will’s waiting for us.’ He took a quick look at Luca’s outfit—jeans that probably cost more than his monthly rent, and a t-shirt that was thin enough to show his nipples, but probably on purpose. It wasn’t the best for being outside, but as long as he was wearing sun block, it would do. He led the way to the door, then waited on the top step as Luca locked up.

“What are we doing out there?” he asked aloud as Wilder headed out the front door and to his car.

“I don’t know. I told Will you were looking to get your hands dirty, so he said he had plenty of things that’ll mess up your pretty nails.”

Luca glared again as he got in the passenger seat and slammed the door. “I’m not going to be ashamed for the things I like.”

At that, Wilder flushed, because he hadn’t meant it to be cruel. His friends all had a sharp sense of humor, and nothing was sacred. It was just too easy to forget that Luca hadn’t built up defenses against them. When people attacked Luca—even under the guise of humor, Wilder was pretty sure they meant every word.

“Have you had one of Jayden’s manicures yet?”

Luca glanced at him like he wasn’t sure Wilder was being serious or not, and there was something impossibly young in



the line of his face, even if he was older. He wasn't stunted—at least, Wilder didn't think he was. More like he'd spent a lot of his life lost in the shadow of siblings, from above and below.

"I haven't done one in forever," he went on when it was obvious Luca wasn't going to answer him. "Last year during a...bad anniversary, he gave me one for free as a way to help me de-stress."

Luca's eyes widened. "Bad anniversary?"

Wilder swallowed heavily, speeding up as they hit the open mountain road. "Yeah—it's not something I like to talk about, and Raphael was really good about it." Wilder bit his lip, then sighed. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings before. I don't think there's anything wrong with that type of self-care."

"Girlie shit, you mean?" Luca shot back.

Wilder blinked. "Did you say *girlie* shit?"

"I've heard it before," Luca said with a huff.

Wilder shook his head. "That isn't what I meant. Jesus, you're defensive." He felt his own hackles rising, so he fell silent, and out of the corner of his eye, watched Luca wrap his arms around his middle and turn his gaze out the window.

For the first time since seeing the sorry man sitting on that bus bench, he wondered if maybe he should have just let him get the damn ticket and go. There was so much going on in his head, so much he obviously couldn't explain. Wilder had never considered a life of privilege could be a prison for someone—but clearly Luca had suffered something.

He knew all too well what it was like to feel undervalued in your own world. He was a commodity, a tool to his mother and nothing else. He'd ceased being a child to her and existed as a communication device. He'd seen the horror and pity on other Deaf parents' faces when he told him what growing up with her was like—but it only served to remind him that he had the short end of the stick. His father loved him, but he never stood up to his wife. His sister loved him, but only

quietly where she wouldn't be encouraged to step on Wilder's back to achieve her own goals.

His therapist called it abuse, but the word still felt wrong on his tongue. He didn't know if it was because she was his mother or if it was because he believed he should be stronger than her sharp words, but it was a weak spot he'd probably always have.

Even this many years later, and these many miles away, her grip on him had never fully let go.

And it was obvious Luca understood that—in some way. But he was only just now trying to find out who he was in all that mess, and Wilder wasn't sure anyone in his little friendship community was strong enough to help him through it.

He made the turn up the ranch drive, the road a little rough, but Liam had been good about keeping it graded in the summer. Will had bought two dairy cows and a couple of horses, and he was offering riding lessons to some of the seasonal tourists in addition to the milk products he had set up in a little market stand right at the edge of his paddock.

It was never busy, but it was always open if someone need a get-away, and there was no better place to start than there.

“So, you know these guys?” Luca asked, his voice deep and rumbling in the silence between them.

Wilder's hearing hadn't fully come back since his vertigo attack, but with his hearing aids, he could make out most of his words in the car. “We'll be hanging out with Will today, but his husbands might be around. Or well, Isaac might be.”

“*Husbands?*” Luca asked.

Wilder didn't think there was judgment in his tone, so he shrugged. “I mean, not legally, but yes. Isaac works downtown, and Liam has a mechanic shop about a mile up the road.” He pulled up next to Will's truck and put the car in park. “Will is sort of... he just does whatever strikes his fancy.”

“Sounds familiar,” Luca said, but he didn’t sound happy about it.

“Not what you were looking for?”

“I wanted to find some sort of direction. And I know that makes me sound like some middle-aged white woman in some Venetian villa after her second divorce, okay?”

Wilder’s lips twitched. “Okay.”

“But I actually am...” He stopped and let out a frustrated growl, dragging hands through his hair and disordering it with all the product. He looked wild and a little terrified, and somehow it made him even more attractive, which sent Wilder’s stomach into a spin. “I don’t think I’m going to find that missing piece of me on a fucking farm. I just wanted to meet some people and find out how they managed it.”

At that, Wilder softened entirely. It was the first time Luca said anything that made sense, the first time he spoke with real substance. “The fact that Will does whatever he wants doesn’t mean he spent his life like you. I don’t know him that well, but we’ve spent some time together, and I know he used to be a college professor before his husband left him. Then his dad died, and he inherited this piece of a preserve a couple hours from here where he herded Scottish cows and did rafting tours on the Chattahoochee.”

“And then he got married to two men and bought a ranch outside of Savannah?” Luca asked, only slightly mocking.

“Something like that. I think Will does whatever he wants because his life has meaning outside of traditional work.”

Luca sighed and ran his fingers through his hair again, this time putting it flatter. He had that effortless bedhead look of a man years younger than he was, and Wilder wondered if there was any real, lived life inside him.

“I don’t know if I want that.”

Wilder laughed and reached over, gently squeezing Luca’s shoulder. “I didn’t ask you out here so you could find a way to be like Will. You said you wanted to get your hands dirty, and this just seemed like a good start.”

Licking his lips, Luca's gaze moved out the front windshield, then back to Wilder before lifting his hands. 'Fine. Let's do this.'

Wilder smiled and opened his door, climbing out and not bothering to wait and see if Luca was going to follow.

## CHAPTER 9

LUCA HAD NEVER BEEN SO grateful to see a bag of frozen peas before in his life, and it also might have been the first time he wanted to cringe as an incredibly attractive man was reaching for his dick. The pain of taking a cow's hoof to the balls was something he had never imagined before, and as embarrassed as he should have been for turning his head and vomiting what little breakfast he'd managed that morning, there wasn't anything he could have done.

The only thing saving him in that moment was the fact that no one was laughing. Wilder looked horrified, and Will looked both resigned and apologetic as he managed to corral Dottie into what he called the 'shame corner' of the barn—a little fenced off area that had blankets and a nice fat salt lick.

Luca hadn't had much time to investigate any of it before disaster struck.

Will had met them outside at the paddock gate, looking a little bit like a lumberjack with his flannel shirt and his wash of grey-streaked hair. His thick beard stretched around his big grin as he extended his hand, and he seemed enthusiastic to show Luca around.

They got as far as the barn entrance when he heard a horrible squawking sound, then the cow went running like she'd been spooked. She was coming right at him, and he attempted to get out of the way, but he managed to be at the exact right angle at her backside when she kicked out.

He heard Wilder make a noise and Will shout, "*No!*" but he didn't understand why until he was suddenly on the ground,

entirely unable to take a full breath.

The pain radiated down to his toes, and for a moment, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get up again. Eventually, though, Wilder got him up to a bench just inside the building, and Will hurried out, returning with frozen peas that sat resting against his aching crotch and soothing it less than he'd hoped.

"I think you should go to the ER," Wilder said after a beat.

Luca's entire face went hot. "Seriously?"

"I have a really good friend who works there," Wilder insisted, and Luca had a vague memory of Raphael saying the same thing.

As horrifying as the idea was, Luca thought it might be a good one. He'd heard plenty of terrifying stories involving dick and balls drama, and he wasn't sure he wanted to take the risk. But his reputation was already at an all-time low from his allergy freak out, and he wasn't quite sure he wanted to add to it. Right now, he was tempted to haul ass to the airport for a first-class ticket back to his superficial, pointless life where at least his genitals weren't at risk.

"Trust me," Wilder said softly, and when Luca didn't answer, he moved off the bench and crouched in front of him so Luca couldn't miss his hands when he signed. 'Trust me. I'll go with you.'

Luca groaned, his head falling back, and he dragged a hand down his face. When he looked back down, he realized he wasn't going to be able to tell him no. 'I guess my time at the farm is over anyway.'

He was surprised at the look of utter relief on Wilder's face as he stood up and motioned to where Will was standing at the fence scolding a preening peacock who was busy trying to eat one of the blankets.

"We're going to take off," Wilder said, tapping Will on the shoulder. "I'm taking him to Aksel."

Will looked heartbroken. "I'm really sorry. Kevin's always been a giant dick, and Dottie's usually the sweetest."

Luca waved him off with a weak hand. “I get it. She’s a cow and she didn’t know.” It was a little bit a lie—but Luca didn’t exactly have experiences with farm animals, and he supposed on some level, he probably deserved it.

“Do me a favor and text Aksel—let him know we’re on our way,” Wilder said, then walked back over and offered Luca a hand up.

He still ached. It was painful enough that walking made him feel like he was going to be sick, but he was able to make it out of the barn at a glacial pace, and Wilder supported him to the car.

“The hospital’s only a few minutes down the road,” Wilder said. He reached over and took Luca’s hand. “You can squeeze if it hurts.”

“Not that kind of pain,” Luca told him—and it wasn’t. It wasn’t a sort of sharp, surprising sting. It was a blunt ache that consumed his lower half, and he felt a moment of terror like maybe that cow really had done some damage. “It...it feels like there’s something wrong.”

Wilder’s face paled, which wasn’t a good sign—nor was the way he sped up down the winding road. He got them there in minutes, as he’d promised, and he came to a sudden halt in a parking spot near the ER doors.

Luca managed to lever himself out of the car, but Wilder was there a second later and helped him up the ramp and inside where a small, older nurse at the desk looked at them with expectation on her face.

“Farm animal incident,” Wilder said.

“Kevin again?”

Luca didn’t hear Wilder’s response over the click of the door lock and the humming panic in his hears. He was grateful she hustled them both past the normal triage, and got him right to a room where he was able to lie on his back and take the pressure off his lower half.

“The doctor will be just a minute, dear,” the woman said.

“Thanks.” Wilder touched his hand again. “You want me to go?”

“While some strange, terrifying doctor pokes around my dick?” Luca asked, voice high and tight with anxiety.

“Terrifying, yes. Strange...debatable,” came a voice from the doorway. Luca lifted his head to see a very tall man with soft blond hair and wrinkles near his blue eyes. He was smiling, holding a stethoscope in his hand as he shut the door with his knee.

“Literally no one would debate that,” the man who had to be Aksel said with a grin. “You must be Kevin’s latest victim.”

“I’m horrified that this is a thing,” Luca ground out, holding tight to Wilder’s hand. He wasn’t sure the offer from the car still applied, but he was going to take advantage of it.

“I’m Dr. Aksel Alling, by the way.” He extended his hand, and as Luca took it, he realized it was a prosthetic.

He tried not to falter, though he wasn’t sure if he succeeded because the pain was still there—as present as ever. “Luca Moretti.”

Aksel’s gaze snapped up. “Adriano’s brother.”

Luca covered his face with his free hand. “Please don’t put this on Twitter.”

“I have no desire to be sued to oblivion for violating HIPAA,” Aksel said cheerfully. He hooked his rolling chair with his foot, then lifted it until he was at the height of the exam table, and he sat. “Will texted me about the incident, so I won’t ask you to relive it, but I’m well aware that cows have a lot of strength, and they can damage delicate parts of the body.” He sounded more like a doctor suddenly, which was both worrying and soothing all at the same time.

“I’m scared there’s something actually wrong. It hurts. It *still* hurts.”

Aksel hummed, then stood again. “I need to examine you—which I assume you know. Do you want Wilder to stay?”



Yes, his brain said, but it didn't feel like that was his question to answer. None of this was Wilder's fault, and they weren't friends. They were barely acquaintances, and at this point, Luca was nothing more than a walking disaster. "You don't need to."

Wilder hesitated, but eventually he nodded and slowly detached from Luca's hand. "I'll be in the lobby, so if you need me..."

Luca shook his head, even as every fiber of his being was crying for Wilder not to leave him alone. He felt ridiculous—he felt like a child, nothing like a man of forty-three who should have had his shit together long before this. It was humiliating—which seemed to be the theme of his trip since leaving California.

But he couldn't bring himself to call Wilder back. He closed his eyes and waited for the door to click shut, then breathed out, chest shuddering with the effort. "So, you want me to just, like..."

"Pants down to the ankles," Aksel said.

He bent low and then pulled out a sheet, shaking it before laying it over Luca's middle. Luca's hands trembled a little as they fumbled with the button and zipper, but he managed to wriggle them off in spite of the pain, and then scooted all the way up until only his knees hung off the sides of the table. "Is this uh...good?"

"It's fine for now." Aksel gripped the end of the sheet, then met his gaze. "You're going to be okay."

Luca's eyes went hot. "Right...but if there's something actually wrong..."

"There's a top urologist with an office about ten minutes down the road, and he can take care of anything I can't. I don't think there's anything wrong with you, though."

Luca blinked, but he didn't think he was going to be able to hold back tears. The last few days had ravaged him, and now this... "It hurts." His voice was barely a whisper, and he hated the look on Aksel's face from it.

“It’s supposed to hurt. You don’t take a cow hoof to the balls and walk away like it was nothing. Especially when that little shit Kevin is behind it.”

Luca’s eyes widened, but his tears started to recede. He flinched when Aksel put on his gloves, then lifted the sheet, but the doctor didn’t touch him. Yet. “So, he’s done this before?”

“He usually tries to peck people’s eyes out...or runs them off the road,” Aksel said. He bunched the sheet up at Luca’s waist, then laid a hand on his thigh. “I’m going to touch you, okay? And I’m going to try and be delicate. I don’t want you hurting more than you already are.”

Luca bit his lip and nodded, then held his breath as he felt Aksel’s cool fingers manipulate his dick. Once upon a time, this might have even been a fantasy of his. A tall, gorgeous, blond doctor with a hint of an accent and a thousand-watt smile leaning in to kiss his dick better? But right now, the thought of getting hard again made his stomach roll.

As it was, Aksel’s delicate touch felt like he was being rammed all over again, and he only just managed not to cry out.

“So, the truth is, you *can* break your penis, and you can rupture testicles,” Aksel said, gently cupping his balls and manipulating them with his fingers. “Fortunately for you, I don’t think you’ve done either. You’re going to be sore for a while, but there’s no swelling, and everything seems intact.”

Luca swallowed thickly. “Oh.”

“Now, if you ejaculate and there’s blood...”

Paling again, Luca pushed himself up onto his elbow. “*Seriously?*”

“If there’s blood in your urine, or if you wake up and either your penis or your testicles are swollen, I want you to come back in right away.”

Luca groaned and dropped his head down to the thin paper covering the table. “Great.”

“It could be worse, Mr. Moretti.” He snapped his gloves off as Luca managed to get his boxers and jeans back on without too much more pain. “I am going to write you a script for some of the good shit. It does mean no more trips to the Tavern to yell at unsuspecting chefs...”

Luca flushed hotly. “I’m fucking sorry for that, okay? But I have a severe allergy and they didn’t put pine nuts on the damn menu. I panicked.”

Aksel froze, hands poised above the trash as he was throwing his paper towel away. “Really?”

“I’m not *actually* an asshole. Or well, mostly,” Luca muttered, dragging a hand through his hair.

Aksel’s face softened. “Ah well, aren’t we all just a little bit? My point still stands. I mean, you’re welcome to yell at whoever you want, but no drinking on these meds. And you might want to stay home and rest for a day or two. Frozen peas will work wonders for the pain.”

Luca nodded miserably and waited for Aksel to tap a few lines out onto his tablet. “I uh...thanks? For not making this more embarrassing as it already is.”

Aksel turned and looked at him for a long moment, then smiled even softer. “I’d share with you some of the shit I’ve gotten up to, but if you stick around long enough, you’ll hear the stories. And I *am* an asshole, Mr. Moretti. I’m a giant asshole, but I’m also a doctor, and I’m not going to make this whole experience worse for you. My job is to make it better.”

It wasn’t entirely comforting. He was glad the man was professional, but Luca couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to have people give a shit the way Aksel did simply because they wanted to—simply because he was worth it. He wasn’t sure anyone in his life cared for him that way.

His family loved him—there was no doubt about that. They let him get away with his baby of the family bullshit nearly all of his life, but he was starting to see that the way they enabled him felt like maybe they just didn’t care enough to encourage him otherwise. It was a painful, stark realization

to admit that he had no one. Not really. Not the way the people in Savannah did.

Adriano had visited and claimed a piece of that for himself, but Luca didn't think it took him publicly humiliating himself and getting his dick almost knocked off by a cow. He didn't know where he'd gone so fucking wrong, but somewhere, the path had diverged, and he'd taken the wrong fork.

"Listen, I'm going to call this in to the pharmacy, and I have a friend who works there, so I'm going to have him run this by the Augustin when it's done. It'll be faster that way."

Luca frowned. "Why?"

"Because, like I just told you, you need to be in bed." Aksel rose and approached him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Rest will make it better quicker. And next time you head out to Will's farm, wear a cup."

"There's no fucking way I'm going back out there," Luca grumbled as he reached for the door.

Behind him, Aksel laughed. "Yes, well, that's what they all say, Mr. Moretti. Safe travels."

Luca walked out of the room, and most definitely didn't look back to see the kind of smile Aksel wore on his face.

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LUCA APPRECIATED that Wilder didn't say anything on the drive back to the Augustin, because the last thing in the world he wanted was to answer any questions. He sat in the car a few moments as the engine idled, and then he turned and offered a tense sort of grimace that was meant to be a smile.

"Sorry."

Wilder's eyes widened. "Sorry?"

Luca wasn't sure if he was surprised or trying to understand him, so he raised his hands to sign. 'Today was not what I expected.'

Wilder's entire body heaved with a sigh. 'Please don't apologize for something that wasn't your fault. Sometimes life isn't kind to people.'

'How many people go through something like this?' he couldn't help but wonder.

Wilder's lips twitched. 'In my experience, just one. His name is Antoine, and if you stay long enough, I'm sure you'll meet him.'

And that was the real question, wasn't it? How long did he plan to stay? How long would he subject himself to this if it was obviously getting him nowhere? He felt like a moron, and he wanted to curl up in bed, sleep until the pain in his dick didn't make him want to vomit, and then go home. Home wasn't necessarily good for him, but at least he knew what to expect from the people there. And at least they knew what to expect from him.

'Don't give up,' Wilder signed when he had Luca's attention again. 'Please.'

There was a soft pleading in his eyes that Luca found impossible to deny. He licked his lips, then leaned his head back on the headrest and tried not to move his lower half too much. 'I just need a good night's sleep.' And hopefully to wake up without any ball swelling or pissing blood, which still scared the hell out of him.

'I was going to invite you to the Farmer's Market this Saturday,' Wilder signed. 'Not a good idea now, but there's another one next weekend. Stay for that, okay? And then if it's still just a big pile of shit, go home.'

A week. He could do a week. He'd done worse over the course of his life—both before and after he had money. Committing to this city and this man's pleading smile was easy enough. 'One week.'

The concession was worth it at the sight of Wilder's smile. He knew what the warm feeling in his gut was—he was searching for purpose in his life, but he still knew himself, and

he knew that in a week he'd be head over heels for the man sitting across from him.

Nothing would come of it. Wilder was kind in ways Luca had never experienced—and when he was harsh and sharp with him, it was only because he wanted Luca to be better. Luca had met people like that before, but he'd avoided them like the plague. He'd never been strong enough to withstand that sort of tough love, but maybe that was his problem all along.

Whatever the case, he'd never be good enough for a man like this, so entertaining the idea would amount to nothing but heartache. Of course, maybe he needed it. Luca had almost gotten anyone and anything he'd ever wanted—and maybe denial would make him a better person.

Maybe that was the lesson here.

He climbed out of the car, then offered Wilder a wave before he made his way inside, and he let out a breath of relief when he saw the front desk at the salon was empty. The stairs were hell on him, and the pain was throbbing all the way up to his gut by the time he got inside, but he managed to collapse on the sofa and cover his face with one of the sofa cushions.

Luca was exhausted from the pain and stress, and he didn't even realize he'd dropped off until something hard and metal knocked him in the ankle. He sat up with a gasp, then his stomach rolled from the pain, and he gingerly pressed his palm to his crotch as he peered one eye open.

He startled again, though this time he managed to keep his body from jolting when he saw Raphael standing there with his crutches and a paper bag clenched between his teeth. "What..." he started.

Raphael released a crutch handle and set the bag on the coffee table before balancing himself and looking down at Luca with a face full of so much pity, Luca knew his secret was out. "Chaz came by with your meds, but I guess you didn't hear the knocking."

Luca groaned and laid back down. "Fuck. I forgot."

“Clearly. He said you need to take these with food, so I ran by Adam’s truck and picked up a few things. I figured we could do dinner together.”

Luca could hear in Raphael’s tone that he had no plans to leave, so he groaned and shifted up. “I thought we were supposed to have pasta night,” he said through clenched teeth as he shifted over.

The pain was less, but not enough.

“You don’t look like you’re up for cooking tonight,” Raphael said with a smirk. He set his crutches aside, then eased himself down next to Luca and emptied the food bag. It was instantly fragrant, spiced and subtle—with a hint of fry oil, but it made his stomach growl and mouth water—and he realized he’d missed all of his meals apart from the breakfast he’d lost on Will’s farm. “You’ll like this. I actually had it once in Stockholm—it’s not the same as what Adam makes, but it’s close.” He started to hand it off, then hesitated, “What other allergies do you have?”

Luca rolled his eyes. “Just the one. Well, and Oak pollen, but I’m not worried about that in my sandwich.”

Raphael handed the food over, and Luca peeled back the foil, revealing something that kind of looked like a calzone. He was too hungry to really care after that—and too desperate for pain meds. He broke it in half and quickly began to stuff it down, well beyond caring what he looked like to the man next to him.

“Better?” Raphael asked after a bit.

Luca groaned. The food was delicious, and he was actually full, but the pain was creeping back up. “What did Dr. Alling send?”

“Unlike most people around here, I didn’t go snooping.” Raphael leaned forward for the small bag and tossed it into Luca’s lap. “Chaz just said take it with food, and it might cause constipation.”

Luca snorted as he tipped one of the pills into his hand, then pushed himself up to his feet and hobbled across the room

to the fridge for water. “You want something to drink?”

“Not booze. He also said not booze,” Raphael called.

Grabbing two glasses of water, Luca made it back to the sofa in one piece, then took the pill down and sighed. He wished he’d remembered ice, or literally anything frozen he could use to soothe the ache, because the twenty minutes it was going to take to kick in felt like twenty hours.

“I have to say,” Raphael said after a minute, grabbing the bag to clean up their mess, “breaking your dick is definitely new as far as accidents in the city go.”

“Aren’t I special, then,” Luca grouched. He shuffled deeper into his cushions and closed his eyes, waiting—praying—for a little relief. “Maybe I’ll set some records before I leave.”

“Maybe.” He heard Raphael messing with the bags, but when he thought the man might get up and go, instead he felt him reach over and take his hand. “I used to have a lot of surgeries. We’d have to go to Brussels and stay for weeks with my aunt there who had this tiny flat. My mom would make me a little bed on the floor with all the blankets she could find, but the only thing that ever helped was when she’d sit and hold my hand and talk to me.”

Luca opened his eyes and glanced over, watching Raphael’s careful expression—the way he was holding himself kind of tense and unsure. He squeezed Raphael’s fingers gently and didn’t pull away. “I don’t think a bruised dick is as bad as all that.”

Raphael snorted. “I don’t know. I’ve taken an accidental crutch to the balls before, and I would take a hundred tendon surgeries over that.”

Luca couldn’t help his grin. “I threw up. Like...instantly.”

“Mm.” Raphael shifted even closer, then took Luca’s hand between both of his and began to massage his fingers. “I don’t doubt it.”

Luca let out an involuntary sigh, and his eyes closed again. “How are you so good at this but you don’t do it for a living?”



Raphael chuckled as he ran his thumbs over the tendons of Luca's wrist, easing them into relaxation. "I got into massage from a friend when I was younger. I kept it up when I realized it helped keep my fingers from getting too stiff. They're not as spastic as my legs, but they don't have the same dexterity as other people. Apparently I have a talent for it, but this is not how I want to spend my day."

"You'd make a shitload of money if you moved to LA and opened up a studio," Luca said, his voice getting thicker as his pill started to ease its way into his bloodstream.

"I'm not interested in money. I'm happy here." Raphael switched hands, and Luca fell a little more sideways, but didn't bother to right himself. "I know you've had a rough time, but you should give it a chance."

"Promised I would," Luca muttered. He slung his free arm over his eyes and breathed out as the pain in his groin began to ebb away. "Promised Wilder too. He asked for a week."

Raphael chuckled again, digging his thumbs into the heel of Luca's palm. "You are something special."

"No..."

"Yes," Raphael said over his protest. "But it's not up to me to convince you. I don't hate that you want to stick around, though."

Luca wanted to protest, but the pill was hitting him faster than expected, and everything felt sort of heavy and soft all at the same time. His tongue moved to lick his bottom lip, but it was sluggish, and sleep tugged at his edges.

"Rest," Raphael said from somewhere far off. Luca hadn't noticed him get up, but suddenly there was a blanket on his legs, and he shifted so he could stretch his feet toward the arm of the sofa.

His shoes were off—which, when did *that* happen—and he could move without his stomach heaving a protest. Luca's breathing started to even, and he was pretty sure Raphael said something else, but it was easier to succumb to the pressing

darkness, and the final, soothing push of the drug that was taking most of his pain.

## CHAPTER 10

“So.”

Wilder startled, spinning around to find Jayden perched on the side of his table just a foot away from where he was standing. The sun was almost set, and the second day of the Market was just barely underway, so the crowds were still quiet. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see if you’re ready to talk about it,” Jayden said with a toothy smile. His friend had been better about his tendencies to involve himself in situations that weren’t his business. However, Wilder was well aware of the compulsion—and the moment the rumor mill hit, Jayden had been on him.

“I’m not going to talk about someone else’s business with you,” he said plainly. And that was the truth. Luca had been through enough, and in spite of the fact that long dormant feelings were scaring the shit out of him, he felt the urge to protect Luca from further harm.

Jayden sighed, swinging his legs around the table and hopping into the booth. ‘What if we sign it? No one will know.’

Wilder gave him a flat look and started to sign. ‘Knox will know, and he’ll gossip to everyone else. And I’m already sure Roman knows since Aksel treated him—and the moment Aksel gets drunk...’

“I didn’t follow half of that,” Jayden complained with a sigh. He flopped into Wilder’s chair and then scooted it across the grass until he was at his side. “Can I at least ask if he’s okay?”

“I,” Wilder started, but the truth was, he didn’t know. He and Luca hadn’t spoken in the couple days that passed. He’d pulled away from the Augustin without knowing what Aksel said or how bad the injury was. He read Luca’s desperation to be alone all over his face, so he hadn’t pushed the issue, but he’d wanted to go upstairs with him until he was sure Luca felt better.

He didn’t enjoy the feeling, but it was there and impossible to ignore.

*It is not another Scott*, he reminded himself sternly as he finished setting up the last of his lemon meringue cupcakes.

Jayden kicked him in the shin. ‘You what?’

‘I don’t know.’ His fingers flicked away from his temple, trembling with a little frustration. ‘I left him back at the Augustin, and he didn’t text.’

“Didn’t text?” Jayden clarified, and Wilder nodded.

“You could always text him.”

“And look desperate?” he blurted, then his face erupted into a blush because he hadn’t meant to say that. He knew what that implied—and worse, that somewhere deep down, he meant it.

Jayden’s face broke into a shit-eating grin and he stood up. “You have a crush.”

“Please don’t,” Wilder begged.

“But...”

Reaching a hand out, Wilder snagged Jayden by the bottom of his shirt and tugged him close. “I’m not ready. Okay?”

Jayden’s eyes glanced down at the exposed scar on Wilder’s forearm, and it was a stark reminder of why he might not ever be totally ready. Or at least, not ready enough to give someone what they wanted—what they needed from a relationship.

“Okay,” Jayden said after a long beat. “But you do...*like* him, right?”

“Yes,” Wilder hissed, and the admission aloud, as it rushed off his tongue and through his teeth, felt oddly cathartic. He had avoided any idea of crushing on anyone since Scott—and even when he felt gentle stirrings of it in the past, he’d quashed it until it was nothing more than motes of dust in the air. Something about Luca was different, though—and maybe it was the pieces of himself he could see in the man—or maybe it was the unapologetic way he admitted to and embraced his faults.

He couldn’t be more unlike Scott if he tried, and there was some semblance of safety in that which was both wonderful and dangerous at the same time.

“I don’t know what to do with it,” he said, then let Jayden go and ran a hand through his hair.

“I have some suggestions, but you won’t like them.” Jayden took a step back and straightened himself where Wilder had wrinkled him. “But you’re friends, right?”

“Something like that.” In truth, he didn’t know what the hell they were. They’d made some progress, but he wasn’t sure Luca could come back from having Wilder watch him have his dick crushed by a cow hoof. Wilder wasn’t sure he’d be able to look anyone in the eye after they witnessed that. If he ghosted, Wilder wouldn’t blame him.

“He’s at Fitz’s booth.”

Wilder looked up at Jayden’s face. “He’s what?”

‘Fitz’s booth,’ Jayden spelled on his fingers. “He’s looking at scarves. Why don’t you say hi, and I’ll watch your station?”

Wilder glanced through the slit in the back of his booth tent that had a direct line to Fitz’s. It was a smaller square, just a short table with an awning and a finger-painted sign he was pretty sure Aksel made that read, *Fitz’s Knitz*. Fitz was standing behind his table wearing a small frown, saying something Wilder couldn’t read off his lips from there, and Luca was running his hands over one of the scarves.

He looked gorgeous, even from behind, with his artfully messy hair and his tight, stone-washed jeans. His forearms were slender but muscular, and his fingers were long and thin. Wilder wanted to feel them on his body, wanted to know what Luca smelled like up close, with his nose buried in the man's neck.

He was in so much trouble.

Stepping back, he opened his mouth to say no, but the look on Jayden's face said that if he didn't, Jayden would make him pay for it. And maybe his friend was being a bit cruel, but maybe—somewhere deep down—Wilder was ready to take a step he hadn't let himself in years.

'Fine.' His thumb tapped his chest a little too hard, but he barely felt it. Brushing past Jayden, he walked around the side of his table, then down the aisle behind his booth and caught Fitz's eye as he approached.

Fitz's middle finger dragged up the side of his chest. 'What's up?'

'Nothing,' Wilder signed back, and he knew Fitz's lexicon didn't extend much further than that—but it was something.

And it had caught Luca's eye, whose head whipped around, and his eyes widened. He took a step back, and he wasn't limping as badly as before, so Wilder hoped it meant that his pain was less. He had the mad urge to look down at his crotch and see if he looked bigger, but he wasn't a fool.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to say hi," Wilder said as he stepped closer. "You looking to buy?"

Luca swallowed thickly, then shrugged. "I like these, but this guy is trying to talk me out of buying one."

Wilder looked up at Fitz, who was smiling helplessly. "They're terrible."

"They're interesting," Luca argued, and where anyone else might have been trying to be nice, Wilder knew Luca wasn't motivated for that. He was staring at Fitz's work like it meant something—like there was a hidden pattern in the stitches that no one had figured out. "I want at least two."

Fitz sighed, then took the two that Luca had been touching and shoved them into a paper bag, pushing it toward him. “There you go.” When Luca reached for his wallet, Fitz shook his head. “Your money’s no good here.”

Luca’s fingers twitched, but the motion didn’t stop, and he pulled out two twenties. “I’m sure you’ll find use for it somewhere.” He slapped the bills on the table and then grabbed the bag, stalking off.

Fitz stared after him, mouth slightly parted, and then he looked back at Wilder. “Do you know what the fuck that was about?”

“It might have been about the *incident*?” Wilder offered, not sure if Aksel had spilled the truth yet.

Fitz’s brow furrowed. “The... Tavern thing?”

Something about Fitz not knowing made Wilder’s chest unknit, and he shook his head. “Uh, no. No, he had a bad day, and he probably thought you were doing it out of pity.”

Grabbing the twenties, Fitz shoved them at Wilder and held them against his chest until Wilder took them. “Go take that sad man out for dinner or something. He’s walking and talking like he has an actual stick up his ass.”

Wilder tried not to wince, because it was true. Luca was prickly, and he was still moving with a slight limp. He curled the cash into his palm, then shoved it in his pocket and resolved to find a way to give it back to Fitz somehow. He definitely wanted to take Luca to dinner, but not on Fitz’s dime.

With a quick wave, Wilder weaved through the increasing crowd and managed to catch up to Luca, who had found the same bus bench and was sitting there with the bag between his spread thighs. He had half a scarf out and was running his fingers over the fringes—all of them mismatched in color and length—and a mess. And yet, it was oddly fitting for Luca.

He slowed a bit as he approached, and he watched Luca stiffen when the other man realized he was there, but his

presence wasn't immediately rejected. "Fancy meeting you here."

Luca snorted and shook his head. "People only say that when they're nervous."

Wilder bit his lip, then sat down. "Yeah well, you make me nervous."

At that, Luca laughed—a full-bodied sound that was more vibration than noise, and it hit Wilder in the center of his chest. "Are you worried that my bad luck is catching?"

"I'm worried that you're going to panic and leave without giving this place a chance," he said. *Without giving me a chance*, but he wasn't going to say that aloud. Not yet. "How are you feeling?"

"Dr. Alling gave me narcotics," Luca answered with a shrug.

Wilder's lips twitched. "It's weird to hear anyone call him Dr. Alling. He's..."

"A mess?" Luca offered.

"Unconventional."

Luca's shoulders rose and fell, and Wilder assumed he sighed. 'I thought it was going to be worse than it was,' he signed, 'but I was hoping he wouldn't tell anyone.'

'I don't think he did,' Wilder replied. 'Fitz didn't know.'

Luca scoffed. 'So why the free scarves?'

'Because he's only ever charged two people in his life, and one of those people is the man he's going to marry.'

Luca's eyes widened. '*Why?*'

'Because from what I was told, they didn't really like each other very much when they first met.'

Wilder dropped his hands into his lap, then reached over and pulled one of the scarves out. Although they were poor stitching and didn't seem to have much in the way of consistency in color or even yarn texture, there was something



unique about them that Wilder had always loved. He knew the teasing was in good fun, but he liked that Luca saw something more in them. He saw something of worth.

‘They’re actually interesting,’ Luca signed. ‘Different. I like that. I know a lot of people who would like that.’

‘He’s not in it for money,’ Wilder signed, trying to keep his face gentle.

Luca shrugged. ‘I understood what he was saying, but he should still get paid for the work.’

Wilder bit his lip, then decided it didn’t really matter since Fitz had never hidden himself from anyone in Savannah. “He was burned in a fire when he was a kid—fourteen or fifteen, I think? He was in therapy for a long time, and he does this mostly to help keep his fingers from getting too stiff.”

“Like Raphael with the massages?”

Wilder’s brows shot up. “The what?” He felt a sudden and unexpected rush of jealousy—the image of Luca stripped down and Raphael’s hands all over him. And it wasn’t his place but...

“He gave me a pedicure and then later he massaged my hands after the whole...cow thing,” he grimaced. “He said he did them for a long time because it helped his hands...or something.” Luca let out a laugh Wilder could see more than hear it was so soft. “I was kind of out of it by the time he was finished with my right hand.”

Wilder felt himself calm, even though the ground beneath him felt shaky. “He’s a good guy.” And Christ—he meant it, even if he didn’t want to right then. “He seems to like you.”

“God knows why,” Luca said. He took the scarf back and shoved the bag between his feet, turning to face Wilder better. “The first time I met him, I fell down the fucking stairs. The second time I met him, I embarrassed myself in front of the entire Tavern. And the third time we hung out was because I had my dick bashed to pieces by a cow. There’s no way he should want to be my friend.”

“You don’t have to be a certain way for people to like you,” Wilder pointed out.

Luca shrugged. “Maybe in your world. And maybe that’s what I need to learn, I don’t know. I don’t really have friends like that. People who want to be around you without wanting something. Back home, they either want money, sex, or both. And I don’t think it’s ever been genuine.”

Wilder flushed deep inside because, in truth, he wasn’t sure what it was about Luca he liked—but he knew the feeling was more than friendship. So, did that make him as bad as all those other people in Luca’s life?

“I think a lot of places—it’s kill or be killed, you know? People tend to step on each other as a means of survival. And it’s not perfect here. Everyone’s closet has a skeleton or two—including mine.”

Luca bit his lip, and Wilder didn’t miss the way he glanced down at his scar. He wasn’t ashamed of them, but there were moments—a lot like this one—where he was glad the rest were covered by his clothes. People knew he’d been through something, but they didn’t feel compelled to ask about the details when they couldn’t see the physical extent of how badly Scott had hurt him.

“I was in a bad relationship,” Wilder started, and Luca shook his head.

“No, you don’t need to.”

Wilder lifted his hands. ‘I was in a bad relationship,’ he began again, and being able to say it all in sign and be understood—even if he had to go slow—was like a balm to his soul. ‘Years ago. I was young when we met, and I was looking for an escape because I didn’t get along with my parents.’ Wilder took a breath, but it felt powerful to see that his hands weren’t shaking. ‘He was nice at first, but after a while, it gradually changed. I tried to leave one night, and he didn’t like that. And I got hurt.’

Luca grimaced, but it looked more like it was from anger instead of pity. ‘What happened to him?’

‘He went to jail for about eighteen months, and then served some probation. I moved back in with my parents, and I re-up a restraining order once every twelve months. He will occasionally get my number or my email address and try to contact me, but he’s lost his power over me.’

Luca’s hands clenched into fists, then relaxed. ‘I’m sorry.’

Wilder wanted to brush him off, because he always hated the ‘I’m sorries’ from people. But it was more than that—especially in ASL. Luca’s fist rubbed over his chest in a fierce circle that said so much more than those two, superfluous, spoken words. It meant sympathy, empathy. It meant touching his own heart the way he might touch Wilder’s to soothe those old wounds that still existed, scabbed over and mostly dead.

‘I left my parents and came here not long after that and opened up the shop,’ Wilder went on. ‘It hasn’t been perfect. People didn’t want me here—they wanted Noah to stay or Adam to take over the bakery. But they got used to me eventually.’

Luca laughed, this time a bit louder, and a little kinder. ‘Is that what I should do? Hang tight until they get used to me?’

‘It’s an option,’ Wilder pointed out. ‘You’ve made friends.’

Luca bit his lip, then nodded. ‘That means something.’

‘And you don’t have to hang out on farms with sadistic peacocks if you don’t want to,’ Wilder pointed out.

This time, Luca’s laugh boomed from his chest, wild and all-encompassing. ‘Okay.’

‘But maybe...you might also want to have dinner. With me,’ he added after a second.

Luca’s lips parted and chest expanded like he sucked in his breath. ‘Why?’

‘Because as far as I know, we’re both humans who eat human food, and I know a couple of decent places. Here and down the hill,’ he added, in case Luca wasn’t ready to face the Savannah nightlife just yet.

After a beat, Luca nodded. ‘Tomorrow?’

Tomorrow would work—he would make it work. It had been years since Wilder had thought of anything except his bakery, and his quiet life, and his Tuesday wine nights with Jayden, Knox, and Talia. The newness was nerve-wracking and knee-trembling, but he wanted it. He hadn't realized how starving he was for a new step, for proof to himself and to anyone who had known him before that Scott hadn't entirely destroyed him. That he had managed to save all the pieces of himself, even if they didn't fit together the same way anymore.

When he'd seen this man, looking like a lost puppy on a park bench, he'd only wanted to offer a cupcake and a kind word. He'd had no idea the potential it had to become something so much more.

## CHAPTER 11

IT WASN'T A DATE. It most definitely was *not* a date, but it felt like a damn date, and that had him panicking almost beyond reason. Eventually, Luca rushed downstairs and slammed himself against Raphael's desk, careful not to jostle his still-aching dick as he met the other man's wide gaze.

"Help."

Raphael cleared his throat and rolled back in his chair.

"Help?"

"I have a thing."

"You have a *thing*?" Raphael's lips twitched. "You really need to be more specific."

"Dinner. Tonight. Uh," Luca sat back and ran his hand through his hair. "It's not a date?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" His tone was more amused than anything, which only served to make Luca more panicked.

"I don't know. I'm think I'm freaking out."

With a small sigh, Raphael wheeled around his desk and dragged his gaze up and down Luca's body. "Give me five minutes."

Sagging against the desk, Luca tried to calm himself down because he had no right to get worked up in the first place. Wilder was being nice—Wilder felt sorry for him, with good reason. But he also seemed like maybe he kind of liked having Luca around, and even if it wasn't romantic, it was the first

time Luca realized he was going to have to impress someone simply by being himself.

And that was terrifying, because he didn't have much self. Before his money, he'd been a pliable stoner who worked customer service and always had a couch for friends to crash on. After money, he'd been a walking ATM—or a walking orgasm. Even Gabby—and God, he did adore her—wouldn't have bothered to stick around if he hadn't put her through school.

The tuition checks had earned him plenty of blow jobs and late-night Chinese take-out and reality TV binges, but he had no illusions about why she was with him. To her—he was a glorified sugar daddy. He was a pretty wallet, but ultimately just a sad old man with no direction.

So why did Wilder want this at all? Pity was one thing, but he wanted Luca to stay, and he didn't think it was to change the way Luca thought about Savannah.

After all—he was nothing. He was no one.

What did it matter?

“You look like you're about to have an actual breakdown,” Raphael said, jarring Luca from his thoughts.

Luca cleared his throat, annoyed that it was tight and hot. “It's just been a day. This is normally how I calm myself down.”

“That surprises me in no way,” Raphael said with a grin. “Come on. Jayden's back here, and he's going to do your hair, and then I'll give you a facial. The proper kind, not the come kind.”

Luca's cheeks flushed hotly. “Are you always like this?”

“Yes.” Raphael rolled ahead of Luca with long strides of his chair and came to a stop at the doorway of a back room. Just inside was a tall, thin man with soft, long hair—black with tinted beetle-blue highlights. It accentuated how pale he was, and how dark his eyes were, but his smile was as soft and friendly as his posture was intimidating. “This is Jayden. Jayden, this is Luca—the squatter.”

Luca's mouth dropped open to defend himself, but Jayden just laughed and gave the chair a pat. "Come on, gorgeous. You don't need much, but I can fix you up." Raphael was gone before Luca could protest, so he sank into the chair and closed his eyes as the stylist began to run fingers through his hair. "I've heard a lot about you," Jayden said after a beat.

Luca scoffed. "I have no doubt. I didn't exactly make a great impression."

"No, but you made a big one. My sisters are still talking about it."

Luca's eyes snapped open, and he stared at Jayden in the mirror. "Your sisters?"

"Rose and Sonia. They own the Tavern," he said. He rubbed a few locks of Luca's hair between his fingers.

'*Fuck*,' Luca mouthed. "You know I didn't mean it, right? I didn't...it was a bad night, and..."

Jayden's chuckle quieted his words, and he laid his hands on Luca's shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "I'm not going to shave you bald or dye you green—though you could rock a fantasy color so hard. But Raphael explained everything, and Sonia feels really bad about the pine nuts."

Luca's cheeks heated, and he glanced away. "I didn't mean to be a dick."

Jayden simply hummed and then grabbed a comb from his drawer and began to drag it through his locks. "You don't color your hair."

Luca shook his head. "Not yet, but I will. My older brother, Pietro—he went grey at twenty-three, and I was always terrified. He looks amazing with it, but I don't think I could pull it off."

"It happens to us all, but you shouldn't be ashamed of it. You wear youth like a shield."

Luca bit the inside of his cheek, feeling his defenses rise. He'd known enough stylists in his day that tried to act like therapists, and there was something about Jayden that cut to

the quick. Mostly because he wasn't wrong. Luca was in his forties but looking at his life, no one would have known. He hadn't done anything a grown adult should have done. He was a glorified teenager with daddy's black card and no curfew.

It was embarrassing. He had no idea how he'd managed to fall so far off the path his brothers and sisters walked.

"Are you okay?"

Luca realized his emotions were playing out on his face, and he took a breath. "I've been going through some stuff. It's stupid."

"I very much doubt it's stupid." Jayden patted his shoulders twice, then urged him up. "Let's do a wash, and then I'll give you a trim. After that, Raphael can fix your face up, and I'll get you styled when you're done."

"Okay," Luca said, his voice low and raspy. Once upon a time, he paid for services like this and didn't think twice about them. Salon workers existed in his periphery as necessary indulgences to pass the time or to get him looking better than he could on his own before a gallery opening or art showing.

He'd never bothered to consider their opinion of him. He simply paid a tab, added a tip, and went on with his life. Now, with Jayden's dark eyes watching him and assessing his worth—he wasn't sure he'd be able to withstand the judgment.

"You'll feel better after this."

"Why do you care?" he couldn't stop himself from asking.

Jayden laughed as he eased Luca's neck back onto a towel, then turned on a low stream of warm water. It was instantly soothing, along with the fingers dragging against his scalp, and his eyes closed. "Well, first of all, you're paying me."

He didn't wince, but it was a near thing.

"Secondly, you're going out with Wilder who is arguably one of my best friends, so I want you to feel good when you're with him."

"And the third?"



Jaden smiled. “I like when people leave my shop feeling good about themselves, not just about their hair. That’s why I do this. Trust me, if I wanted to get rich, I’d have gone to medical school or something.”

Luca chuckled. “Or porn.”

Jayden’s fingers spasmed, then he laughed. “You’re Adriano’s brother. I forgot.”

He managed a half-shrug from where his shoulder was pressed up against the basin. “He’s good at it, and he makes a ton of money. And he’s happy.”

“That wasn’t a judgment, my love,” Jayden told him. He began to massage shampoo into his hair, and Luca couldn’t stop the small groan. “I liked his work before he showed up here.”

Luca twisted uncomfortably. “Can we not talk about that, though? He’s my brother and it’s just...gross.”

“Fair,” Jayden said, chuckling again. “My point is that I do this because seeing people leave here feeling good about themselves gives me life. And I know that sounds like some hipster, toxic positivity bullshit, but it’s true.”

“I believe you,” Luca said softly. And he understood it in a more profound way than he was expecting. He *was* a glorified ATM to a lot of his friends, but part of that was knowing he was able to make their lives better—easier. The fact that Gabby was going to have opportunities that she never would if it hadn’t been for those checks meant something important to him. And the price of their shallow relationship wasn’t enough for him to want to stop.

He just didn’t know how to translate that into something more than what he’d been doing. Something with substance.

“So, what is it you do?” Jayden asked when he started to add the conditioning treatment. The scalp massage was almost enough to send him onto a plane of euphoria, but he breathed through it.

“Nothing. I mean, I owned a couple of art galleries and...I don’t know. I did that, I guess?”

“That’s not nothing,” Jayden said. “Art is important.”

“Yes, but I never got it. I tried—but...it just never made sense to me. I wanted to feel like I deserved to have this life. But...”

“It didn’t make you happy?” Jayden tried.

Luca shuddered when the warm water cascaded over him. “It made me miserable. Then Adriano came home in love and happier than I’ve ever seen him, and I wanted that.”

“I hope you find it.” Jayden eased him up and dried his hair with quick swipes of the towel. Stepping in front of him, he began to drag fingers through the wet locks again, then he shook his head. “You don’t need a trim. You need to relax. Go across the room and undress, then get under the sheet on the table. Raphael will meet you there in a minute.”

“I...”

“Trust me,” Jayden said, soft but powerful. “Okay?”

Luca’s breath trembled, but he nodded. “Okay.” If only he felt like it was.

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Luca wanted to blame the fact that everything was puffy and a little pink on the facial, but he knew better. He knew it was the fact that the moment Raphael’s fingers dug deep into the tense muscles of his neck, everything burst loose like a dam breaking.

Tears cascaded down his cheeks, and a sob lodged in his chest, and he felt pathetic and small as pieces of him shattered.

Raphael hadn’t batted an eye, though. He let Luca fall apart and then knit back together as he rubbed him down and then gently massaged his hands as the wafting clouds from the steamer mingled with the tears on his cheeks.

He calmed down in time for Raphael to add the moisturizer, then give his brows a trim, and then he was sent back to Jayden who kindly didn't mention the fact that he was splotchy and subdued and had very little to say at all. He was grateful that neither Raphael nor Jayden tried to refuse payment, and he was also grateful when Raphael followed him to the corridor and used the stair banister to rise from his chair before he took Luca's arm.

"You owe me dinner."

Luca chuckled and nodded. "Yeah."

"You'll have to bring it to me though. I fucking hate these stairs."

"I can do that." Luca's breath still held a faint tremble, but he was starting to feel human again. Still cracked on the inside, still bleeding a little, but maybe that's what he needed.

He knew, in reality, he wasn't nothing. He wasn't a nobody. He was a person who deserved true and honest affection and kindness just like everyone else, even if he didn't earn it the same way other people did. He was a good man, even if he was a shallow one.

When he got back up to the apartment, he saw a text from Wilder letting him know he'd be there to pick him up at five since it was going to be a bit of a drive to wherever this date was taking place. Luca desperately wanted to ask, but no one had ever gone out of their way to try and surprise him before, so he was nervous and excited—which cobbled together to form a ball of anxiety that sat heavy in his gut.

He'd never had a real friend before, and even though he was crushing—knowing that he couldn't have him wasn't enough to put a damper on how much he craved his presence. Having a friend was enough—without strings, without obligation. It was new, and it was damn near everything.

He managed to get his eyes and skin calmed down enough that he didn't look a total mess, and he wasn't sure what to wear, but he didn't think Wilder was going to go black-tie, so his jeans and button-up seemed fitting. He slid bare feet into

his loafers, added a bit more product to Jayden's careful work, and made it down the steps in time to see Wilder's car pulling up.

He glanced at Raphael, who was looking at him with a smirk, and he ignored the man's double thumbs up as he pushed the door open and headed down the steps. Wilder was leaning against his open car door, and his mouth softened into a grin when Luca stepped out.

'Nice,' Wilder signed.

'Thank you.' Luca climbed in the car and let the familiar scent of Wilder wrap around him. It was sweet, like his bakery, but it was also a little woody from his soap, and it was the oddest blend and yet so perfectly him, Luca couldn't get enough of it.

He breathed in deep as he put his seatbelt on, but when he looked up, he saw Wilder staring at him with a frown.

"What?"

"Were you crying?"

"Shit," he breathed out, then shrugged. "Yes? It was a weird day."

"We don't have to do this if you—"

"No," Luca said in a rush, then stopped and bit his lip. "I mean, I need this. Unless you wanted a reason to cancel, and then we can..."

"Luca," Wilder said very softly, and it may have been one of the very first times Luca had heard Wilder use his name. He said it almost unsure—like he hadn't used the name a lot, like he wasn't confident in his consonants and vowels. And it was the best thing Luca had heard in a long time. "I want to go out to dinner with you."

"Okay." He breathed out a sigh. "I promise it's nothing bad. I'm trying to figure shit out, and it's not easy."

"I get that." Wilder put the car in reverse, and soon had them on the road—the street sign indicating the freeway just a few miles off. "I've been there."

Luca hummed and glanced at the trees whipping by as Wilder picked up speed. “It’s just weird, you know? I have a break for the first time in my life—no obligations, no people, no nothing. And somehow, I feel worse.”

“Right after my ex went to jail,” Wilder said after a pause, “I went home. I had to do some physical therapy for some of my injuries, and I had mental therapy because all of that fucked me up pretty badly.”

Luca let out a small growl. “I’d like to put his face through a glass window for that. Which is probably wrong of me to say, but...”

“It’s not necessary, but thank you,” Wilder told him softly, smiling. “The truth is, I thought the years right after the incident were going to be the worst—and they *were* hard. But it didn’t get bad until I moved here.”

Luca frowned. “Seriously?”

“It took me a while to realize that going from living with Scott to living with my parents meant I was still in survival mode. My mom was even worse when I came back, and my dad was more checked out than he’d ever been. My sister was never home, and I was stuck in the same loop I’d been in as a child. The same loop that sent me into Scott’s arms in the first place.”

Luca swallowed thickly. “I’m sorry.”

Wilder waved him off. “It’s okay. I just didn’t realize it until I got to Savannah, and I was suddenly safe. I was on my own, and there was no one left to fight—no one left I had to prove myself to. I wasn’t some useless disappointment. I wasn’t anyone’s punching bag. The quiet safety gave room for all the things that had been silenced by chaos to rise to the surface, and I had never been so overwhelmed before.”

“How did you get through it?” Luca asked. His pain wasn’t anywhere near what Wilder had been through, but the ideas all made sense. Luca had been lazy, but he had never been still before now—he had never been in a position where he didn’t have to use himself in order to feel worth.

“I just let it hit me. I let myself rely on my new friends for the first time ever.” He smiled, and it reached his eyes, the brown color almost gold in the fading dusk. “I let myself be weak—and I let myself fall apart. It was easier to put myself back together after that.”

Luca felt a breath leave him like it had been punched out. “I don’t know how to.”

“It takes time,” Wilder said. “Jayden was kind of my touchstone for a while. He came around even when I didn’t want him to, but I always felt better when he left. He used that analogy, you know, about those Japanese vases with the gold?”

Luca shook his head. “I don’t know that one.” Wilder raised his eyebrows. “I’ll show you sometime. But there’s this practice in Japan where they repair shattered pottery with liquid gold—and somehow it makes all the fractured pieces even more beautiful. He said putting yourself back together after shattering apart was like that. You’ll always have the scars, but they don’t have to make you feel ugly.”

“Oh.” The word left him in a breathy rush, because he could see that in Wilder—even if he didn’t think any amount of precious metal could ever make what he had inside worth looking at.

“He reminded me a lot of what my therapist had been saying to me this entire time. It’s okay to feel shattered—it doesn’t mean you are. You’re just put back together in a different way—but it’s not worse.”

“Is it better?” Luca asked.

Wilder grinned. “I don’t know, but I like to think so.”

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An hour into the drive, Luca realized they were heading into South Carolina. He’d only been to Charleston once—as a

patron for a showing at the art gallery, but he hadn't done much more than smile pretty then get bombed later at some restaurant he couldn't remember the name of.

He and his friends had boarded a plane first thing in the morning, and the most he remembered about the trip was blueberry mojitos and throwing up purple in the airplane bathroom nearly the entire flight.

He was nervous now, not sure how to react, but the mood in the car was calm. There were no obligations, he reminded himself. Wilder didn't expect anything from him except that he was there—that he existed in this moment, and he tried to enjoy himself.

And for as light as it was, it almost felt impossibly heavy.

His eyes fixed on the Atlantic, the way it lay flat against landscape. It was such an intensely different picture than the wild Pacific. He hadn't noticed it before—hadn't bothered. Now, he couldn't get enough of the way it looked like polished glass.

“It's gorgeous here.”

Wilder chuckled. “I'm from Illinois. It's just flat—the occasional hill. It's green—endless fields of it. But nothing like this. We never traveled when I was a kid, and after Scott...” He trailed off and shook his head. “It was hard to look across an almost endless ocean and accept that it's real.”

“Have you been up to the mountains?” Luca asked.

“Once or twice. Jayden tried to get me to hike last year, but it was just a fucking mess.” Wilder grinned. “The cold triggered my vertigo, and I tumbled down one of the hills. I was done after that.”

Luca winced. He'd been skiing. A lot. Utah, France, Canada. He'd done so fucking much, and none of it felt like it had any meaning, because he'd taken it all for granted. He'd never absorbed any of the gifts he'd been given, and here was a man who was overwhelmed by the sight of the ocean—something he saw almost every day.

It was so simple, and yet, Wilder saw it in ways Luca would probably never understand.

“Anyway,” Wilder said, interrupting Luca’s train of thought, “I spent so much of my childhood doing outdoorsy shit, I’m happy not to anymore.”

Luca chuckled. “That’s fair. It’s like me with Malibu and LA. They’re always busy and no one ever sleeps, and as much as I love my hometown, I think I’m craving something new.”

“This is definitely a far cry from the West Coast,” Wilder said, and Luca couldn’t do anything but agree.

He didn’t just mean the coast though, but he didn’t say that part aloud.

As they got into Harbor Town, Wilder carefully made his way down a bunch of side streets, and eventually pulled into a parking lot with full view of the candy cane striped lighthouse. He turned the car off, then turned the light on, but he didn’t move to get out.

“So, there’s this thing that I’ve always wanted to do here. Um.” He suddenly looked very young and almost shy as he bit his lip and rubbed the back of his neck. “You have to book tickets like months in advance, but Roman had a hook-up, so I jumped on it.”

“Okay,” Luca said slowly. “Is it weird? Is it, like, some zombie escape room or something?”

Wilder laughed, shaking his head. “No. It’s this dinner thing at this little aquarium. They have this massive dome where the fish and sharks and stuff are all swimming over you—and you get to eat, and then take a night tour... It’s, I don’t know. Maybe dumb? But I thought it could be fun.”

Luca’s heart was thrashing against his ribs to the point it almost hurt, and he had to breathe through it for a moment. “I like it.”

“Yeah?” Wilder still looked unsure. “I’ve always kind of been obsessed with marine biology stuff—I could just never you know, get the biology part in school. But I know you’re



actually from the coast so this might just seem boring and old.”

“I love it,” Luca said, and he wondered if Wilder could hear the intensity in his tone—because it was heavy, and it startled him. But it wasn’t a lie. This was Wilder doing something for him, but he was sharing it with Luca—not his friends in town, not anyone else. It felt like a moment, and God...he wasn’t sure he deserved it. “Thank you for this.”

Wilder lifted his hand, hesitated, then reached out for Luca and squeezed their fingers for a minute. “You deserve nice things, you know. And not for what you give back. Now come on, we need to go check in before they give our tickets to standby.”

Wilder got out of the car after that, and started walking off like his words hadn’t just stripped Luca bare and left him there to face his own reflection alone.

## CHAPTER 12

WILDER WASN'T EXPECTING to be as nervous as he was, but the moment he set his sights on Luca, his heart leapt into his throat. Luca looked gorgeous as he stood there on the porch step in his tight jeans and shirt tailored perfectly to his body. His hair was styled, and his glasses stood perched on his nose, and he looked every bit a man who could have graced the pages of a magazine.

When he got in, though, Wilder immediately noticed the way his eyes were red-rimmed and the way the edges of his nostrils were pink. He'd been crying—and Wilder found a sort of confusing and all-encompassing wave of protectiveness rising in him out of nowhere. It took all of his self-control not to demand who hurt him and to take what little bits and pieces Luca was willing to offer.

As they drove to the city, Wilder was overcome with self-doubt about the date. He'd found the courage to ask Roman if he could still get tickets to the Aquarium At Night event, and he only breathed easy when Roman produced the tickets like it was nothing.

Wilder had Dmitri call and place the reservation time, and then it was a matter of keeping himself busy so he didn't pace a hole in the floor. By the end of the afternoon, he'd taken out his hearing aids, put Dmitri in front, and turned on music with a heavy beat he could feel in his fingertips as he worked with new flavors for the following week's specials.

It wasn't enough to keep his mind from wandering, but it was enough to keep him from staring down the clock until it was time to get ready and go.

He second guessed his outfit three times, but as he came down and heard Dmitri's faint whistle, he felt like maybe he was doing something right. Then Luca appeared outside the manor looking like an actual movie star, and he was once again reminded that their lives existed in two different worlds. He was a nobody in the face of a man who should have inspired Grecian sculptures. Wilder had to remind himself, over and over, that Luca was leaving. He was here for a week, maybe two, and then he'd go back.

And maybe his life wouldn't be the same as it was—the sort of shallow, painful pretend-play that had been tying Luca into knots, but he definitely wasn't going to lock himself down to a place like Savannah. There was nothing there to offer excitement or conflict, and Wilder knew too well that it took a special sort of mindset to be content there for long.

And that was okay.

It was.

He repeated that like a mantra because Luca might be the first since Scott, but he didn't have to be the last. He was the step toward this path Wilder was ready to take. He wanted to learn his new normal, his new boundaries. He wanted to explore this version of himself that erupted from the ashes of his former life and grew into a whole person.

In spite of his nerves, Luca seemed genuinely excited for the trip into the aquarium, and Wilder was excited because the maximum capacity there was twenty, which meant there wouldn't be overwhelming noise if they chose to not sign, which Wilder often preferred in public.

He hated being watched. Signing was his language, and he should have unrestricted access to it, but it was exhausting feeling like he was on display, giving some sort of modern art performance for hearing people.

More times than he could count, he caught people surreptitiously trying to record him when he was with Deaf friends back in college, and after Scott, the idea of anyone watching him without his consent sent him into spirals of anxiety.

It was why dating still terrified him. It was why walking toward the door with Luca grabbing his hand made his heart race.

Not enough to turn back, but enough to feel a flush creeping up the back of his neck as they approached the doors.

“Let me,” Wilder muttered, fumbling in his pocket for the print-out. The woman at the door looked bored more than anything and used a hand-held to scan the code before waving them through. Wilder had been to the aquarium twice—both times during the day. There had been kids and parents and even a field trip, and the sheer volume of white noise had overwhelmed him to the point he’d pushed his hearing aids into his pocket and let everything dim to a quiet roar.

It had taken something away from his experience, having to navigate through the sensory over-load, and he’d done it alone. By the time he’d gotten back to his car, he was grateful he’d gone, but he was still trembling at the knees, and his head was still pounding. He wanted this time to be different. He was desperate for it.

He wanted to hold Luca’s hand and watch another universe float above them. He wanted to let himself feel small and unimportant and then look across the table and be reminded that he wasn’t. And it might have been unfair to put that on Luca, but the way he clung to Wilder said maybe he understood.

“I think it’s this way,” Wilder said, tugging Luca toward the sign that led to the people mover. It ran through the small aquarium tunnel and opened into a larger auditorium under the dome of water. According to the photos, all the tables were set up there, with dinner service, cocktails, and desserts.

For building his entire life around rich, sweet desserts, he had never let himself have something that felt so decadent before. His palm was a little sweaty against Luca’s, but the other man showed no signs of wanting to let go as they stepped under the faint, soothing blue lights of rippling water, tropical fish swimming through it like a cascade of rainbows over their heads.

His breath caught in his throat, and he found himself smiling as he watched a shark press its belly to the glass, then wander off without a care in the world. It wasn't a life he wanted to live—he liked being busy, he liked being human—but he thought maybe it would be a soothing rest for a little while.

“This is amazing. I had no idea this place even existed the last time I was on this side of the country.” Luca's voice carried in the echo of the tunnel, reaching Wilder's ears and rushing through him like a vibration. “Thank you.”

Wilder had no real answer for him, so he squeezed Luca's fingers a bit tighter, then led the way off the people mover and toward the woman standing as hostess for the arriving couples.

There were only ten tables set up, a bit close together, but the room was quiet and had the same echo from the glass above them. Wilder wanted to look up. He wanted to lie on his back and hold Luca's hand all night and watch the sea from below it. Instead, he gave their name and followed quietly to the table that was one close to the glass.

“Are you hungry?” Wilder asked as he picked up his menu.

Luca laughed. “Not really? I was nervous, and it killed my appetite.”

“Are you afraid of fish?” Wilder asked with a tiny grin.

“I was afraid of having to be myself.”

Wilder blinked in surprise, and it took him a moment to form his question. “What do you mean?”

With a shrug, Luca shifted his chair closer. “Is this okay, or do you want me to sign?”

“Voice right now,” Wilder asked. He braced himself for Luca to ask why, but the other man just nodded instead.

“You know by now I don't have real friends. Every time I was out with people, it was like putting on a show. Rich, pretentious, spoiled. We'd shop at designer boutiques and eat at restaurants where the meal cost more than my mortgage.

We'd drive aimlessly in my Bentley so people could be seen in it." He ducked his head for a second, and Wilder could see a rising flush on his cheeks, though it faded by the time he looked up again. "It was the only way my friends would spend time with me."

"All of them?" Wilder asked quietly.

"Enough of them. And you, well...you just want *dinner*. It's new."

The way he bit his lip and looked so damn unsure made Wilder's gut clench, because in reality, he *did* want something more than dinner. He wanted to press Luca to the cool glass and kiss him until neither of them could breathe. He wanted to put hands on him, wanted to wrap around him, wanted to feel things he hadn't let himself feel in so many years because he was afraid of his own vulnerability. He wanted to take him home, to keep him, to wake up with him in the morning and start all over again.

Wilder wasn't sure if that made him better or worse. Or maybe he was just the same as all those other people. But he liked to think that maybe what he wanted was okay, because maybe Luca wanted it too. He lifted his water glass and smiled over the rim. "Here's to new experiences, then?"

Luca's smile was bright—lighting up the place like the roof cracked open and let the sun in. They clinked glasses and took a sip, and Wilder knew that no matter how far gone he was, he could never let him be like those people in Luca's life who wanted to bleed him dry.

Lust would never be enough.

It had to be love.

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The meal wasn't great. It was barely tolerable, but the atmosphere and their shared laughter made the whole thing worth it. Luca's smile continued to light up his entire face, and Wilder felt a wild compulsion to do everything in his power to keep it there.

As the server took away their barely touched dessert dishes, Wilder slipped a cash tip under the salt shaker, then rose and extended his hand. "We have a whole aquarium to see if you're up for it."

Luca's palm was warm against his, fingers tight as he held on, and he let Wilder lead the way past the dome and into the hallway that he knew led to the interactive exhibits. A lot of the hallways were roped off, but he could smell the sharp scent of saltwater from the touch pools, and he felt a sort of rush—making him aware of the youth still left in his bones as they hurried along the dark corridor and into the open space.

With the museum closed to the public, there were only a few people milling around that had finished dinner before them, and Wilder felt his entire body sag with relief. They weren't alone, but they were close enough. There was no one intruding on this night between them.

He smiled at Luca, who grinned back shyly, then tugged on Wilder's hand until they came to a stop by the stingray pool. The animals inside were swimming around lazily, brushing the top of the water, then sinking back down. Luca cocked his hip on the side of the wall and dragged his fingers through the water.

"I... stung... before... trip." Luca's face was tipped down, so with the splashing noise of the pool, Wilder missed a lot of the sentence.

"Did you say you got *stung*?" he asked as he shifted closer.

"In the hand." Luca lifted his head and pulled his hand from the water, turning his wrist to the side to display a short, thin scar beside his thumb. "Adriano took us all to Mexico one year to celebrate his birthday. It was his ex's idea," he said it with such a deep scowl that Wilder wanted to hug him. "There was this cove right outside our hotel, and the front desk had

forgotten to warn us that there was a massive stingray migration going on. I was sitting in the sand, and I put my hand down and..." He slapped the water, making one of the rays jet off to the other side.

Wilder's stomach clenched in sympathy. "Did it hurt?"

Luca laughed, shaking his head. "Not the worst pain I've ever felt. Less than taking a cow hoof to the testicles. But yeah, it was pretty bad. My hand swelled up like three times its size, and I had to go home."

Wilder reached over, grabbing his hand, and he ran his thumb over the flat scar. It was nothing like his own—lacking the puckered ridges of traumatized flesh from where he'd been cut open and stitched back together. They were echoes of his past. They didn't define him, but they meant something. A bit like Luca's little mark, carrying no lingering pain, but he'd always remember where it came from.

When he looked up, he saw something soft in Luca's eyes—and maybe a little afraid. He moved to pull away, but Luca twisted his hand around and held tight—a sort of desperate action that Wilder wanted to feel and yet didn't. It was too close to a line he wasn't sure he wanted to cross right then, no matter how much he wanted the other man.

"Why did you bring me here?" Luca asked after a beat.

Wilder swallowed thickly. It was a loaded question. The answer was simple enough—he'd wanted to make Luca happy, but the *why* of that statement was so much more complicated. "I like you."

Luca lowered his eyes, his shoulders moving with a sigh. "Right."

"I wanted you to smile." Wilder gave in to his compulsion and cupped his hand around Luca's neck, brushing the warm skin with the edge of his thumb. "You haven't had the best few days."

At that, Luca nodded and let out a small laugh and looked up into Wilder's eyes. "My time in Savannah *has* kind of sucked."



“Yeah,” Wilder said, grinning right back. “And I hate that you came here looking for peace, and all you got was...”

“A busted dick?” Luca offered with a snort. “It’s probably karma.”

Wilder rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help his smile from going impossibly wider and shook Luca gently by the shoulder. “You deserve to have nice things, Luca. Without a cost attached to them.”

Luca licked his lips. “You know, I told myself that earlier. I’ve been trying to tell myself that since I got here. But it’s not always easy.”

Wilder sat down on the bench, then shifted closer and pressed Luca’s hand between both of his own. “It takes time to get there. And I know the feeling of desperation—the need to rush it, because the time between not being okay and being okay feels like an endless void of...”

“Nothing,” Luca finished for him in a whisper. Wilder couldn’t hear the word, but he saw it on his lips, in the movement of his tongue as it briefly pressed between his teeth.

“But *this* isn’t nothing.” When Luca didn’t look up, Wilder touched his chin with his fingers and drew his gaze until their eyes locked. “I like you,” he said again. This time, it was an offering—one he had told himself not to make, but he couldn’t hold back. He wanted Luca to know the choice was there, that Wilder wanted more, but he was willing to take whatever Luca felt safe giving him. “I like you,” he repeated, willing Luca to understand.

And, after a moment, he did. Luca’s eyes softened, and his nostrils went wide with a heavy breath. “*Oh.*”

“It doesn’t mean...”

But his words died when Luca shifted as close as he could and reached with his other hand—damp from the water—pressing it to the side of Wilder’s neck. “I know. You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yes. And I’m...I have to take it slow. I haven’t been with anyone since my ex. I haven’t wanted to be...until I met you.”

Luca's cheeks went dusky with a very faint blush, his eyes darting back and forth like pieces of him couldn't sit still, even though his grip on Wilder was painfully tight. "That's a lot."

"I know," Wilder said. He bowed his head. "I know, and it doesn't have to mean anything. Just friendship with you is enough, if that's what *you* need."

Luca swallowed thickly, then cleared his throat. "I don't want your *friendship*." Wilder winced, reeling back like he'd been slapped, but before he could stand up, Luca detached his hand from where they were tangled together and bracketed Wilder's head, thumbs near his temple in a hold so gentle, he could barely feel it. "I mean, I *do*, but I also want so much more, and I don't know how to deserve you." His voice dropped again so low, Wilder had to strain to hear it, to read what he missed on his lips. "All I have to give is myself, and I'm not sure that'll ever be enough."

Wilder felt those words rip through him—so much to unpack, so much he wanted to undo. He wanted Luca to feel his own worth, but at the same time, some people needed to be loved anyway—even when they couldn't love themselves.

And he could do that.

Given time, he could do that.

Closing his hands around Luca's wrists, he held him tight. "I can think of a thousand ways you've already come to matter to me, just by being you."

Luca's eyes closed, and his breath shook. "I really want to kiss you."

And God—*God*—Wilder wanted that too. He needed it. The first kiss he'd share in so many years, he'd forgotten what it was like to want to feel someone's lips on his. He didn't know how to open himself up to it anymore, but things felt easier, suddenly, when Luca took the lead. His hands moved to cup Wilder's cheeks, and his left thumb brushed over his lower lip.

"Slow," he said, and Wilder knew he meant more than the kiss—and that was everything.

“Slow.” The word fell from his lips before Luca closed the distance between them, and their mouths brushed. It was more breath than anything, the press so gentle he wasn’t sure it happened until Luca surged forward again. And then again—harder, with a swipe of tongue that made Wilder gasp. He opened to it then, pushing his body into Luca’s, letting him invade his mouth in careful sweeps, like he was trying to taste the essence of him.

He was so gone. He groaned and clawed his nails into Luca’s wrists where he held on for dear life, and his heart thudded so hard it drowned out what little he could hear.

He thought for a moment he could lose himself entirely in this kiss, and then Luca’s entire body stiffened, and he let out a pained, agonizing groan and wrenched back. “I can’t,” he gasped.

For a moment, Wilder panicked, like maybe the whole thing was too much, or maybe he went too far. Then he saw Luca cupping his hand over his crotch, saw his face drawn and pale, and he realized why.

“Oh God, your balls.”

There was a man standing to the left that burst into laughter, and Luca groaned louder as he buried his face in Wilder’s neck. “If public humiliation is the price I have to pay for kissing you—I’ll gladly pony up. But it sucks.”

Wilder couldn’t stop his laughter. It was rich and full, and it filled his entire body. It was fueled by so much more than just humor. It was filled with wonder, and his own strength, and the elation that he had taken this step and it meant something to him that no one could ever take it away.

He composed himself a second later, then extended a hand to Luca, who had managed to breathe again, and together they headed for the parking lot. They didn’t say much after that, the ride in the car too dark, but Luca held his hand the entire way, and Wilder stared ahead at the sea of stars low on the horizon as they made their way back to Savannah. And, for the first time in forever, he understood what it meant to feel content.

## CHAPTER 13

LUCA SHIFTED from foot to foot, leaning in to press the buzzer with his elbow, his arms occupied with three Tupperware containers of food and sauce. He had Raphael's crumpled address in his pocket and a knot in his gut, because he had never in his life just showed up to someone's house without making concrete plans—after convincing himself they wouldn't hate it if he was there.

After a bit, Luca started to panic like maybe Raphael wasn't home, or maybe he'd seen through the peephole and had decided not to answer. He took a breath and reminded himself that Raphael might need a few minutes to get to the door, and that was proved true when it opened and Raphael was there, leaning heavily on a cane.

His brows lifted, his mouth parting in faint surprise, then he smiled. "Is that my dinner?"

"Yes." Luca dragged his bottom lip between his teeth, then shrugged. "You said to come by whenever, so I thought...if you're not busy..."

"I am never busy when someone wants to cook for me." He stepped back, letting the door swing wide, and Luca walked in. The place was small, with polished wood floors and wide doorways. It was a great room with the kitchen against the far wall and nothing more than a TV stand and a sofa.

He wasn't sure if it was out of necessity or if Raphael was a minimalist, but either way, it fit him. The place had a sort of rich, woody smell from a little oil diffuser on the kitchen

counter, and the air was cooler than Luca normally kept his place.

“Can I just,” he gestured with his elbow to the kitchen counter, and Raphael nodded, walking behind him at a slower pace. “Most of this is pre-cooked. My mom’s trick with her sauce is to cook it all up, and then let it sit in the fridge for like four or five days so the flavors really marry together. Then you have to eat it right away, but it never lasted in our house.” He was well aware of the high tension in his tone and the fact that he was rambling.

And from the way Raphael laughed behind him, he was pretty sure the other man noticed too. “I have wine somewhere if you want some.”

“I still need a pill at night, so I’m not supposed to be drinking,” Luca said, ducking his head low toward the counter as he picked at the seal on the container.

Raphael let out a small sigh, then shuffled around the counter, using it for balance with one hand as he reached for Luca’s arm. “Water is great. You didn’t need to do all this.”

“I promised. And you brought me food and drugs,” Luca reminded him. Raphael’s hand was warm as it encircled his wrist, and it was grounding. He’d never had a friend like this—who liked to touch, who liked to be in his space without wanting something physical. It made him nervous, but it made him hungry for it. He used to envy people who had those kinds of friendships, the easy casual affection that seemed so deep and so genuine.

He wanted to hold on with both hands, but he didn’t want to scare Raphael off.

“This is more than a thanks,” Luca said after a beat.

Raphael blinked at him, then slowly withdrew his hand. “I told you, it’s not a good idea if we...”

“Look, you are hot,” Luca interrupted. “Stupid hot. But I don’t want to sleep with you.”

Raphael raised a brow. “Okay?”

“I went on a date with Wilder last night, and we kissed,” he blurted. He looked away, not able to meet the sheer rise of joy in Raphael’s eyes. “And if I’m with him again tonight, I’m going to get hard—and when it happened last night, it hurt so bad I wanted to pass out.”

There was a silence so heavy, he could almost hear the flecks of dust in the air as they blew past his ears. Then Raphael threw his head back and gave a deep, rich belly laugh. “*Ach du heilige scheisse*. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Luca didn’t know what the German words were, but he could tell from his face it was subtle mockery. “Yes. So, I’m here to visit my new friend and thank him with dinner that I meticulously researched, and also give my dick some time to heal so I can kiss him without wanting to cry.”

Raphael reached out for him again, and Luca expected a pat on the shoulder or a gentle hand-squeeze, but instead the man gathered him close. Luca towered over Raphael by at least six inches, yet he felt small in his arms and weak against the strength of them. He dropped his forehead to Raphael’s shoulder and sighed out a breath.

“Tell me this thing with Wilder isn’t a bad idea. I like him a lot, but I did not come to Savannah for this.”

“It isn’t wrong *because* you didn’t come here for this.” Raphael eased Luca’s face up and braced himself with a firm grip on his shoulders. “You can have both things, you know?”

“Both things?”

“A path to find something good in your life—a way to be happy with yourself. And you can also find someone who makes you happy separate from that. Wilder doesn’t have to be anything more than just a man you like.”

Luca hadn’t realized just how badly he needed to hear that, but the relief of it was like a gut-punch. “Oh.”

Raphael chuckled and gave his cheek a pat. “Make me some dinner, and I’ll find a movie we can watch, hmm?”

Luca’s face softened, and he stepped back from Raphael’s touch. “Yeah. I can do that.” He turned to the stove as Raphael

walked out of the kitchen, and he let himself just stand there for a long moment and feel.

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“Is your mother still alive?” Raphael asked an hour later as they were scraping the last of the vegetables and sauce from their plates.

Luca’s brows lifted. “Yes?”

“Is she still in love with your father?”

Luca realized where he was going with that statement, and he rolled his eyes, snatching the plate out of Raphael’s hand and walking to the sink. He’d kept the place relatively clean—a new thing he was trying since he’d been humiliated by the state of his apartment when Wilder had come over.

He wanted the embarrassment he’d been through since arriving in Savannah to mean something—to help him find whatever sort of substance it was he was looking for.

Stacking the plates in the sink, he moved back to the sofa where Raphael was still sprawled with his legs on the table, and as he sat, Raphael’s thighs began to tremble. “Shit, are you...”

“Spasms,” Raphael said, his voice a little tense. His eyes shut, and his mouth formed a thin line, but he didn’t move to stop them, so Luca held back.

“Hurts?”

“Not as bad as when I was a kid. But it’s not comfortable.” He muttered a long string of soft German under his breath, then heaved out a sigh when the tremors started to calm down. “I was on my feet a lot today. Using my wheelchair helps, but I like walking.”

He said it with a sort of defensive tension Luca recognized all too well—like maybe he was about to be given the third degree over why he didn't just use his chair all the time. It was only funny because Luca had been asking himself over the last week why he'd let himself avoid every hard decision in his life.

Why had he been so weak?

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Luca offered.

Raphael snorted. “Come over again and cook me more food?”

Luca gave him a flat look. “Really?”

“You asked.” Raphael's grin softened, and then he shifted close enough to lay his head on Luca's shoulder, and he nestled in. “I like you.”

The tone was nothing like the way Wilder had used. There was no desperation, no passion, no want. Just a simple fact. Raphael was his friend because he liked Luca. He found worth in him beyond what Luca could offer. He was too afraid to accept it, but too lonely to deny what Raphael was offering so readily and so easily.

He slung his arm around Raphael's shoulders and let him settle in closer. “Why are you single?”

“Too many reasons to list. Mainly because I haven't found anyone I want to date. It's hard work, and it never ends well.”

“Never?” Luca pressed.

“For me.” Raphael let out a sigh. “You're not trying to play matchmaker with me, are you? Jayden starts up his nonsense every couple of months, and I don't need another one of those in my life.”

Luca bit back a comment about how he wasn't going to be around that long, because frankly he wasn't sure what the future held. He liked Wilder—and he would eventually reach the fork in the road where he'd have to choose, because Wilder wasn't going to be like Noah. There would be no closing the bakery doors and riding off into the sunset. They were new—



they were more than new. They liked each other, but their lives were strangers in different universes.

“I just wondered. I don’t think relationships are the only way for people to be happy.”

Raphael chuckled, sounding tired. “They aren’t. Knox—have you met him?”

Luca shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“He’s the Captain of the Fire Department. He also has the blacksmith booth at the Market.” When Luca shook his head again, Raphael shrugged. “We fuck sometimes.”

Unable to stop himself, Luca startled. “You *fuck* sometimes?”

“He’s nice and very attractive. Very good in bed,” Raphael said, looking up with a wide grin. “But he doesn’t date. He’s grey...something...” His brow furrowed, nose wrinkled. “I can’t remember the word. He normally doesn’t want relationships. Sometimes he connects to people, but it’s rare.”

“Grey aromantic,” Luca murmured. He’d thought that about himself once, but he knew it wasn’t true. Just because his relationships never had meaning and never lasted didn’t mean he didn’t want one.

“It’s just as well. He’s not my type. But he’s happy, you know? Just as he is—with his job, and his hobby, and this city.”

“Is that you too?”

Raphael shuddered out a sigh, then turned his face into Luca’s side and groaned. “No. But I wish it was. It would make things so much easier. It does help that I haven’t met someone that makes me feel that...spark, you know?”

“I do,” Luca said softly. Because he did—God, he did. And he knew he would do anything to keep it.

“I’m not unhappy with life, even when I’m lonely.”

Luca felt that—deeply, profoundly. He turned his head and laid his cheek on Raphael’s hair and let himself take comfort

in this moment that cost him nothing beyond a new, fragile friendship. “I thought I was. I mean, I thought I was content, at least, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

Raphael hummed. “Do you want to talk about your date? I’m assuming you were wrong about it not being one.”

Rolling his eyes, Luca sighed and shifted so they could cuddle a little more comfortably. “I was too afraid to assume, you know? He’s such a good person. He’s... I don’t know how to feel like I deserve this chance with him.”

“Being yourself is a good start,” Raphael said, elbowing him gently. “Being kind. Appreciating him. It’s not complicated.”

Luca bit hard on his lip. He knew all of this already. He was a stranger to real, actual intimacy, but he was old enough to know the basic mechanics of making a relationship work. “Do you think,” he started, then stopped because he didn’t really have a question to ask. Or, if he was being brutally honest, any question he did have, he wasn’t sure he wanted an answer.

After a beat, Raphael pushed away from him gently and settled with his feet in Luca’s lap. They were stiff, his muscles small with very little give, but Luca decided to return the earlier favor and started to massage him.

Raphael’s head fell back with a small groan, and Luca smiled. “I knew this friendship was a good idea.”

Luca snorted. “Thanks.”

“I mean it. More than just dinner and massage, but I do appreciate it.” Raphael opened his eyes to shoot Luca a wink. “And to answer your question...”

“I didn’t really ask one,” he muttered, and Raphael huffed a laugh.

“Yes, you did, even if you didn’t say it. The truth is, you’re over-thinking it. You have a rare opportunity—thanks to the life you’re trying to escape—to make this work. Yes, you have another life in California, but it doesn’t have to stay there, does it?”

Luca wanted to contradict him—wanted to find something in his life he had created that was permanent. Something that needed him home. But the reality was the opposite, and it hurt to admit it, even in his own head. “No. It doesn’t.”

“Maybe something in your life was just waiting for someone like Wilder to come along,” Raphael offered, then dropped his head back down and closed his eyes again. “Maybe your path was always meant to lead you here.”

Luca allowed those words to sink in. He’d never really been the sort of person who believed in fate or predestined paths. He wasn’t sure there was anything in the universe that gave a shit enough to dictate the future of one single, pointless human being. But it was nice to think of himself as important—even if it was only for a moment.

And the fact remained, Raphael was right. California had no hold on Luca, so assuming Wilder would want him to stick around, there was nothing holding him back.

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Luca was grateful for the pills but frustrated that he was sleeping in late and taking twice as long to shake the fog from the narcotics. The morning after the *incident*, he’d showered and looked down in horror to see a faint purpling rising to the surface of his flaccid cock. He examined his balls in the mirror after and found a corresponding bruise on the side, but there was no swelling, and apart from the pain when he was erect, he wasn’t pissing blood.

He didn’t have any of the signs Aksel had warned him about, so he wasn’t panicking over his health, but he was still mortified at being seen this way. It was bad enough now that Wilder had seen him almost cry when he’d sported a half-chub behind the zipper of his jeans, and although Wilder had still seemed interested after their kiss, he hadn’t so much as texted him after that.

And two days had come and gone.

Luca wasn't normally a man prone to panic—he had long-since accepted that he was a person worthy of ghosting. But he was hoping things with Wilder would be different.

Halfway through brushing his teeth, Luca's phone buzzed, and he nearly dropped it in the toilet as he fumbled for the screen to turn it on.

Wilder: Can you come by the shop before I open?

Luca: What time do you open?

Wilder: Eleven.

Luca: Be there.

His heart thrashed wildly against the inside of his chest, and he took several calming breaths, then moved to the kitchen for water since coffee would only make his nerves worse. It didn't sound like a break-up text—not that they had established any kind of relationship that would require a break-up. A sort-of date and a minute-long kiss counted for nothing, at least in his experience. He wanted more, but he knew that was going to take time.

He was beyond begging though. His first instinct was to make himself as pretty and expensive looking as possible, to find some way to peacock himself in front of Wilder so the other man would find reasons to keep him around. But he was trying to break his old habits. He wanted Wilder to see the other things about him, to dig deep and find bits and pieces of him worth keeping around that didn't have anything to do with money or sex appeal.

He wanted someone—he wanted *Wilder*—to look at him as he was, in his sloppy sweats and an old t-shirt, and see him as a man worth trying for. For so many years, he'd heard too many people say it was impossible to love someone if you didn't love yourself.

And that thought terrified him, because most days he didn't even *like* himself. He stared back at a reflection he barely recognized and wished he'd drawn a different lot before his soul came to earth. But he was capable of love. He knew that. He loved his siblings, and he loved his parents. He loved Gabby, even if she would never return the sentiment.

He was even coming to love Raphael as one of his first friends that wanted him around just because. And it didn't feel less than just because his own self-worth had hit rock bottom. But maybe they were on to something. And maybe that's what Wilder was trying to tell him.

He felt nervous as he escaped from the Manor without Raphael noticing him, and he decided to walk the half mile to Whipped. The warm air and the soft summer breeze helped his shoulders relax and clear his head a little as he headed down the sidewalk.

In the courtyard across from the fire station, he could see the Fire Chief standing at attention and another tall, dark-haired man in front leading the rest of the crew through exercises. Had it been any other day, he might have stopped to watch. He appreciated a fit human body in all forms, and he had absolutely spent his money on firemen calendars in the past.

But right now, his mind was focused on one thing—whether or not Wilder was going to end the best thing that had ever happened to him before it even began.

His heart was in his throat, but he reached for the handle to the bakery door and tugged. His foot slipped off the step with the force of his pull and with the way the door had no give, and he started to panic before he remembered that it was before the shop opened. He pressed his head to the glass and peered in, considering knocking before he realized Wilder wouldn't hear him.

Luca: I'm here. Front door.

Wilder: Come around to the back, it's open

Luca shoved his phone into his pocket and made his way around the corner, into the alley, where he saw a heavy green door propped open with a milk crate. He heaved it wider, then slipped inside, and was instantly overwhelmed with the rich smell of cake and frosting. He had never had much of a sweet tooth, but he'd skipped breakfast, and he remembered the way Wilder's cupcake had melted in his mouth.

He followed the scent down a short corridor, which opened up to a main kitchen area, and he found Wilder at the baking table staring right at him with a soft grin. It was the smile on his face that made everything relax, that made his knees want to give out. And it felt like an overreaction, so he pushed it aside and crossed the room, propping his hip against the table.

'Good morning,' he signed.

Wilder's smile widened. 'Morning. Sleep okay?'

Luca shrugged. 'Drugs are knocking me out pretty hard.'

At that, Wilder's brows furrowed. 'Is the pain that bad?'

'Worse at night,' Luca answered, but this was the last thing he wanted to be talking about right then. He glanced at Wilder's ears and saw his hearing aids weren't in, and as much as he wanted to switch back to speech, he didn't. 'It's getting better.'

Wilder hummed, then reached around Luca to push a bowl of what looked like whipped butter from the edge, then he carefully slid his arms around Luca's waist and held him. "Is this okay?"

Luca's entire body felt flushed and hot, and he nodded as he dragged his fingers into Wilder's hair and cupped the back of his head. "Yes. I...is this okay? Your hearing aids..."

"I can hear what you're saying since there's no other noise in the room. I had to take them out this morning. I have Meniere's disease, and they make my vertigo worse on bad days. I had a really bad one yesterday. I couldn't get out of bed, so Dmitri had to run the shop, and it's been off and on this morning." As he spoke, Luca noticed the way his eyes trembled back and forth, like a spasm.

The words hit him a second later, and he felt the anxiety knot in his belly give way to something softer and sweeter. Wilder hadn't been ignoring him. He hadn't wanted to brush him off, and Luca felt like an ass for not checking in. He detached his hands from Wilder's hair to sign, 'Do you need help today?'

Wilder grinned, but he shook his head. "Dmitri did almost all the prep work last night." He dug his fingers into Luca's sides. "I wanted to invite you to my place for dinner."

Closing his eyes, Luca leaned in, brushing his nose along Wilder's forehead before smudging kisses along his cheeks, his chin, his neck. He wanted to kiss his mouth, but he also wanted to breathe in the scent of him, let it wrap around him and overwhelm him.

"Is that a yes?"

Luca pulled back and nodded his fist. 'Yes.'

"Good. Kiss me then, before I have to finish this up."

Luca had no trouble complying. He laid a hand to Wilder's jaw, dragged his thumb along his skin, then pressed their lips together—soft and chaste at first, and then deeper as Wilder opened to him—just like before, fierce and willing. He tasted sweet and fruity, and his tongue fucked into Luca's mouth before he pulled away with a gasp.

"Sorry," he said, pressing a hand to Luca's chest. "Sorry."

Luca frowned. "What?"

Wilder's hand drifted to his crotch and pressed to where he was hard. And there was pain, but not like the night at the aquarium. It was a dull throb, a lot like blue balls. Nothing he couldn't handle. Wilder's hand made him harder though, and he couldn't stop his groan as he pushed into it.

"It's fine."

Wilder frowned up at him. "I didn't catch that."

'It's fine,' he repeated in sign. 'The pain is better.'

Wilder's smile after that was hungry—it was almost feral as he rose onto his toes and flipped them around, so Luca was pressed to the bench, and he proceeded to devour his mouth like he was starving for him. “Tonight,” he muttered.

Luca pressed his hand into Wilder's palm and nodded his fist, not wanting to pull away for sign space. ‘Yes.’

Wilder ripped his mouth away, his cheeks flushed, lips parted with his pant. He swallowed thickly once, then twice, and finally looked up. “You have to go. I'm not going to be able to concentrate at all if you stay here.”

It wasn't exactly incentive to stay away, but knowing that he'd have Wilder tonight—in whatever capacity Wilder wanted to give himself—was enough to push him into another kiss, and then a second, and then a third before he managed to stop. They didn't say any sort of goodbye, their gazes locked for a short eternity. Then Luca turned on his heel and let himself out, and he could only breathe again when the warm air filled his lungs just outside the shop.

The day spread out in front of him with no purpose, and yet he didn't feel compelled to fill it. He forced himself away from Whipped only to remove the temptation to go back inside, and instead found himself wandering back toward the courtyard where all of the fire fighters had gone except Fitz, who Raphael had introduced him to the night at the Tavern, and then the tall, good looking man next to him.

Fitz's eyes zeroed in on him, and before Luca was aware of it, he was following the man's shorthand wave to come over. The grass sank beneath his feet, and he felt only a little nervous as he approached, shoving one hand into his pocket just for something to do.

“You look lost,” Fitz said.

Luca rolled his eyes. “I *am* lost. Not literally, but... I'm not sure what the hell to do with myself today.”

“Besides making out with your boyfriend all morning?” Fitz offered, and the other man laughed.



“I don’t know what...” he started, but Fitz’s eyeroll cut him off.

“I’m engaged,” Fitz reminded him. “I know what it looks like when someone’s been making out for the last half hour. I’m willing to bet your boy looks even worse than you.”

“It wasn’t all morning. It was five minutes, maybe,” Luca defended, unwilling to lie.

At that, the other man’s eyes darkened for a second, and he took an imposing step forward. “We haven’t met. I’m Knox.”

Luca’s eyes widened as he extended his hand and felt his fingers near crushed in a firm shake. “Oh. Uh. Raphael mentioned you.”

“So, you and Raph are official?” Knox asked.

“Oh my God. No,” Luca said in a rush, pulling his hand back. “No, not...I was at the bakery with *Wilder*.”

Knox’s face didn’t show any ease. “Ah. Wilder’s a good guy.”

“Don’t,” Fitz warned him, and Knox scoffed. “Why don’t you get Ruiz and finish that trimming job Mrs. Winters was asking for.”

Knox rolled his eyes, then gave Luca another sharp look before he stormed off. When he was gone, Luca’s shoulders slumped, and he glanced away. He knew Knox wasn’t romantically interested, but it was very obvious he was protective—and that he didn’t like Luca much.

“He gets that way with everyone,” Fitz said, his tone surprisingly gentle. “I’ve only seen him loosen up around two guys before, and that’s because he wants to sleep with them, and they keep turning him down.”

Luca’s cheeks pinked. “I can’t tell if that’s supposed to make me feel better or insult me.”

Fitz chuckled. “Neither. He has specific taste. But for what it’s worth, Wilder was smiling this morning when I ran into him on my way to Adam’s truck, and I haven’t seen that look on him in...maybe ever.”

Luca's stomach twisted with worry and pride. He liked that he could give Wilder something—but the pressure was a lot. “We’re not...I mean. It’s new.”

“I know,” Fitz said with a gentle smile. “I’m not trying to make it more than it is. I just want you to know that I noticed. And I’m happy for you both.”

Luca didn’t know what to make of that, but he thought it was probably time to stop searching for hidden meaning in people’s words. At least here, people didn’t play those same games as they did back in Malibu.

Which, really, was starting to feel less and less like home.

“So, you know the uh...farm?”

“Will’s place?” Fitz asked, the corner of his lips twitching.

Luca let out a heavy sigh. “So you know what happened.”

“Aksel is my best friend. And by that, I mean he’s been one of my soul mates since we were eight years old. So yes, I know.”

Luca wanted to be angry—it was private, medical information, and no one had the right. But Fitz wasn’t looking at him with pity, rather more sympathy and apology. And he just didn’t have the energy to care. “Do you think he’d mind if I went back there?”

Fitz laughed. “Who, Will?” When Luca nodded, Fitz dragged a hand down his face. “He would love it if you went back. I haven’t seen him around in a while, but he’s probably a mess about what happened. He’s a good guy, and he takes it pretty personally when people get hurt out there. Especially by Kevin. He doesn’t like when people are angry at him.”

“I’m *not* angry with him,” Luca said—and he meant it with every word. He had been in too much pain at the time to be disappointed that his trip to the farm had been cut short, but he was thinking about it now, as the entire day sat before him with nothing to occupy his time.

He was beyond the ridiculous idea that he could find himself by digging his hands into dirt, but he wanted to

present himself as a person willing to bounce back when everything fell apart. He'd never done that before, and he needed to know he was capable.

“You good, man?” Fitz asked.

Luca smiled. “Actually, I think I am.”

## CHAPTER 14

WILDER DRUMMED his fingers on his leg, nervous energy rippling through him, threatening to trigger his vertigo, which was teetering on the edge of another attack. He hadn't had a day like this in a while—not since he left home. Stress was one of his biggest triggers, but he had never considered how badly he could stress over getting something he wanted. Mostly, he thought with a sardonic, quiet laugh, because it rarely happened.

He was comfortable and settled in Savannah, but the city had never inspired such hunger or desperation in him before. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd ever wanted something as badly as he wanted Luca—and the thought didn't scare him as much as it should have. Luca had asked him not to cook, but Wilder hadn't thought about his own restrictions until half an hour before Luca was supposed to show up.

Which was why he was standing outside of Adam's truck waiting on a container of rice, saltless grilled chicken, and a couple of Israeli salads. He felt like an ass for picking up a plan B, but he didn't want anything to ruin what the night might become. He wasn't ready for everything—hell, he wasn't ready for much—but he was ready to prove to himself that he could move on. That Scott hadn't robbed him of a future with someone else.

Wilder started when the window slid open and Adam leaned out, a plastic bag looped around his wrist. 'Finished,' he signed.

'Thank you.' Wilder took it from him and swiped a hand over his brow, which was sweating, but not from the short

burst of late afternoon summer heat. He noticed when Adam became aware of the tremble in his fingers, and he held his hand behind his back. “Sorry.”

Adam’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head at him. ‘Don’t.’

Wilder felt another ripple of anxiety, and he breathed through it, giving a tense, nervous laugh. “I should go.”

He started to back away, but Adam waved at him, and he turned. Adam’s signs were amateur at best, but he got his point across. ‘Relax. It’s going to be fine. Adriano loves his older brother. He’s a good person.’

Wilder nodded, but it didn’t help. Luca wasn’t the end-all, be-all of his potential love life, but Wilder had come to realize he wanted him to be. He wanted his happy ending, and he didn’t want to slog through more bullshit and pain to get there. He wanted to go to bed and wake up to his sleepy brown eyes and slightly crooked smile. He wanted to feel Luca’s warm hands on him and the way his shoulders shook when he laughed, and he wanted the shy look on his face all the time when he tentatively asked for validation.

He wanted to grow with him—to see what new shape he would take post-Scott as he shed the last of that life in the wake of something new and wonderful. And he thought maybe that could be Luca, but he had never been good at predicting the future.

He’d be damned if he didn’t try, though.

He offered Adam another thanks, which was waved off, and he felt better about himself as he headed back to the apartment. Making his way upstairs, he grabbed his phone and shot Luca a text, letting him know he was home and would be ready for him whenever.

Luca: I told you not to cook, right?

Wilder: You did, and I didn’t.

He contemplated telling him now that his restrictions were annoying, but important. Luca would get it—he had an allergy that could kill him if he wasn't careful. He wouldn't mock Wilder for it. But he hated needing to be accommodated.

Eyeing the bags of food on the table, he shoved them into the fridge, then began to tidy up until the light by the door flashed. His heart hammered in his chest for a minute, but he breathed through it, then walked downstairs and let Luca in.

He looked good, more dressed than he'd been that morning in the bakery kitchen, but not as fussy and put together as before. His hair was wind-swept, and his t-shirt was only half tucked into his jeans, and he was effortlessly gorgeous. He had a scarf hanging over his arm, and a couple of silver rings on his fingers, and his arms were loaded with Tupperware.

They said nothing, but they locked eyes and smiled for far too long before Wilder turned and led him up the stairs. He could feel Luca directly behind him, a sort of warmth taking up normally empty space, and he wondered if it was something he'd ever get used to.

It was odd having anyone but Jayden in his place. Apart from wine nights and the occasional trip down the hill for a movie, Wilder wasn't the most social person, and he didn't mind that life. He liked his safe space. He liked that he could trust his apartment would always be his—and he liked that he had control over who he shared his world with.

The moment became sweeter when Luca dropped everything on the table, then reached for Wilder and drew him close.

His palms were heated from the food he carried, and they seared through Wilder's thin shirt, right into his hips as Luca lowered his head and nuzzled their lips together. He felt a moan drag from his throat, his lips parting, letting Luca's tongue inside.

His head spun—but for the first time that day, it wasn't vertigo. It was happiness, so alien to him, he almost didn't recognize it.

“Hey.” At least, that’s what he thought Luca said, the breath of the word brushing against his mouth. He gave Wilder a series of pecks, then gently pulled back for sign space. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Better,’ he answered, glad he could be honest about that for once. He had stopped feeling like he was walking sideways around one, after he’d eaten his lunch, and even with his heart thumping wildly at the feeling of Luca standing so close, he had never felt steadier. ‘What did you bring me?’

Luca stepped back and flushed. ‘I’ve never had to surprise anyone with dinner, and I...you’ll think I’m weird.’

Wilder cocked his head to the side. ‘I won’t.’

‘I looked up your disease?’ He signed it with his brows lowered, almost like he was trying to phrase it as a question. But Wilder wasn’t sure he meant it that way, or if he was just struggling with his facial expressions. ‘Google said that sodium is a big deal.’

Wilder flushed, his guts twisting in the best and most painful way because no one ever—*ever*—asked him about it. ‘Yes. On bad days like today I generally avoid all salt.’

Luca nodded, and he bit his lip as he went on. ‘Italian food without salt is...a crime, according to my mother. But I tried my best, and I think it tastes okay. If it’s awful, we can order out or cook something. Whatever you want...’

That might not have been the end of his rambling signs, but Wilder would never know. He gave in to the rush of desire to grab him, to hold him, to kiss him deep as he backed Luca up all the way to the table, fingers digging into his hips. He broke apart, breathless and trembling, and he laid his head on Luca’s shoulder. “It’ll be perfect. Thank you.”

He felt a soft vibration, heard a faint tone, but he didn’t think it was words. A soft groan, maybe, as Luca curled his hands into Wilder’s shirt and just held him. It was nothing like he expected—and he wasn’t sure what to do with it, but he knew he was right in not wanting to let him go.

He pulled back after a minute, offering Luca a sheepish smile, and he shrugged. ‘I like you.’

Luca chuckled. ‘I can tell.’

Wilder felt a pang of something uncomfortable, an old, broken fear left over when Scott had used his body against him. If Wilder was hard, it was obvious he wanted it. If Wilder wanted it, he had no right to tell Scott no. It had taken him years to stop being afraid of his own body, to reclaim the idea of consent. But showing physical desire still terrified him a little.

The look in Luca’s eyes was nothing like Scott, though. It was soft, it was full of wonder, and of was hesitance. It calmed him and took away some of the trembling in his hands when he lifted them. ‘We should eat, yes?’

‘Yes.’ Luca looked almost relieved, and he quickly took the containers of food to plate everything, moving around Wilder’s kitchen like he’d been there a dozen times. He turned around, a small grin lifting the corners of his mouth, making him look young and a little unsure.

Wilder moved around him for water before leading him to the living room and easing down with his legs stretched under the coffee table. It was small, barely room for both of them, but it felt good to have Luca pressed against his side like he was always meant to be there.

“So, tell me,” Luca started, then froze.

It took Wilder a second to realize why Luca hesitated, then he shook his head. “There’s no background noise. I can hear you.”

Luca’s voice was muffled, but he could make out all the consonants and most of the vowels as he leaned in to finish what he was saying. “You can tell me if the food sucks. I promise it won’t hurt my feelings.”

Although Wilder had a feeling that was at least partially a lie, he nodded. “Trust me—my diet is bland. *This* does not look bland.” He wasn’t making that up, either. He ate a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables, but his proteins were always



lacking when he had to forgo all salt. Even the low-sodium soy sauce was too much on most days, and he had never been very creative when it came to meals.

His baking—that was different. But he had resigned himself to a diet without any real pleasure. But now? He could smell the richness of it—the bite of wine, the mushrooms, the garlic. He took some onto his fork, then ate it, and his eyes shut with real pleasure.

It was good. He didn't have to lie or placate. It lacked the sort of tongue-curling sharpness of salt that he missed and craved too often, but in place of that was a sort of richness that brought him something like comfort. "Wow."

"You're not just saying that?" Luca asked.

Wilder set his plate down and turned to face him. "Did you try it?"

At that, Luca scowled. "I always taste my food when I eat it. But it isn't the recipe I'm used to. It's not how I'm used to cooking. If I told my mom no salt and no parm, she'd cry. And this really isn't as good as hers."

Wilder grinned and shook his head. "I probably won't get the chance to compare. Even on my good days, I have to be careful. So, in our world," he reached over and laid his hand to Luca's cheek, "this is the best risotto recipe ever made."

Luca swallowed thickly. "So, eat it, then."

Wilder laughed, and then he did. They kept the conversation small, easy—Luca told him about his day at Will's ranch and how things had smoothed out between him and Dottie, which would have been hilarious and absurd if it wasn't the absolute truth.

"I don't think I did any good out there," Luca said as he scraped the last of the food off his plate and set it down on the table. "I mean, he won't be in a rush to hire me for, you know, farmhand stuff."

Wilder laughed again. "Is that what you want to do?"

“God, no.” Luca swiped his hand over his mouth, then took Wilder’s empty plate and set it beside his own before pulling him up to the sofa. He shuffled Wilder toward him, draping his legs over his thighs so they were pressed together. It was a closeness Wilder had never experienced before—and one he didn’t want to let go of. Ever again. “They had barn kittens which were cute, but the litter boxes were disgusting. And the chickens would not leave me alone. I don’t think it was my, you know, *thing*.”

Wilder shook his head with a grin, letting his fingers play a pattern up Luca’s ribs. He liked to feel him jump when it tickled, and then push against him a little harder when it didn’t. “I’m not judging you. I grew up on a farm, and I am okay not spending a lot of time at one again.”

Luca grinned and shuffled them down a little before he reached out and brushed fingers through Wilder’s hair. It was so damn soft, so damn easy, it almost didn’t feel real. “What kind of farm animals did you have?”

“Chickens, mostly. My mom loved chickens. She had Frizzles and Silkies—and she had one rooster that was such a dickhead,” he groaned at the memory of how the little bastard would always escape his coop and always end up at his window to crow three hours before sunrise was due. “We had a huge field, and we grew pretty much everything we ate. There are days I can’t even look at a squash without wanting to gag.”

Luca grinned at him, then cupped his cheek and dragged his thumb under his right eye. “I’ve only ever seen squash at Trader Joe’s. I grew up on boxed pasta and canned tomatoes for sauce. Then Adriano got rich, and...things changed. *I* changed.”

Wilder watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat, and he curled his fingers around Luca’s hand and pressed it tight to his face. “You deserve to be softer to yourself. You only knew one thing, and your brother dropped something on you that you weren’t prepared for.”

Luca scoffed. “What kind of asshole does it make me to say that my life got worse after I had money? I could have

done something with it, you know? Something good.”

“You did,” Wilder said quietly.

Luca shook his head. “Something bigger. Something...not so myopic. I helped people who paid attention to me. It was entirely selfish.”

Wilder bowed his head. “Not everyone has to save the world, Luca.” He leaned in, and Luca met him halfway, and they were kissing again. It lacked the desperation from the kisses before, and it lacked some of the newness, but left all the want and desire and heat behind as Wilder felt himself get hard.

Luca tugged and pulled until Wilder was on him, almost too big to be straddling a man Luca’s size on his little loveseat, but he felt cocooned by Luca’s arms and the cushions that pressed against either side of him.

Wilder opened to the other man, pressing into his chest, digging fingers into his hair. He spread his thighs farther, let his dick rub up against the inside of his boxers as he gave tiny thrusts until it almost hurt. “God,” he said, tearing his mouth away.

Luca dragged blunt nails under his shirt, over each rib until he had both hands curled around his shoulders. “I want you.”

Wilder closed his eyes. He wanted Luca too, with a power he hadn’t expected, but there was something a little ugly and anxious simmering—faint in the background and unkind. “It’s been so long.”

“I know,” Luca murmured, nipping at his ear. “I know. I’m not asking for more than this right here. I just want you to know how I feel, okay? You’re gorgeous, and you’re one of the best people I’ve ever known. And I want you.”

Wilder wasn’t ready to let it end here. He pulled back, releasing his hold on Luca’s hair, and let his hand trail to his chest. He could feel the wild thrumming of his heart against his palm, and he closed his eyes because Luca’s all-encompassing stare was dangerous.

“Bedroom.”

“Are you sure?”

Wilder licked his lips, nodded, but didn't look up. “I'm sure. Not for...everything. But for something. I need to feel you, need you to touch me.”

Wilder half expected for Luca to drag him back, to bring their simmering passion to a boil, but instead, he rose, then took Wilder's hand and placed a wet, openmouthed kiss to the center of his palm. He didn't say anything, but Wilder heard his own muted breath as it stuttered a gasp from deep in his lungs.

He was grateful his room was only steps away and that it was already lit from his bright lamp on the desk. He'd tidied, though the bed was still a mess, but Luca didn't seem to mind it as he eyed the comforter, then dragged Wilder over and eased him onto his back.

“What can I do for you?” he asked softly.

Wilder reached up and brushed fingers over his lips, feeling the soft puff of air as he exhaled, and then the gentle lick of a tongue as he nipped at Wilder's warm skin. “I don't actually know. It's been so long—and sometimes things don't make sense.”

“Until they do?” Luca offered. He nosed along Wilder's jaw, then gently kissed under his ear. “I get it. I just want you to feel good. Wherever that takes us is enough for me.”

It seemed too good to be true, but Wilder lost himself to sensation quick enough that he didn't think about it. He just let himself experience it—just let himself unburden under the weight of Luca's body and the press of his lips, half open as his tongue tasted exposed skin.

Wilder wasn't sure when they'd started to lose clothes, but when he felt Luca's bare chest touch his, he felt a moment of crushing panic. Luca's fingers were exploring him with gentle, nonsense patterns, then he brushed a scar, which made Wilder freeze.

Luca was in tuned enough to notice, to feel it, and he wrenched his hand back. “Here?” he asked, touching the side

of Wilder's nipple.

A few inches off was his biggest scar—the stab wound that would have killed him if it had been on his left side. As it was, it had grazed his lung, and it had taken the most stitches. In the weeks after his injury, Wilder had felt that one the most. “Just don't ask me about it right now?”

Luca's brow furrowed until he realized what Wilder was talking about. “That's...of course I'm not going to. We don't ever need to talk about it.”

There was sincerity in his tone—at least, that's what he thought it was. But it was so hard to tell, because Wilder had never let anyone this close. Frustration welled up in him, and his throat went tight, because for just fucking once he wanted to feel normal. He wanted to lay here and feel good and let this gorgeous man make him come without the weight of his ex and his trauma holding him by the throat.

“Will you touch me?”

Luca hesitated, and Wilder knew that some of what he was feeling was showing in his eyes. “Why don't *you* touch *me*. Show me what you want—what you like.”

It wasn't really a request, even though it was worded like one, and Wilder wanted to yell and hit something because he didn't always want to be in control, even when it was probably necessary.

*It won't always be like this*, a voice whispered, sounding suspiciously like his third and best therapist. He hadn't seen her since he'd been back with his parents, and he hadn't stayed with her long, but she'd been the one to get through to him most.

And she would tell him to have this—to compromise first and work on the rest later.

Trust didn't come naturally or quickly to him anymore, no matter how good a person seemed or how safe a situation appeared. And Luca was giving him the power to earn that trust, and he needed to stop being angry about it.

Leaning up, Wilder gripped him by the back of the head and kissed him. “Roll over.”

And he did, easily, like he was made to follow commands. He spread out in his socks and boxers, and he looked ridiculous with the contrast of his dark hair and the white cloth—and Wilder wanted to lick every inch of him. He wasn’t ready for that, either, but he was ready for something. He straddled Luca, then dragged hands down his chest before he cupped one around the bulging hardness straining at the silky fabric.

“I’m almost curious how much these boxers cost you.”

“I wish I could remember,” Luca answered, breathy, more a movement of lips than sound. “It was a lot.”

“I bet.” Wilder shifted up, letting his own clothed dick rub against Luca’s. The pressure was enough, but the friction was lacking—however, he needed that barrier for now. He thrust, and Luca’s hips arched, and Wilder could feel it under his hands that his lover was seconds away from falling apart. “God, you’re so responsive.”

“I’m not usually,” Luca admitted. He pushed up onto his elbows then looked down at where they were joined yet separated, and he licked his lips. “That’s...weirdly erotic.”

“Me fucking you through your clothes?” Wilder thrust again, his dick even harder now. He was so sensitive, his own cotton boxers were threatening to chafe, but he couldn’t stop moving. He’d found a rhythm, felt something warm and hot rising in his belly, tugging at his balls. “Does it hurt? Your injury...”

“It hurts,” Luca said, but when Wilder tried to pull back, he grabbed him by the hips and thrust again. “I like it.”

“Into pain?”

“Into you,” Luca countered. “Please, kiss me. I need...”

But Wilder wasn’t about to make him beg. He gripped the back of his neck and hauled Luca in as he thrust them together in a stuttered rhythm that shouldn’t have been able to get either one of them off.

But it did.

Luca shot first, a heavy groan pushing into Wilder's mouth, against his tongue, his body shivering and twitching. The warm wetness spread along the front, and just knowing what it was—what Wilder had done—was enough to send him crashing over the edge.

The orgasm, the pleasure of it, was muted. It was softer, a gentle rippling through his limbs, but he felt himself spurting all the same, his cock throbbing—wanting more, wanting to be touched, and yet he didn't. He thrust helplessly against Luca's softening dick—just shy of enough, and he dropped his forehead.

He wondered if he'd ever been so satisfied before. Pushing up, he shifted off to the side, then rolled to face Luca. 'Stay tonight?' he signed after a beat.

The curve of Luca's smile brightened his entire face. 'Yes,' he signed. 'Definitely.' His hands dropped, and he gathered Wilder close, burying his face in the crook of Wilder's neck. It was the warm, even breath that settled them both, and Wilder finally settled into himself.

## CHAPTER 15

LUCA WOKE in Wilder's empty bed, his side cold, not a sound in the house. For a moment, he felt a cold wash of panic, until he saw a small, folded note on the nightstand. *Downstairs doing prep*. He rolled onto his back, feeling deliciously sore and sated for having done so little that night beyond a bit of frotting and coming in his pants the way he'd done as a stoned teenager.

He felt like he'd climbed an emotional mountain, and he wanted to embrace that freedom of letting go all the things that had been weighing him down. His problems hadn't been solved with a mutual orgasm—and it would take a while to really believe that Wilder wanted him just for him—but it was a step.

Pushing himself up to his feet, Luca padded to the bathroom and washed up, scrubbing a little toothpaste in his mouth with his finger, then he rummaged through Wilder's things and found sweats that fit him—even if they were a little high on the ankles—and a t-shirt that smelled faintly like cupcake batter.

The light from the kitchen window was warm and gentle, the early rays of the sun filtering past the curtains. He pushed a pod into Wilder's coffee machine, then started it, waiting with his eyes shut for a second to watch the way everything lit up bright orange behind his eyelids. The smell of coffee filled the room, mingling with the faint scent of baking cake from below.

He grabbed his drink and headed downstairs. The room was brighter from the fluorescent lights, and Wilder was



standing at the table bobbing his head to music from wide headphones pressed over his ears. He had a spinning cake stand, and Luca stood, mesmerized as he watched him spin and frost—a perfect swirl of something soft yellow and pastel purple.

He hesitated when he realized he had no choice but to startle the other man, but then he spied the switch on the wall and quickly flicked it up and down. Wilder's hand stuttered, but he turned his head and smiled when he saw Luca. "Hang on," he said, his voice soft. He pulled his headphones off, then reached for a small case on the table where his hearing aids sat.

Luca was patient until Wilder had them on, then he crossed the room and set his coffee down before grabbing Wilder by the apron pockets and tugging him into a kiss. "Mm. Frosting?"

"I always taste my work," Wilder said. He picked up the bag and dabbed a bit on his finger, then held it up. When Luca pulled the whole digit into his mouth, Wilder let out a small groan and swallowed heavily.

"Good?"

"Amazing. What is that?"

"Lemon and lavender. It was a spring flavor that got popular, so I think I'm going to keep it on the menu." His voice was still a little breathless, and he leaned in to steal another kiss before moving to the sink to wash his hands. "Did you sleep okay?"

Luca nodded when Wilder turned back to him, slinging a dish towel over his shoulder. "Better than at the house."

"Is that a hint?"

At that, Luca's mouth twitched into a half smile. "Not yet. My dick wants to say yes, but my heart says it's probably best for it to be patient."

"Your heart is a smart little thing," Wilder said. "You should trust it more often."

Even the kindest honesty could feel like a sucker punch, and Luca swallowed back his knee-jerk reaction to tell Wilder that it had never led him in the right direction. But maybe this time was different. “I’m getting there. And last night was good.”

“Very good,” Wilder breathed out. His fingers trembled a little as he reached for his frosting again. “I think I need to kick you out, though. I have about two hundred more cupcakes to frost, and I’m not going to get anything done if you’re here looking all...” he moaned quietly and waved his hand up and down Luca’s body, “in my clothes.”

Luca couldn’t find a single way to take that poorly, smiling around his coffee as he took another drink. “Then I’ll get out of your hair. Can I see you later, though?”

“Yes.”

*Yes*, he said, as simple as that. As easy as anything had ever been, but Luca was still startled by his honesty.

“Text me?”

Wilder nodded, then used his free hand to beckon him close before going up halfway on his toes and closing the distance between their lips. “Have a good day. Promise me.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to try,” he said, and he meant it.

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LUCA SLIPPED out the back and made his way to the Augustin without being seen by anyone that early. His bed was inviting, if not a bit lonely, but it felt good to get another two hours of sleep before the bright morning insisted he rise.

He had more coffee and contemplated his day when his phone buzzed, and he saw it was a text from Will—something he wasn’t expecting.

Will: Had a thought—something you might like that's not as dirty. No cat boxes.

Luca: What time?

Will: Sooner the better. Wear clothes you can stain.

BY DESIGN, Luca didn't own clothes he could stain. The very idea was horrifying, but he found sweats and a t-shirt that had been around just short of forever, and he slipped them on, grabbing his oldest running shoes and heading for his car. He felt a pang of disappointment when he saw the salon desk empty, and he told himself to text Raphael later when he was done with whatever idea Will had.

It wasn't a chore to go out to the farm really, even if he hadn't been any good at the tasks Will had offered. Milking the cow had been a damn disaster—he hadn't been able to figure out how to actually get the damn thing to express milk—and the kittens were more interested in using him as a climbing post than anything else.

Luca couldn't help but wonder what about that place kept a man like Will satisfied.

It was all busy work—mindless sort of routine, and Will wasn't that much older than Luca, but it was obvious in the lines of his face he'd lived more life than him. He seemed richer in his spirit and in his laughter. Luca envied it so deeply he could taste it, but he didn't begrudge the man his happiness.

All it had really done was motivate him to want more—from himself, from this place, even from Wilder.

Luca made it to the farm just before ten, throwing the car into park beside Will's truck. As he stepped out, the man in question came from around the side of the house, waving until Luca got within earshot of him.

"I'm out back today. Have you ever made soaps or lotions before?"

It was probably the most random question he'd ever been asked. "There was this boutique at Seaport Village in San Diego where I could go have my own blends mixed in—but I just picked out a few things and they whipped it up for me."

"Ah, mate, what *is* your life?" Will asked with a small chuckle. "Normally, Isaac's at home to help me with this, but he's busy today, and I need to prep for the Market. I have a stall on the weekends where I sell soap. A lot of them are based from Dottie's milk, but I try to keep a variety."

"And you want *me* to help with it?" he asked, unable to hide the disbelief in his tone.

"It's easy," Will promised him, though his smile was a little deceiving.

They walked to a set-up under a metal awning, and Luca couldn't make heads or tails out of it. There were jars, silicon molds, and buckets of things like flowers and small plastic peacocks and massive tubes of paint or food coloring.

"I've got a blend here all prepped, we just need to add fragrance, color, then get them into molds. I thought you might enjoy the clear ones. They're my allergen free," Will said, and pointed to the end of the table.

Luca blinked at him. "...okay?"

Will laughed again and shook his head, reaching for a bucket of the little plastic peacocks. "Just stick one of these at the bottom, pour from that jar there, and let them set. Easy as that. Also, don't forget gloves, because the jars are bloody hot."

Luca noticed the thick gloves at the end of the table, so he slipped them on, then shook the bin of peacocks. "Kevin really is a local celebrity, isn't he?" Luca asked.

Will snorted, but he looked a little sad. "Trying for some better PR. Sorry little sod's made a name for himself and not in the way I'd hoped. I think he's acting out, and Liam reckons I'm being a bit of an idiot about the whole thing and Kevin's just acting in his nature."

Luca found the idea of terrifying cows into kicking people in their dicks as a peacock's nature to be somewhat debatable, but he couldn't help but admit the brightly colored creature with his massive tail had some appeal.

"I'm not the only one he's gone after though."

Will shook his head. "Nope. One name on a long list, mate. But doesn't mean you're not special."

Luca began to place the peacocks in the molds, setting them upright and waiting for Will to nod. "I'm not sure I want to be special in *that* way."

With a snort, Will began to swirl marbled waves of color into a white mix, then he gingerly tipped the mixture into hearts. "I'm just glad he didn't scare you off."

Luca shrugged before he grabbed the jar off a hotplate, wincing as the heat seeped through the gloves, then he started to pour. It was harder than it looked, and he knew his technique was sloppy, but he didn't spill too much over. "I'm just surprised you wanted me back. I'm definitely not cut out for farming."

"Most of us aren't," Will said with a wink. "Liam would rather die than have to deal with most of this, but he's got his garage and his cars."

Luca loved the way Will said garage—*geh-roge*. It made him grin as he filled the second set of molds. "You must adore him."

"I do. Both of them—and who'd have ever known," Will said quietly. "You make any progress with your... whatever it was? Date, right?"

Luca had very carefully avoided telling Will anything personal. Not just to keep his own business private, but it wasn't his place to talk about Wilder without him knowing. "I think so."

"You're smiling more today." Will set his mixture aside, then went under the table for a second. "You want to make something for him?"

Luca's mouth dropped open to deny that there was anyone special, but he realized Will hadn't asked specifics about who it was. He was just being kind. "Yeah, that might be nice."

Will beckoned him over, then lifted up a small bin that was filled with tiny brown bottles. "I have nearly every scent you can think of—I assume you want to avoid baked goods?"

Luca flushed hotly and hoped it didn't show on his face. "Someone told you?"

"People take notice when a man like Wilder starts smiling that way for the first time since he moved here," Will told him quietly. "For what it's worth, everyone appreciates it."

Luca thought about Knox, and the protective glint in his eyes that said he'd gladly run Luca off if he had the chance, and he shook his head. "Not everyone."

"They will." Will's voice held a note of finality, and his fingers pawed through the bin until he selected a larger bottle with a white label reading *Basil*. "It'll make him think of you," Will said with a chuckle.

"It'll make him smell like a pizza," Luca countered, and he pulled the cap off and waved it under his nose. It was surprisingly subtle, and not as much like a pasta dish as he thought it might be, and oddly, he kind of liked the idea that Wilder would have something so distinct.

"Is that a yes?" Will asked.

Luca sighed, then picked out the peacock from the bucket. "With one of these?"

Will laughed again. "This one's a milk soap—he won't see it until he finishes the bar."

"So, an extra surprise," Luca said.

Will nodded, then dug under his table and came out with another little bin. "You can also leave him a note. It normally takes people about three months to go through a full bar—so anything you might want him to know in the future?"

It was a dangerous question, because Luca had never felt steady enough with anyone to promise anything in three

months. And yet...

He picked up one of the small scrolls, the little felt tipped pen, and the jar that would go right alongside the miniature Kevin.

“You know what you’re going to say?” Will asked.

Luca smiled down at the empty paper. “Yeah. I think I do.”

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Luca was exhausted, a little sunbaked, and more relaxed than he’d ever been when he finally got back to the Augustin. He and Will had finished off the day making a few extra soaps for Jayden and Raphael, and Luca carried the bag inside, frowning when he found the front desk still empty.

He hesitated at the entrance, then stepped in and peered around the corner and found Jayden in his empty salon chair, tapping away on his phone and spinning in a circle. He came to a sudden halt when he saw Luca there, and shot him a sheepish smile.

“No appointments. You in the mood for a style?”

Luca shook his head with a faint grin. “Ah, not tonight. I just got back from Will’s, and I probably smell nasty.”

“You smell like essential oil,” Jayden said.

“Well, we made soap.” He fished the two bars out of the bag that were for him. “He said you wanted lavender.”

Jayden clutched them to his nose and breathed in. “God, these are the best. What else do you have?”

“Oh. Some Epsom salt and honey cubes for Raphael. Is he off today?”

Jayden’s eyes darkened. “Yes. Sick day.”

“Is everything okay?”

Jayden shook his head. “Sometimes he just has bad days. If you want, you can leave them on his desk. He’ll be back by Thursday.”

Luca felt a spike of worry for his friend, but Jayden seemed more protective than concerned, so Luca nodded and headed back out to the front. He left the cubes by the keyboard and scratched out a little note, then went upstairs so he could shower off and wait for Wilder to text him.

He’d been so busy, he hadn’t noticed the lack of activity on his phone—except to note that it had been nearly a week now that he’d been in Savannah and not even his siblings had checked up on him. But it didn’t feel as empty or hollow when he didn’t find messages from Wilder, because in spite of his anxiety, he knew that Wilder still wanted him.

He hadn’t changed his mind in the last six hours.

They were fine.

Wilder: I’m about to close up. Did you want to get together?

Luca: Come over?

Wilder: Yes. I’ll bring dinner this time.

Luca held his phone close to his chest, breathed out, then hurried for the shower and didn’t bother to put himself together beyond sweats and a t-shirt. His socks slid across the floor when he heard the soft knocking, and he managed to catch himself just before he opened the apartment and got a good look at Wilder’s grinning face.

“Bad time?”

Luca rolled his eyes as he stepped back to let him in. “Slippery floors.” He shut the door, then grabbed Wilder and crowded him against the wood, kissing him thoroughly. “How was your day?”

“Not as good as this,” Wilder said with a sigh. He curled his hand around the back of Luca’s neck and licked into his mouth before pulling away with a smacking peck to pouting



lips. “I brought something from Enzo’s food truck. I wanted to bring something from the Tavern—but I thought you might want to talk to Rose first.”

Luca glanced away. “It’s not that I don’t trust them...”

“I get it,” Wilder said quietly. “I know it isn’t the same, but I know what food restrictions are like. I’ve gotten a concussion because of too much salt. The vertigo was awful, and I fell down the stairs all because someone lied and said something was made without it when they thought I was just being picky.”

Luca lifted the hand not weighted down by the to-go bag and kissed his palm. “I’ll talk to her.”

It was worth it to see Wilder’s smile like that—soft and relieved and hopeful. He pulled him into the living room and onto the stiff sofa cushions that had softened a bit after he’d spent an entire day there nursing his bruised balls. The pain was a lot less, but part of him wondered if it had to do with the fact that everything about him just felt so damn much better.

Either way, he didn’t care.

“TV?” he asked, reaching for the remote.

Wilder shook his head. “Food. Then I thought maybe we’d go out and take a walk or something. Stargaze?”

It was maybe the most romantic thing anyone had ever suggested, and Luca wasn’t quite sure he was ready to say yes—but he knew he wasn’t going to say no. “Whatever you want.”

Wilder looked at him for a long moment, his face unreadable, then he dug the food out and they sat in an oddly comfortable silence as they ate. They played footsie under the table, and bumped each other with their elbows because Wilder was left-handed, and Luca was right. And it felt like the most domestic thing in the world.

He could see it—suddenly and surprisingly—a future ahead of him that made no sense for the man he was, but would make perfect sense for the man he could be. His heart raced a little, but he didn’t want to run from it.

“I made soap today,” he blurted.

Wilder blinked, then turned to face him. “Did you say you made soap?”

“With Will. I...made you one. It’s stupid, but...”

Wilder shoved his plate on the table and took Luca’s from his hands. “Show me.”

He rose, obeying like he was made to do it, and he hurried to the kitchen counter to grab the bag. The oils from the soap had seeped into the paper, making it dark in patches, and he felt a little embarrassed at how ill packaged it was. Wilder deserved better things—*beautiful* things—but Wilder took it from him like it meant everything.

He spilled the soap out into in his hands and turned it over. It had been poured into the mold that was meant to look like a geode—with bright green clear soap in jagged edges on the side, and a sort of soft, opaque-grey in an oval for the rest.

Wilder dragged his thumb over the sharper edges, then lifted the bar to his nose and sniffed it. “What is that? It’s familiar.”

“Basil,” Luca said, sitting down and running a hand through his hair. He stared at his feet and sighed. “Will thought it would remind you of me. Uh...and I, well. I thought it might smell like a pizza, so it’s totally fine if you hate it.”

Wilder laughed and gently set the soap down before taking Luca’s face between both hands. “It doesn’t smell like pizza. I love it.”

His words were profound, gutting—but in the best way. He had nothing to say, so instead, he pulled Wilder in by his wrists and kissed him, slow and deep. “Thank you,” he murmured, knowing Wilder probably wouldn’t understand him, but hoping he felt it anyway.

Wilder, in response, only kissed him harder.

Luca was surprised at himself for being the one to break the kiss, but the idea of taking a walk was appealing. Wilder didn’t seem to mind as they put shoes back on, and Luca

breathed out a heavy sigh as the cooler night breeze wafted across their skin. It was a balm after the warm day in the sun, and he enjoyed the juxtaposition of heat in Wilder's hand that sat comfortably in his.

"I did a lot of walking around when I first moved here," Wilder said as they turned a corner, away from the restaurants and the busier streets. "Jayden told me one of the best things around here were all the little hidden neighborhoods. The main one behind the bookshop is Forsyth Park. All the locals walk their dogs there and picnic in the smaller parks. And the houses are so old and beautiful. I can't get over it."

"It sounds..."

Idyllic? Romantic? Storybook?

The words all felt a bit too alien to him. He'd grown up in the hustle and bustle of a busy California city which felt so young compared to Savannah—and even after they were able to move away to quieter, more posh areas, there was hardly any calm.

Wilder squeezed his hand gently as they took the little road through the dark canopy of trees, and his other hand brought out his phone to use as a flashlight. "I never did ask if you're into, you know, being outside like this."

Luca laughed softly under his breath and tugged on his lover's hand. "Yes and no. I don't actively seek camping or anything, but I like this."

Wilder grinned at him. "I like it better over here. It's kind of a neighborhood secret that none of the tourists know about. It's quieter." They came to a small park with a large pond that couldn't have been more than twelve inches deep. Even in the moonlight, Luca could see the crystal-clear water flowing over a little water feature.

"Well?" Wilder asked after a beat.

Luca tipped his head up. The trees were still so thick, there were only small bursts of sky, lit by stars, and a faint glow from the nearly full moon. "Not what I expected."

"In a good way?"

At that, Luca turned his head, then licked his lips. “In the best way.” He let the real meaning sink in, watched it as Wilder’s cheeks darkened enough to see even in the dim light.

His lips parted in a sigh, then he leaned in, and Luca met him in a kiss. “You’re addictive.”

“Mm.” Luca smiled, then pulled back and shuffled closer. “I could say the same about you. You make me want things I never expected.”

Dropping his head down onto Luca’s shoulder, Wilder breathed out with a small, contented hum. “I’m glad you decided to stay. When I asked you,” he stopped, his body a little rigid with tension.

“What?” Luca pushed.

Wilder sat back up, the look on his face almost pleading. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way.”

Luca waited for pain to sink in—for the blow to hit his self-esteem, but it didn’t. There was just a quiet resignation and maybe a little amusement. “You didn’t like me then.”

“Well, I thought you were nice to look at,” Wilder told him, his eyes gleaming, “but no. I wasn’t interested in you.”

“You felt sorry for me,” Luca added.

Wilder’s eyes rolled upward. “You were kind of asking for it. But it didn’t take me longer than a couple of minutes to see the strong, worthy man underneath all that disaster.”

Luca couldn’t help his laugh, the feeling of it a little bit wild, and yet impossibly steady. He felt grounded and happy, and it was just so damn unexpected. “I’m glad you gave me a chance.”

“I’m glad you let me,” Wilder told him.

They kissed again, long and slow, as they sat down on a stone bench, and Luca did little more than accept how absolutely perfect the moment was.

## CHAPTER 16

WILDER HAD BEEN WAITING on apartment renovations for months, but it felt almost like a curse now that it was interfering with what little time he had to spare. It had been something on his to-do list after buying the place. A way to make it feel like his.

Adam had taken it poorly. It came across as anger, but Talia had taken him aside one afternoon to explain that Adam didn't deal with change very well. Things eventually settled though, and Wilder showed Adam his plans to update things, and Adam no longer bit his head off every time they crossed paths.

Now, halfway through his day, Wilder found himself annoyed that his time for prep was being taken up by having to move shit around for the contractors. But he was glad it was finally happening. Adam, Talia, and Jayden showed up to help him get all of his stuff moved into the second bedroom, and he could feel the tension radiating off Adam in waves as that bedroom had been his for most of his life.

But he did it with a smile—a look of sad nostalgia in his eyes, but he didn't complain once—even at the state of the wall. Wilder knew if he wanted to totally gut the place, Adam would have been devastated. But that wasn't the point of it all. He just wanted it to feel like it was *his* home.

“Do we need to do anything else?” Talia asked, startling Wilder out of his thoughts.

He sighed. “Just remove the plywood and indicate any spaces that are weak and crumbling.”

Talia nodded, and they got to work, the place looking worse than before, but it was nice to see progress being made. She took the left corner of the room, and gently began to prod the crumbling drywall. What was left started to cave inward, a dull thump—but after a second, he swore the sound was different.

He adjusted his hearing aids, then pushed more material in—and it happened again. “Do you hear that?” he asked.

Adam was walking over, frowning. “Sounds like... something falling on a cookie tin?”

It was a weird image, but Wilder dropped to his knees and pushed on the wall until the bottom gave way, and when the hole was wide enough, he found it. It was a cookie tin, just like Adam said. It was a rich blue, faded and a little rusted in the corners, but it was sealed tight with nothing to indicate what was inside.

“Uh, do you know what this is?” he said to Adam, pushing it along the floor.

Adam stood a foot away, his face set in a look of panic almost like he wanted to bolt. “No. It doesn’t look familiar.”

Wilder shrugged, then pried the lid off the top and stared down into the bottom. There were two folded up pieces of paper, an old matchbox car, a very small, very faded dalmatian figurine, and a couple of playing cards.

“Does this,” he started to say, but then he looked up at Adam’s face and saw that his eyes were glassy and red. “It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Adam dragged his bottom lip between his teeth, and his breath was ragged as he shook his head. “It’s not mine. It’s Noah’s. I...*hashem yishmor*. I vaguely remember this. There was a hole in the wall panel, and he shoved it inside and said we would dig it out when we were old.”

Wilder caressed the edge—this moment of memory that clearly had teeth as it bit deep into Adam. Then he covered the box and lifted it toward him. “He’s coming back for the holidays, right?”

Adam closed his hand around the box like he was too afraid to take it, but his grip tightened when Talia put her arm around his waist and leaned in to whisper something in his ear. Adam nodded, his jaw tight, but he didn't seem angry—he was almost resigned to whatever pain was inside those letters.

“The dalmatian was mine,” he said when he stepped back, and he offered Wilder a grin that seemed like more concession than anything genuine. “I was obsessed with them until I was, like, nine.”

Wilder pushed to his feet and swiped his hands on the front of his jeans. “I had a really, really intense Bug's Life phase. The chubby caterpillar—God, my parents hated it.”

Adam's chuckle was soft, but it was genuine. “Cute.”

“They didn't think so.” He moved around Adam to the kitchen and got everyone water, and he could tell the mood in the apartment had irrevocably shifted. “Thank you for your help.”

“Is that it?” Jayden asked with a frown.

Wilder darted his gaze over toward Adam, who was still staring at the box in his hands. “That's all they need from me.”

“Cool,” Talia said, snapping her fingers and pointing them like guns. “Catch you later?”

Adam briefly met Wilder's gaze before he followed his fiancée out, and the door shut hard enough Wilder could feel it in the soles of his feet. He looked up at Jayden, who was wearing a soft frown, then he set his water on the counter.

“You still want to stay with me, right?”

Wilder shrugged. “That's the plan.” Only, he was half considering changing his mind—if Luca wanted. He hadn't brought it up, hadn't wanted to rush things, for himself or for Luca, but it had a little more appeal than staying with Jayden and Tim, even if his place was bigger than his last shoe-box apartment. “Text you?”

“Shit, I'm being kicked out?” Jayden asked with a grin. “Is your hot Italian sausage coming over?”

“Don’t ever say that to my face again,” Wilder ordered, and he took Jayden by the elbow and escorted him to the door. “And maybe. I’m going to send him a text.”

Jayden looked happier than he had any right to be, but in that moment, Wilder couldn’t blame him. He felt the same emotion lodged deep in his chest.

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Wilder made his way to Luca’s apartment with more instruction not to cook, and he wasn’t going to turn down Luca attempting to woo him through food again. He hadn’t been lying when he said he had written off his diet as bland and tasteless. He had never been particularly experimental outside of baking when it came to flavor, and anything pre-packaged low sodium was a death sentence to his taste buds.

So, he ate fresh and bland, indulged in his cakes, and didn’t let himself worry that his abs weren’t flat. It was his one small food joy, and he would take it without shame.

But Luca’s food had been like magic, and he couldn’t help but look forward to the night. He popped down to the bakery to make sure Dmitri was taking care of everything for the Market, then he grabbed a box and filled it with a few cakes that sat out on the table.

He had a few hours before set-up, and he was going to use that in his own sort of indulgence—wrapped in Luca’s arms and letting himself truly feel this brand-new happiness.

He bypassed the salon and headed up the stairs, then tapped his foot as he waited for Luca to answer. He did, not long after Wilder knocked, looking like he was fresh from a nap with mussed hair and his shirt rucked up on one side. He rubbed his curled fist into an eye as his other hand reached out, dragging Wilder inside, and when the door shut, Luca’s mouth was on him.



A press to the lips, a nip against his neck, a nuzzle along his collarbone—it was fucking heaven. Wilder closed his eyes and gave himself to each and every tiny sensation that Luca dragged from his neglected body. He'd grown numb to being touch-starved until now, and God, he wasn't sure he'd be able to live without this for long.

“How are you?” Luca rumbled just under his ear.

“Exhausted. Long day. Were you sleeping?”

Luca nodded. “Sorry—I had a rough night. It's been a while since I had insomnia, and it knocked me out this afternoon.”

Wilder's brow furrowed, and he pushed past him to set the cupcakes and his bag on a chair. “I should have stayed.”

“And what, had me keep you up too?” Luca huffed and wrapped his arms around him, pulling Wilder's back to his front before he kissed the nape of his neck. “You're here now, and that's what counts.”

“And you sound like *you* need to go back to bed,” Wilder countered.

Luca shook his head. “No. Food, Market date, then bed.” He kissed him again. “Want to help cook?”

“Always.” And although Wilder wasn't good on his own in the kitchen, he was trained. It was easy enough to pick up a knife and start chopping zucchini—and there was something beautifully simple about the way they worked together, like they fit.

And he had never fit before.

“You look... thinking...hard,” Luca said, nudging Wilder with his elbow.

Wilder turned to face him, having missed most of the sentence. “Sorry, what?”

Biting his lip, Luca shook his head. “You look like you're thinking too hard,” he repeated.

Wilder shrugged. “It’s nothing bad. I’ve just never really done this before. You know, the whole domestic, cooking dinner sort of thing.”

“Not even with...” Luca said, then paled and looked away as the rest of his sentence trailed off into a dull murmur.

His words were so muffled, Wilder was mostly guessing, so he reached out and touched his chin. “Bad ear day, so I really need you to face me. But I think I caught most of that, and no, not even with my ex.”

Luca set the wooden spoon he’d been using to brown sausage down, and he propped his hip against the counter and switched to sign. ‘Was it always terrible?’

Wilder shook his head, feeling soothed by his language on Luca’s hands. It was so much easier to talk about it that way. ‘No. It was okay at first—but not great. Not the way it should have been. It was just less violent. And there *were* good moments. I tried to leave him once, and he promised to change, and there were about three months that I thought he meant it.’

‘Sorry,’ Luca said. He turned to stir the meat again before looking back. ‘I wish it hadn’t cost you so much to get out.’

‘The price was worth it,’ Wilder said, and he believed that with every ounce of his being. He wouldn’t trade a single second of his scars—inside or out—for his freedom and for the distance between him and his past. ‘But even in the good months, it was never *this* good.’

‘It’s not really a high bar,’ Luca told him, and Wilder laughed.

‘No, but the one you set is.’ Wilder hesitated saying any of this, because it had been a week—just a week since the man stumbled into his life, begging for pity but offering so much more in return. Wilder shuddered to think about how he had almost not gone outside when he saw him on the bench that day. He had almost not bothered. That thought alone threatened to choke him, and he set his knife down and put both hands at Luca’s waist. “Thank you.”

Luca's brows lifted, eyes going wide, but he didn't ask what for. He just leaned in to kiss him. "Come on," he murmured, trailing his lips to speak against the shell of his ear. "Let's get this cooked so we can get your booth set up. I'm looking forward to this date night."

Wilder stole a last kiss, then stepped back to tip the zucchini into the pan next to the meat. "Selling cupcakes isn't much of a date."

"It is to me." And the absolute and simplistic honesty of his words were enough to make Wilder feel like he'd finally gotten something right.

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"Oh, shit. Oh, holy *shit*."

Wilder turned his head in a half panic at the sound of Jayden's voice rising above the crowd as he clambered over the table and into the booth. 'What's wrong?' he signed, pulling him close.

'You,' Jayden signed, then bit his lip and leaned in so Wilder would be able to hear him over the crowd. "You're in *love!*"

Wilder blinked, then took a step back. 'No.'

Rolling his eyes, Jayden turned and motioned across the way where Luca was currently in deep discussion with both Sonia and Knox at the blacksmith stand. Wilder knew Knox had given him shit, but whatever happened in the two hours Luca had wandered the Market, it seemed like things were fine now. In fact, Knox was grinning at him and pushing something into his hands.

Wilder had been watching them—and admiring Luca's lithe form, he couldn't deny that. And he had also been feeling

a lot of things deep in his gut—soft and a little scary, but so damn good. And yet... the idea of being in love? This soon?

“You can’t lie to me. I am your self-appointed platonic soul mate, and it’s my job to notice these things,” Jayden said, slinging an arm around Wilder’s waist and speaking close to his ear. “You are in love with him.”

His pulse raced—he could feel it against the inside of his throat and thrumming in his ears. It had never felt like this before, not before Scott and not with him either. And he realized he had no true baseline for what a healthy relationship was like. But still... *Love?*

“Don’t panic,” Jayden said firmly, turning Wilder to face him. “Breathe, and then take that man home, and fuck him stupid.”

And there. There was the real issue, because Wilder had loved what they’d done so far—loved Luca’s soft, careful way of handling him and loved how he didn’t push for more and didn’t use the phrase, ‘when you’re ready.’ He acted like Wilder’s boundaries were permanent, and it was...

Perfect. Too perfect.

It had to be too good to be true, because no one would ever stay that patient. Luca didn’t have the same kind of trauma, and eventually, he’d get bored with over the clothes frotting, or hand jobs, or however close Wilder could get to the things most people wanted.

But Wilder wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready for anything more than that.

He hadn’t liked penetration before Scott, and when he was with him, he hadn’t been given a lot of say in the matter. And now, he didn’t think he’d ever be able to open himself that way. So why would Luca want to stay with that mess, no matter how they felt about each other?

Relationships fell apart for smaller things than that—and to assume a man who wasn’t from here—and didn’t entirely belong in a small life like this—would compromise all of that? Just for him?

It was laughable.

“I fucked up,” Jayden said. “I can see your face. Please don’t do this. Please don’t panic and run.”

Wilder looked over again, and this time, Luca’s gaze met his through the crowd, and his mouth softened into a grin before he lifted a hand to wave. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said, and he meant it. If there was a coffin, he wouldn’t be the one nailing it shut. He would just prepare himself for when the hammer fell. “I don’t think I love him.”

“Yet,” Jayden pressed.

“I don’t know if I’ll have time for that. He’s not staying.”

He didn’t know what Luca’s plans were. He had a few weeks left booked at the Augustin, and the future after that was just an abstract idea. Luca wasn’t much of a planner, from what Wilder could tell. It almost seemed like they were simply making the best out of their ticking clock before the bomb went off and blew them to pieces.

It would be glorious and painful, and he wouldn’t regret a thing.

Luca’s conversation ended, and Jayden hopped the table and made it around the corner before Luca took his place, squeezing in beside the tent wall. He had a couple of bags hooked on his arm, and he let them fall to the ground before he reached for Wilder, then froze.

‘Sorry,’ he signed.

Wilder frowned. ‘What? Why?’

‘Public.’ Luca spelled the word slowly, his face a mask of worry, and it took Wilder a second to realize what he meant.

“I don’t...oh my God,” said, then lifted his hands, feeling them tremble with both frustration and want. ‘I don’t care if people see you with me. Come here and kiss me.’

Luca licked his lips, and then he erased the distance between them in two long strides and had both hands cupping Wilder’s face as he pressed their lips together. It had the breath

of desperation, but Luca kept it chaste and easy, pulling back with three soft pecks to his chin. “Thank you,” he said.

Wilder squeezed his wrists, then stepped out of his grasp for signing space. ‘You’re beautiful. I will never be ashamed of you. Of us.’

Swallowing thickly, Luca rubbed the back of his neck, then gestured to a customer who approached. Wilder went back into business mode, and Luca busied himself with his phone as he sat in the corner of the tent. It was hardly the most romantic date, but later, they got kettle corn and a funnel cake, and Luca licked powdered sugar from the corner of Wilder’s mouth, and they bought another scarf from Fitz, who again refused to let Luca pay, and he picked up an abstract alcohol ink canvas painting from Evren before the night was through.

It was the best night at the Market Wilder had ever had. He didn’t know what it really meant—or what it would mean for the future, but he was happy.

‘Come back to my place?’ Luca asked at the end of the night as they stood on a dark street corner, watching the way the Market emptied, and everyone made their way home. They kept their palms pressed together, and Luca was more relaxed than Wilder had ever seen him.

“I actually have people working on my apartment right now,” he said with a small grin, “and I was going to stay with Jayden and Tim, but...”

“Me,” Luca all but growled. “Stay with me. Please.”

It wasn’t exactly a question, so he figured a kiss was a good enough answer.

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Wilder typically joined his friends for a quick drink and dinner at the Tavern when the Market was over, but tonight, no

one even bothered to ask if he was going to show up. Jayden smiled, and Chaz waved, and he felt some measure of relief that he wouldn't have to make excuses or explain himself, because all he wanted was to get back to Luca's rented apartment and curl up with him.

And more. Probably. His dick was interested, but the small, nervous twinge in his belly wasn't sure. He and Luca didn't waste time packing up, though, and they took the leftovers to Whipped where Luca shoved everything into the fridge as Wilder darted upstairs to grab clothes for the rest of the week.

It felt odd, moving fast like this. It wasn't permanent, and Augustin House wasn't Luca's anything. And yet, it felt oddly like home, or maybe the premonition of what a future would be like if Luca stayed. He was too terrified to go down that road, though, so he pushed the thought aside and grabbed his keys, locking up before they walked across the courtyard and down the narrow streets that led to the house.

Wilder heard a quiet murmur from Luca, but the words were too low for him to make out, so he pulled him closer. "I didn't catch that."

"It's nice here," Luca repeated, and dragged his thumb over Wilder's wrist. "It has such an old world feel to it."

And that was true. He spent a lot of warm summer nights sitting outside on his little terrace, staring at the blanket of stars that sat over thatched roofs. He was happy in that moment, but he couldn't stop wondering if he would really be content in Savannah forever. So far, the answer was yes, but that was before Luca had stumbled into his life and turned everything onto its head.

"I traveled a lot, but I never stopped to appreciate the small things. I always felt like if I didn't keep busy, my thoughts would get louder." Luca cleared his throat, then shrugged. "I was afraid of myself for a long time."

Wilder tugged him closer, then slung an arm around his waist. "I get that. You're your own worst critic, right?"

Luca's laugh was so low, Wilder couldn't hear it, but he felt the way it thrummed through his side where Wilder's palm rested. "I never did like the tough questions. I didn't want to achieve in life. I was happy to just get by."

"And now?" Wilder pressed.

They came to a stop at the house, and Luca glanced up at the darkened window, then shook his head. "I still don't have a lot of passion. I've never been...driven, you know? I don't want to live a shallow life, but I don't know how to change that without figuring out what I want to do with it."

Wilder had more to say, but right then he just wanted to take Luca upstairs—so he did. He walked ahead of his lover, and waited patiently for him to unlock the door and get the lights on. It was cool from the AC, and it smelled faintly of cleaning solution. In spite of cooking earlier, the kitchen was tidy, and it was obvious Luca had been putting attention into his space.

"It doesn't need to be something grand," he said, and Luca frowned. "What you said before—about not wanting a shallow life? You don't have to find some grand passion and chase it. You're allowed to be content with the small things."

Luca shrugged, looking as lost as he ever did, though his eyes were softer, and his jaw wasn't as tense. "All my life, everyone I knew wanted to follow their passion—and I just thought something was wrong with me. I mean, what kind of person is content working at a coffee shop or a pizza restaurant?"

"Plenty," Wilder said, his voice rich with his desire for Luca to be softer on himself. He took a step forward, but he left signing space because he wanted to say this in his own tongue. 'I didn't open a bakery because I played pastry chef when I was four. I don't actually care about cupcakes. I wanted something that was mine. Something that my family couldn't touch—something they couldn't take away from me. So when I was finally free, I went out and made that for myself.'



Luca swallowed thickly, then cupped Wilder's face. "You make me want to be better."

"You don't need to be better. You are enough already," Wilder told him. He stepped in and closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around Luca's waist before kissing him.

He lost track of their movements, but he was aware that Luca was leading him to the bedroom. His skin was hot, his cock hard and pressing against the inside of his jeans. He wanted to feel skin this time, wanted to feel the curl of Luca's fingers around his dick as he stroked Wilder, as he dragged him over the edge.

He scrambled out of his shirt the moment there was air between them, and Luca went for his own zipper, parting the hem of his jeans in a wide V with his cock tenting his briefs. "Can I...?" he asked.

Wilder knew what he meant, but his words were caught in his throat, and his tongue was thick with want, so he simply dragged his boxers to the ground and showed off his naked body to another man for the first time in too many years. He watched as Luca's eyes widened, as his lips parted on something like a sigh. He watched as Luca gently pulled the rest of his clothes off, then stepped forward with only a little hesitation, like he wasn't sure he was allowed to touch.

But Wilder wanted this—needed it. He had to reclaim these moments for pleasure instead of pain. He walked Luca back to the bed, and when he sat hard, Wilder dropped to his knees between his lover's thighs.

"You...you don't need to..."

"I know," Wilder murmured. But God, he wanted it. He wanted to feel Luca heavy on the back of his tongue, gagging him, filling him. He raked fingertips over the tops of Luca's thighs, and then he leaned forward and dragged open lips over his shaft before ending at his head. He was cut, bulbous, leaking from his slit in clear pulses, and he lapped it up. His hands moved to Luca's waist to hold him.

This was theirs—this present moment—with no past and no future separating them. Luca’s taste was salty and rich, and it filled him, overwhelming his senses as he relaxed his jaw and took him as far as he could go.

He had done this so little, he was worried, but Luca’s cries rose in the silent room, muffled by his deafness and yet perfectly accessible through the low rumble of voice and the vibrations he could feel in the tips of his fingers. It was enough to make his own cock swell, throbbing, his balls pulling tight.

He was close to coming from that alone, but he wanted to wait—to have Luca take him in hand. He sucked harder, faster, used a tight circle of fingers to make up the space his lips couldn’t reach. Luca was saying something in a warning tone—but the sounds were jumbled, and he was pretty sure it was because he was about to come.

Wilder didn’t care. He wanted every damn drop.

Luca’s hands pushed into his hair, gripping just shy of painful. And then he let go. Hot, heavy spurts hit the back of his throat and nearly choked him, but he managed to swallow most of what Luca had given him. He was panting when he pulled away, leaning into the hands that were now combing through his hair. In the long moments after, Wilder closed his eyes and waited for his breath to return to something like normal.

His cock was still hard, but he allowed himself time to feel this—a sort of warm pride that he had reduced Luca to nothing more than sounds of ecstasy. Then he rose, and Luca grabbed him close, murmuring something against his skin before he turned him and laid him out on the bed. Lips met his neck in biting kisses, hands roamed, fingers tweaking at his nipples, dragging down and brushing through the coarse hair below his navel.

“Kiss me,” Luca demanded, his voice clear between them, and Wilder did. He turned his head and wrapped one arm around the back of Luca’s head and held fast as he let the other man push a warm, hot tongue against his own. He groaned,

and Luca swallowed the sounds before breaking away and pressing his hand against Wilder's hip. "Can I get you off?"

"Yes," Wilder said. "Yes, I want you to. I need you to touch me." And it *was* a need. A need to erase the lingering ghosts of his past. A need to make promises for his future.

Luca curled fingers around his dick, and Wilder arched up into it. The sensation of someone else touching him—naked—for the first time in so long was almost enough to send him careening over the edge.

"You're gorgeous," Luca murmured in the space just below his ear. He licked, then bit down, then soothed the mark with a kiss. "You're the most beautiful man I have ever seen."

And Wilder had never thought himself ugly, but never found himself beautiful. And he liked knowing he could be that for someone—with his soft edges and round chin and early greys. He liked that Luca was taken with him exactly as he was, without the expectation to be more or be different. He turned his head again, and Luca kissed him, shifting between his legs and hooking them over his hips.

His hand moved in a furious rhythm, and Wilder gasped, arching up into it as his head spun and pleasure took over. And then it happened. He was coming, and it was so good. It was so good... until Luca's half-hard, spent cock brushed between his ass cheeks and grazed his hole. It was meaningless, a little slip, but it was enough to destroy everything he'd just gained. The pleasure cascaded into fear and panic, and he felt something gripping his throat, choking him.

He was still spilling, hot onto his chest, but the pleasure had twisted around something else—something unkind and cruel, and he didn't realize he was gasping for breath until Luca was cupping his face and telling him to breathe.

"...babe. Can you do that for me? In and out. *Fuck*, okay? In and out?"

It was the tremble in Luca's voice that brought him back down, and he opened his mouth to tell him he was fine, but all that came out was a quiet sob. Luca tried to pull away, but

Wilder clutched at him until his heart stopped feeling like it was going to beat right out of his chest.

“Please tell me what happened,” Luca whispered against the shell of his ear, begging. “What did I do?”

The edges of his vision were rocking like a boat, but he fixed his eyes as best he could on Luca, and he shook his head. “I didn’t know it would be that bad.”

“I don’t understand. What was that bad?” Luca asked, still looking like he wanted to bolt.

“I can’t.” Wilder couldn’t find the words in English, so he finally allowed Luca to pull away for signing space. ‘Anal.’ He spelled the word with a shake in his fingers. ‘I can’t.’

‘I wasn’t,’ Luca signed back, eyes wide with horror. ‘I promise. I would never just...’

‘I know,’ he interrupted. And he did. Of *course*, he knew—but somewhere in the back of his mind, he’d lost himself in his past. He hadn’t thought the reaction would be so instant, so visceral. He thought he was beyond those sudden and wretched attacks of fear, and he was angry right then that he’d been wrong. He was angry that his trauma had settled between them in this moment.

It wasn’t fair.

‘Talk to me,’ Luca asked, still naked, sitting up with his legs under him. ‘Please.’

‘I don’t know why it’s this bad,’ Wilder told him. He pushed up against the pillows. ‘I don’t know why feeling you there made me react like that. Maybe it was just too much at once.’ That’s probably what any of his therapists would have told him, anyway. But he wasn’t entirely sure, because he had shied away from physical contact for so long.

‘We don’t need to do this again,’ Luca told him, but Wilder reached out and grabbed his wrist to stop him.

He held on for as long as it took Luca to relax, then he scrubbed a hand down his face before he signed again. ‘I want this, and I want you. My ex used to...’ he began, then stopped,

because he didn't have the strength for details right then, but the look of horror in Luca's eyes told him he didn't need to say more than that. 'I have trauma, and I can't make that go away, but I need you to be brave with me as I move forward. Because I'm ready to move on. With you.' He was not above begging right then, because he'd spent so long isolating himself, and he wanted to know that the first person he was willing to try for, was willing to fight for him.

'I can do that.'

Wilder blinked, not quite sure he'd seen those signs right, but the look on Luca's face said the rest. 'Promise?'

Luca didn't answer with words or sign. Not at first.

He lifted Wilder's palm to his mouth, then kissed the center gently before closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of them both. When he let go, he met Wilder's gaze with a careful sort of ferocity he hadn't been expecting, and he raised his fist first in a nod, then a finger to his lips, dragging down to his hand. 'Yes. I promise.'

It was the honesty of that moment that allowed Wilder to sag backward and let go of the tension he'd been holding. 'I'm exhausted.'

Luca shifted onto his ass before kicking the blankets back, then rose to grab a box of tissue from the little nightstand. 'Want to shower?'

Wilder shook his head, taking a tissue with one hand and using the other to pull his hearing aids out. It took a moment to adjust to the pressure of heavier silence, but it was nice to let ambient noise fade into a murky background.

He finally found the courage to look up again at Luca, who was standing at the foot of the bed with a little hesitance. 'Are we okay?' Wilder asked.

Luca stared another moment, then took the soiled tissue from his hand and leaned down to kiss him. 'Yes.' His fist nodded against Wilder's palm.

He shifted over toward the wall to make room for Luca, whose body slid under the sheets and his legs spread before he

turned onto his side. ‘Can I hold you?’

It wasn’t what Wilder expected him to ask, but he realized that’s what he needed in that moment. The incident would hang between them—there was no denying that Luca would approach sex again with caution. It would never be what others considered normal—he was aware of that now. And maybe, in the future, it would be different. And maybe, in the future, Luca would get bored and resent him.

But Wilder was determined to never live his life caving to the threats of the unknown. Right now, it was Luca’s warm arms sliding around him after the light went out, and his soft breath—and even softer kisses—brushing the back of his neck.

It was okay, and it wasn’t.

It was perfect, and it wasn’t.

He leaned back heavily into Luca’s embrace, and sleep didn’t take long to claim him.

## CHAPTER 17

THE THIRD TIME Luca peeked around the stairs, Jayden was waiting for him. His long-fingered hand caught him by the wrist and dragged him to Raphael's still-empty desk—where there was a paper bag and a post-it sitting at the edge. “You’re driving me insane.”

Luca pulled a face. “Listen, I just want to know if he’s okay, and...”

His words were cut off when Jayden shoved the bag at him. “Raph’s place is a five-minute drive, and I was stress cooking last night, because he doesn’t feed himself well enough. Someone has to take care of him, and I guess that’s you now.”

Luca’s cheeks flushed, and he glanced down at his hands. “You know it’s not like that, right? I mean, it’s not romantic.”

Jayden laughed and gave his cheek a pat. “Oh, I know. I saw your overnight visitor sneaking out of here early this morning, but it doesn’t need to be like that, does it? He likes you. Raphael doesn’t make friends easily, and he has a hard time keeping them around when he does.”

Luca hated to hear that, mostly because Raphael was such a good person, and he deserved to be loved in every way a person should be loved—platonic and romantic and everything in between. Luca could offer one small corner of that vast universe, and he hoped maybe it was something worth keeping.

He clutched Jayden’s bag to his chest and headed out for his car without going upstairs to change. The drive was short,

and he wanted to use that time to try and compose himself before he saw his friend.

And frankly, he could use the distraction from the memory of Wilder panicking and shaking in his arms. Or more accurately, he was trying not to feel choked with guilt because it was something he'd done, even if it had been unintentional.

Part of him wanted to give in to his panic and run, like he would have done even just a couple of weeks ago, but Wilder deserved so much better than that. It wasn't Luca's job to decide for Wilder what he wanted in a partner, but he needed to face the fact that there were real and actual barriers they would hit if they were going to do this.

That alone was also weighing on him, because they didn't really talk it out when it was over. Wilder had allowed Luca to hold him and kiss him. They'd woken up tangled in each other, and nothing about Wilder seemed hesitant or unsure. He wasn't afraid of Luca. He kissed him before he left, tucking him back into the blankets, and promised him in a soft whisper to see him after the shop closed. But he still felt unsettled, and seeing his friend was the one thing he needed that afternoon, even if it was solely to focus on making Raphael feel better from whatever had him down.

Pulling up next to Raphael's car, Luca made his way to the front door and contemplated calling. But Jayden seemed to think it was fine to just show up, so he let his finger hover over the buzzer while he gathered the courage to drop in.

Savannah wasn't some idyllic nineteen-fifties TV show with manicured lawns and people having block parties, but it was an entirely new, southern, East Coast culture that was taking some real getting used to. He liked that he could stand there at Raphael's door, ring the bell, and he wouldn't be ostracized for committing some heinous social faux pas.

*"Come in!"*

Luca was startled when he heard Raphael's voice, but he pushed the door open and walked into the living room. Raphael was on the sofa, his legs curled up under a heavy



blanket. He looked exhausted, but not as bad as Luca assumed for having been out of work as long as he had been.

It didn't look like the flu, but he had dark circles under his eyes, and his hair was a greasy mess. His brows rose when he saw Luca though, and he sat up straighter. "Jayden sent you?"

Luca shrugged. "He said you needed lunch because you suck at taking care of yourself."

Raphael muttered something in German, but he still shifted over and gave the cushion next to him a pat. "I take care of myself just fine. Look at me—this many years on my own and I'm still alive."

Luca plopped down and kicked his feet up on the table as Raphael took the bag from him, peering inside with a grimace. "I can cook if you don't want it."

"Just sandwiches," Raphael said. "On very shitty gluten-free bread. Jayden can't cook any better than I can." He set the food aside and nestled a little closer to Luca, who didn't hesitate to curl against his side. "It's fine. I'm not that hungry."

"Are you sick?"

Raphael sighed and shook his head. "Not sick. I get seizures sometimes. I have epilepsy, but it's usually controlled with my medications. Sometimes, a bad one sneaks through."

"How bad?"

"Worse than it's been in a while," Raphael admitted, his tone telling Luca he didn't want to admit that aloud. "My doctor thinks it's stress. Or maybe my medication isn't working as well as it used to. Normally, I recover in a few days, but this one knocked me down hard."

Luca gently brushed fingers through Raphael's hair. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't call anyone except for Jayden to tell him I'd be out of work," Raphael said with a huff, his eyes closing. He groaned and used his hands to help shift his legs so he could lay his head on Luca's thigh. The blanket got twisted, but with their combined efforts, Raphael was comfortable again, and

Luca felt him relax, fraction by fraction. “I’ve had a migraine for two days.”

“How can I help?”

“This,” Raphael said. Simple as that, but it was hard for Luca to believe it. All the same, he continued his gentle scalp massage and wished that he was better trained at it. He was doing something right, though, because Raphael was pliant, and his mouth curved into an easy smile. “Jayden tried to cancel a date to come take care of me.”

“You should have let him,” Luca scolded. “I would have.”

“I know. It was why I didn’t call you. He said he saw you and Wilder—things are good, right?”

Luca’s mouth curved into its own soft smile, and he shrugged. “They’re not bad.” But even as he said it, it felt like a lie. “It’s complicated.”

Raphael pushed up on his elbow and turned his head to frown at him. “Explain.”

Dragging his fingers around his mouth, he let his head fall back on the cushion, then pushed Raphael’s head back down and resumed his massage. “He’s staying with me at the house because they’re doing work on his apartment.”

“Okay,” Raphael said.

“I hung out with him at the Market, and it... felt good. It felt,” he trailed off, because there weren’t really words for what it was. Domestic, but that wasn’t enough. Content, but the word was so shallow compared to the burning he felt inside that threatened to consume him. “I want to wake up with him in my bed every day.”

“Does he feel the same?”

Luca groaned. “I don’t know. I want to say yes. God, I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t. But we haven’t talked about it.”

Raphael laughed and muttered something in German. When Luca poked him, he laughed again and sighed out, “You’re such a mess.”

Luca bowed his head and had no defense, because Raphael was right. He desperately wanted to tell him about Wilder's reaction to being touched, because the burden of it felt heavy, but it wasn't his place. Not without Wilder giving him permission. "We both have a lot of baggage."

"That," Raphael said primly, "is very obvious."

"I'm just worried it's too much."

"Too much means nothing if he's worth it. If you're worth it," Raphael said. His voice began to drift, and Luca felt him get heavier.

"You need sleep."

"Mm." Raphael nuzzled and curled his hand around Luca's thigh. "You can go."

He was like a cat—occupying his lap being soft and adorable, and it was impossible to move. "Will this help you sleep?"

"*Ja*, but I've survived worse without rest." Raphael gave his leg a pat, but made no move to relinquish his grasp, and Luca didn't mind. He had hours to kill, and if this helped his friend, he'd gladly spend all afternoon on that sofa.

It wasn't entirely selfless either. Devoting his time and attention to Raphael meant he wasn't thinking about Wilder. It meant he wasn't sending his brain into a tailspin wondering if every time they had sex, it would end in disaster. It meant he wasn't second guessing whether or not Wilder would think he was worth it after all.

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AFTER THE THIRD text from Wilder saying he was going to be even later, Luca hustled Raphael into the car and they drove to the little shopping center with a massive Kroger to pick up dinner from a Chinese restaurant that had a menu Raphael could eat from.

After his long sleep, Raphael was moving around better, and his color was returning to his cheeks, which made Luca feel like he'd done some good. They grabbed the food, then Raphael pointed them to a little park next to an old but not-quite-famous cemetery, and they decided to picnic in the car and eat out of their take-out boxes.

“Jayden will be happy,” Raphael said, leaning back in his seat. They had the top of his car open, and the seats reclined. Everything smelled a little bit like his shumai, which was sitting in the Styrofoam container only half eaten, and the breeze across their face was still humid, even with the setting sun.

“How so?”

“I think I can go back to work tomorrow.”

At that, Luca scowled and turned his head to look at his friend. “Don't let him force you back to work if you're not ready.”

Raphael laughed, rolling his eyes. “That man has never been able to force anyone to do anything. No, I'm ready. And he hates answering phones. I don't want to think about what my schedule looks like right now.”

Luca snorted and shook his head. “Well, if you're sure...”

“I like working. I know it's not some big, grand career you see in California or maybe New York. That life seems so miserable. I didn't want any part of it.”

Luca watched his friend's profile for a long, quiet moment. “What did you want to do? Like, when you were a kid?”

“I wanted to go to space.” Raphael lifted his hand and traced his finger across the sky in a pattern over the stars. “My mother was very practical. When I was born, they didn't know a lot about CP. They told her I would never walk, that I would never talk. She saw these pamphlets with these children who couldn't dress or feed themselves. For so long, she thought it would have been better if I died.”

“Jesus, that's...who thinks that about their kid?”

“A lot of parents, I imagine,” Raphael said, a sort of dark resignation in his tone. “Even now, a lot of people don’t understand it. They think if you can’t be like everyone else, you can’t be happy. She grew more confident as I got older, and she stopped trying to hold me back. Mostly. I told her I wanted to go to space, and she told me they would never let me.”

“Did you try to prove her wrong?”

Raphael’s sigh was very soft, carrying over the quiet breeze. “No. I was trapped in a cycle of endless doctors and surgeries to help loosen my tendons. I fell behind in school because I was constantly out, and I barely passed. University was a pipe dream.”

“So, how’d you get here?”

Raphael laughed softly, and he set his box of vegetables back into the bag at his feet. “I fell in love with a woman who wanted to travel. So, we did that for a while, but my physical limitations were holding her back and making her miserable so I let her go. Then I fell in love with an American man, and he talked me into moving here before it ended.”

“You dumped him?” Luca asked.

Raphael laughed. “Ah. No. The other way around. He wasn’t thrilled when he realized he couldn’t love me into becoming able bodied.”

“Seriously?”

Raphael snorted. “I wish I was joking, but I’m not. He truly believed that love would be enough to make a difference.”

Luca’s brows dipped into a scowl. “That’s...”

“It’s reality,” Raphael said. “But reality changes shape every second of every day. Like space, for example. I’m too old now for NASA, but there’s a child being born sometime soon—just like me—who will be in a rocket. They’ll go to the moon,” he brushed his hand across the sky, “and they’ll touch the stars.”

“It should be you,” Luca declared.

Raphael shook his head. “I found joy in this simple life. I don’t want anything as grand as space. Not anymore. I just want this.” He dropped his hand on top of Luca’s. “I want to feel love and be loved. I want good friends and bad Chinese food that would never be served in China.”

Luca laughed so hard he snorted. “Fair.”

“I want to meet the love of my life someday—but even if I don’t, I still want *this* life. With my little job, and my little house, and my beat-up old car.”

Luca drank in the words, letting them wrap around him, settle under his skin, because it was everything he’d needed to hear. It was a small something that meant *everything*, but he didn’t know how to put it into words to make sense.

“I don’t miss home,” he said instead.

Raphael turned his head and squeezed Luca’s hand a little tighter. “I didn’t think you did.”

“I thought I would. I feel like I’m supposed to. It’s nothing like this.” Luca closed his eyes and felt a sigh lodged in his chest, burning behind his ribs.

“You came here looking for something different. Are you glad you found it?”

“I don’t know.” It was the most honest answer he could give in that moment, but for the first time in a long time, he didn’t hate the unknown. It was strangely comforting, the more he thought about it, but it made sense. There were no expectations here, other than to exist, other than to be kind and be good—and good here didn’t mean philanthropic events bleeding him and his bank account dry.

Savannah was simpler, quieter, and maybe that’s what he’d been looking for his entire life.

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LUCA DROPPED RAPHAEL OFF, seeing him inside and promising to visit the salon in the morning.

He still didn't have a text from Wilder, so he jumped half a foot when he ascended the stairs and found him sitting on the floor with his eyes closed, head lolled to the side.

"Shit," he said, but when Wilder didn't stir, he realized it was because he didn't have his hearing aids on. Luca bit his lip, then crouched down next to him and touched his shoulder. Wilder shifted, then his eyes flew open, and he stared at Luca, a little wild and unseeing.

"How long was I out?"

Luca stood up and offered a hand to him, steadying him on his feet before he took space to sign. 'I don't know. I just got home. Why didn't you text?'

Wilder dragged both hands down his face. 'My phone died. My dad's in the hospital.'

Luca's eyes widened, and he fumbled for his keys, getting them both inside before easing Wilder down to the sofa cushion. 'What happened?'

'Heart attack,' he spelled. He was gaunt, his fingers trembling a little, and his mouth was drawn in a tight line. 'He's not conscious.'

'You need to go. Right?' Luca pressed. 'You need to be there.'

Wilder's hesitation played out on his face, and he shifted on the cushion before shrugging. 'I don't know. I don't know what to do. My sister spent all day FaceTiming me, trying to get me to drop everything and get a flight out.'

'Why don't you?' Luca ached for him, wrenched by a sudden helplessness, because regardless of how much progress he had made with himself, this wasn't something he could fix.

Wilder's look was hopeless, lost, and instead of answering him, he grabbed Luca by the waist and buried his face in his chest. Luca's arms came around him, holding him tight like

they belonged there always. Wilder's body shook a little, not like he was crying, but maybe a little bit like he wanted to.

"Take me to bed," Wilder murmured against the fabric of his shirt.

Luca didn't hesitate. He led the way to the bedroom, leaving all the lights off save for the dimmed lamp perched at the edge of the dresser. He stood Wilder at the foot of the bed, then methodically stripped him of his clothes. Laying everything in a neat pile, he took Wilder by the hand and tugged him across the hall to the bathroom and started the shower, letting it warm before he peeled out of his t-shirt and jeans.

'Let me take care of you,' he said. He couldn't fix what was wrong, but he could do this. His heart sped up a little when Wilder nodded—not smiling with his mouth, but there was a sort of ease in his eyes that hadn't been there when Luca first got home.

He swung the shower door wide, then stepped over the low hump, taking Wilder by the hand, and he stood him under the spray as he grabbed the washcloth he'd left hanging on a hook. His soap was from home, a luxury indulgence that felt suddenly right for the first time as he lathered it and smoothed the cloth over Wilder's outstretched arms.

If anyone deserved to be bathed in decadence, it was the man there with him. He watched as Wilder's head bowed, the way his hair curled slightly under the rivulets of water as it cascaded from the back of his head, running in rivers down his face. He was pliant under Luca's ministrations, moving only when manipulated, his breathing even with the occasional hitch as his emotions overtook him.

Luca wanted to rage at the unfairness of it—at how he'd been given this gift, and how his life was still fine while Wilder was being forced to suffer more. Luca didn't want to lose his parents—he wasn't ready for that. But if anyone deserved to shoulder pain and loss, it was him.

He dragged his soapy fingers through Wilder's hair, then tipped his head back and rinsed him with gentle strokes. When



he was clean, he added conditioner, then backed him into the wall and cupped his face.

They had been in there only a handful of minutes, but it felt like an eternity since words had been spoken between them. Wilder's eyes fluttered open when his back hit the cool tiles, and he looked at Luca like he was seeing him for the first time.

"I need you to kiss me," he said aloud as his fingers dug into Luca's elbows like he was trying to pin him in place. "Please."

Luca wouldn't make him beg. He hated that he even had to ask. He stepped forward, his chest warmed from the steam pressing against Wilder before he lowered his head and captured his mouth. He felt Wilder part his lips, felt his breath come out in a shudder. He opened his mouth wide, his tongue brushing against Wilder's—letting that one kiss show him just how hard he was falling, just how much he needed him.

Wilder moaned, his cock going hard, and Luca hesitated. He wanted to make him feel good, wanted to make him feel possessed and treasured and adored, but they hadn't talked yet, and he was unsure where the boundary lines were. Wilder seemed to sense his reluctance, because he pulled out of the kiss and locked gazes with Luca before taking him by the wrist, then putting his hand to where he was thick and throbbing between his legs.

"I want to feel you. I need it." It wasn't quite a plea, but it was close enough, and Luca closed his hand around his shaft and gave it a firm, easy stroke. "God. Like that," Wilder breathed out.

Luca stroked, feeling the heavy weight of Wilder's cock against his palm, feeling the sticky wetness as he ran a thumb over his slit. He was suddenly desperate to taste him, to fall to his knees and open himself in every single way he was allowed. "Let me suck you," he said.

Wilder's eyes opened again. "Say that again."

‘Let me suck you,’ Luca signed, then rubbed a flat palm over his chest. ‘Please.’

Wilder’s pupils dilated, and he laid both hands on Luca’s shoulders, pushing down by way of answer. Luca’s knees hit the tile hard—enough to hurt, but the pain kept him grounded as he gained his balance with hands on Wilder’s hips. He was the perfect height there to take it, to open up and let Wilder thrust hot and heavy along his tongue.

He tasted of come and soap residue—musky and clean—and Luca groaned as the head of Wilder’s dick brushed the back of his throat with his first thrust. Wilder let out a stuttered moan, sounding almost like he was in agony, but when Luca looked up, he saw him with his head back and eyes closed, cheeks flushed with pleasure. His lips were parted, and his hands moved from where they grappled at the tile to curl into Luca’s wet locks.

“Open wider,” he ordered, and Luca opened until his jaw ached.

Wilder ran his thumb around where Luca’s lips stretched to the point of ache, and then he thrust again. One hand moved from Luca’s hair to his cheek, and Wilder’s eyes were wide and almost frantic, disbelieving as he thrust again. And then again.

Luca choked, but his grip on Wilder’s hips didn’t let him pull away. He took it all, took everything Wilder had to give—desperation and pain and desire and need. He swallowed it all down, more than just willing. He was grateful. He felt appreciated and desired as himself, exactly as he was.

With his second moan, Wilder’s hips stuttered, and they sped up faster than Luca was prepared for. Before he could protest, before he could ease the motions, Wilder gave a short cry, and then he was coming. Hot ropes spilled along Luca’s tongue, and he closed his mouth, sucking him dry until Wilder gasped and touched his face.

The cock slipped past his lips, dragging down his chin before Luca leaned back, and he braced himself on Wilder’s thighs, staring up at him through the faint mist from the

showerhead. He looked exhausted, his eyes closed, his head bowed forward. It was enough to send Luca climbing to his feet and easing his lover under the spray to rinse his hair free of the conditioner.

“What about you?” Wilder murmured. His hand reached for Luca’s hard dick, but Luca grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand away.

When Wilder looked up, he shook his head and tapped the thumb of his open palm on his chest. ‘I’m fine.’

Wilder’s brows furrowed, but he didn’t fight him as Luca turned the water off, then stepped out to wrap himself in a towel. He used the second to dry Wilder’s body with long swipes, then wrapped him up in the soft cloth before using a smaller one to dry his hair. He didn’t bother with pajamas, instead bustling him back into the bedroom and pulling back the covers.

“I need to charge my phone,” Wilder argued. “Need to find my batteries for my hearing aids.”

‘Let me,’ Luca insisted, then got Wilder between the sheets before he set off to do as his lover asked. Wilder’s phone was in the pocket of his jeans, and Luca plugged it in before digging around in his travel case to find his pack of batteries. He had no idea how to replace them, so he left them beside the hearing aids on the nightstand, then killed the light and climbed into the bed.

It was earlier than he’d normally turn in, but Wilder’s soft, warm body pressed against his was enough to get him halfway to sleep before his body was fully relaxed. He turned onto his side slightly, then Wilder did the same and spooned against Luca’s chest, letting out a bone-deep sigh as he was held in a tight grasp.

“Wake me if my phone goes off. Please.”

Luca wanted to tell him no, to rest, that it would be waiting for him in the morning, but he knew better than that. This wasn’t something Wilder could afford to ignore. So, he nodded against the back of his head, then laid kisses to Wilder’s neck,

to his shoulders, to the center of his spine until his body settled, and his breathing evened, and Luca was pretty sure he was asleep.

## CHAPTER 18

WILDER WOKE, disoriented and confused—the feeling like he'd slept too much and too little all at the same time. The room was still dark, the sky without even a hint of morning light, and Wilder rolled away from the arm tucked around his waist to find his phone. It was settled on the nightstand next to his hearing aid batteries, and he felt a wash of unexpected affection for Luca's easy caretaking.

Wilder wasn't sure anyone had ever done that for him before. He had vague memories of his childhood, of his dad holding him at night and sitting him on his knee as he signed storybooks. But as he got older, and his mother's resentment simmered hotter and richer, his father backed off. Wilder knew his dad loved him, but he had never loved him enough to risk that anger turning around on him.

He'd suffered alone, for years. When he got out of the hospital, his mother had given him a look of disdain, had called him weak for staying with Scott as long as he had. He recovered in his childhood bedroom with drawn curtains and perfunctory health checks. No one had hugged him when he felt too close to shattered. No one had called him brave for leaving. He'd pieced himself back together entirely by himself and held the weight of it all in his own hands. He was proud of having made it this far, but he felt a rush of terror now because Luca's affection was going to get addicting.

He took a breath, then turned the screen on and saw two messages from his sister twenty minutes apart. He knew what they were, and for a brief, wild moment, he thought maybe if

he didn't bother to open them, they wouldn't be real. He wouldn't have to deal with it.

But he was no fool. Not really.

Willow: Things bad. Mom want to know if you have ticket already.

Willow: Dad gone. Heart stop at one, and not bring back. Come home.

Wilder let the phone clatter to the floor, and he rolled onto his back as Luca startled beside him. He felt his lover shift, press against him, the vibration of a sleepy grunt rippling up the side of his arm where Luca had pressed his chest. He knew he should turn on the light, maybe put in his hearing aids, maybe explain why it was suddenly impossible to breathe, but it felt like his limbs were filled with lead.

He didn't realize he was shaking and gasping for air until Luca was pushing up on his elbow and reaching for the light. His hand touched Wilder's cheek, and he barely felt it, but he was able to fix his gaze on his lover's eyes, and suddenly, the room stopped spinning. It wasn't vertigo, but it was close. He was off kilter, and the only thing that kept him from tumbling off the side of the world was the press of Luca's warm fingers.

'Talk to me.'

Wilder swallowed—he could do that much, at least. His tongue was thick and heavy, and he wasn't sure he could make his words come out clear. "I." It was the best he had right then.

Understanding flashed in Luca's eyes and he dropped his head, pushing their noses together in a careful nuzzle. He felt a puff of air, the zinging vibration of words he couldn't hear. Lips brushed his own, and then Luca pulled back to sign what he'd said. 'When?'

"This morning," Wilder said, and he was startled that he'd found his voice so quickly. He wanted to wrap both arms around Luca and bury his face in his broad chest and lose himself there. If he was there, reality outside that embrace

didn't exist, and he wouldn't have to deal with any of it. "One a.m., I guess. My sister texted me. I have to go."

He wasn't sure if Luca tried to speak, but he didn't think so. He didn't feel the motion of words, just easy kisses dropping to his hair, his temple, across his forehead. Luca's fingers drew soft lines up and down the sides of him, and the bed beneath them kept him from sinking beneath the earth.

"I don't want to go. I don't want to do this. God, I don't want to see her." He felt the sob lodge in his chest, but it wouldn't break free, and he gave a frustrated growl because he wanted to fucking cry. Maybe it would make the knot in his gut unclench. Maybe it would stop that itchy sort of ache just under his skin that hadn't gone away since he read Willow's text.

Luca pushed up on his arms, but his stomach still weighed Wilder's hip down to the bed. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Yes, he did. More than anything.

He felt like he might lose himself and never find his way back again if he had to walk into that house and face his mother with his father gone. His father hadn't done much, but he'd done enough—like a paper-thin buffer between Wilder and her poison, and now there was nothing. Her grief and anger would make her *worse* than poison, and his father's small protection had slipped beyond the veil with him.

Wilder had no idea what to expect.

"I need to do this alone," he said.

He wasn't surprised at his words, but they filled him with an old self-loathing because he too often refused help when he needed it. He was his own worst enemy on the best of days, even when he didn't have to be. But, as much as he wanted to cling to Luca like a crutch, he knew he couldn't do that. Just like he couldn't allow himself to rely on Luca's soft touches or easy words. His own two feet, his own strength, had to keep him upright, because he might not have Luca one day, and he needed to know he could trust himself.

‘Ok.’ The two letters flicked through Luca’s fingers with steady acceptance, and Wilder winced inwardly. He wanted Luca to fight him—to fight *for* him—but he’d never ask for it. ‘How long will you be gone?’

“I don’t know.” And he didn’t. He had roots here. He wasn’t going to pull them from the ground and set them ablaze because of family tragedy, but he also knew that once his mother got her claws back in, it would be hard to break free. “I need to get ahold of Dmitri. I need to get a flight. I need to...”

His words stopped when Luca touched his cheek. ‘Let me call Dmitri. You go online and book your ticket. I’ll drive you to the airport.’

Wilder blinked, watching Luca’s hands, letting it all sink in. He wanted to turn away—or maybe he wanted Luca to beg him to stay, but he wasn’t a child. He had to face this. Pushing up, he eased himself away from his lover and moved to the bathroom. The door shut with a firm click, and he was profoundly aware right then he wasn’t home. He missed his space—and he was glad to be here with Luca, but in that moment, he wanted to be in his room, with his things.

He’d have to go and pack anyway, and he needed to get things prepped before he did, and he had to get Dmitri ready to handle the business by himself, and if he was gone for too long, things would fall apart, and...

He was on his knees, and it must have made a loud enough sound because Luca was instantly behind him, pulling him away from the sink to hold him. It had been a while since he’d had a full panic attack, but he felt the familiar tug—the room closing in on him, the feeling like he was about to die, the fear that it would never stop, and he’d be stuck in this terrible loop for the rest of his life.

He counted. He breathed. He tapped his fingers in a soft rhythm against the side of his thigh and let that be the only thing he felt until his chest began to loosen. Luca was still holding him, but his arms were loose and ready to pull back when Wilder needed him to.

“I have to go home. To my apartment,” Wilder said.



Luca nodded against his back and let go. They moved from the bedroom, and Wilder dressed before he changed his hearing aid batteries, then slipped them in and turned them on. He pressed his palm to the wall as he adjusted to the sudden rush of sound, to the pressure in his ear, and the inevitable surge of vertigo. It didn't last, and he regained his balance enough that he could bend over for his phone without falling on his face.

Luca was waiting for him, sleepy-eyed and dressed in sweats. His hair was a mess, and he had a cardigan on that looked softer than anything Wilder had ever touched. He wanted to bury himself in it, but he couldn't bring himself to take another moment of physical comfort from this man. If he was going to be gone for an indeterminate amount of time, he had no business making Luca any sort of promise, spoken or otherwise.

He appreciated that Luca didn't try to talk on the drive over. He appreciated that the sound of soft classical music accompanied them back to Whipped, and that Luca didn't turn the car off or get out when he pulled up to the curb.

“So...”

Wilder shook his head. “I don't know how long this is going to take.”

“I know.” Luca offered him a small, sad grin that didn't reach his eyes. “I get it.”

“I'm not—” Wilder said, then cut himself off with a growl. “I don't want to go.”

“I know,” Luca repeated, his smile getting a little bit softer. “What *do* you want?”

Wilder blinked, then he laughed in spite of himself. “For none of this to be happening. To take you with me. To tell you I'm falling in love with you without the weight of my dad's death hanging over it.” He stopped, because while it was true, he'd been trying to save that moment for somewhere important—somewhere good. Somewhere untainted by the pain of his

past. The damage was done though, and he could see it in Luca's face. "I want to be an easier person to love."

Luca gripped the wheel, then he let go and opened the door, walking around the side of the car. Wilder was barely on his feet when Luca reached for him, and he went pliant as one hand dug into his side and the other into his hair. "I'm not going anywhere."

Wilder shook his head. "I don't know when I'll be back. And you have a home to get back to, and..."

"I do have to go back there," Luca said. "I have shit to take care of, but I found what I'm looking for."

"Please don't say me," Wilder begged, his throat thick with emotion. "I can't handle that weight, Luca. I'm...I want to be enough, but I'm not."

"You *are* enough, but that's not what I meant." Luca's grin was a little tight, but it was also as honest as his words sounded. "You're what I want. You were most certainly not what I was looking for, but you're not hard to love, okay? You're an effort, and I'm not scared of hard work."

Wilder started to shake his head, but Luca's grip tightened just a fraction—just enough to remind him that he was being held. "I can't make you promises."

"I don't need them. My life has been full of bullshit and fake promises, and I'm not looking to corner you into a vow you're not ready to make. I don't know if this—if you and I—are end game, but I know this moment right here is a good start." Luca closed his eyes and breathed out. "I think I'd like to stick around for a while. I have to go home and end all those things that were making me miserable, but I know that you'll be back here when you can. And I'll be waiting."

Wilder was desperate to believe him and desperate not to, because he wasn't sure he could take a broken promise. Not one like that. "I don't know what to say."

"Just say you'll text me," Luca told him, simple as that. His hand moved to Wilder's cheek, thumb caressing his warm skin, then moved down to trace his lips. "Then tell me you'll

miss me, and that you're looking forward to seeing me when you get back. And then kiss me."

Wilder gave in and curled his hands into the front of Luca's sweater, letting the soft fleece brush along the pads of his fingers. His eyes closed for only a second, then he nodded. "I'm going to miss you so fucking much."

Luca smiled. "I know."

"I can't wait to see you when I get back."

With a breath, Luca eased Wilder's head back, urged his lips to part with a thumb at his chin, and Wilder leaned into him. Just like Luca had asked. It was sour from sleep, and warm, and perfect. Wilder softened, just a fraction, half-melting into the arms that held him steady. Luca indulged, but only for a moment, and then he broke off with a series of easy pecks across his bottom lip and the edge of his jaw.

"I'll text you," Wilder said, fulfilling that last bit of promise Luca had squeezed from him.

Luca smiled a moment, and then he let him go and walked back around to the driver's side of the car. He didn't wait for Wilder to get to the bakery door. He didn't even wait for Wilder to start moving again before he pulled away from the curb and disappeared around the corner.

There had been no goodbye. None at all, and Wilder realized what it was. Luca wasn't letting him go, even with their vague, uncertain future. He really *did* think Wilder was worth the effort, and that wasn't a gift he planned to squander.

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WILDER HADN'T BEEN GONE MORE than a few years, but it felt like a lifetime as his rental car pulled onto the long, winding dirt road that led to the property. He saw it in the distance, along the rolling fields that gave away miles of terrain. He was missing the coast like a physical ache, the sky too blue here, the horizon too damn empty, the air too dry. This wasn't home anymore, and he had never been more profoundly aware of it.

The flight had been short, the landing rocky from summer wind. Once upon a time, this had been in his blood. He hardly noticed the way the summer air felt too light and too dry as he ran with the chickens and used every excuse he could think of to avoid going inside.

To avoid *her*.

His car rolled to a stop beside his sister's little station wagon, and he took a breath before he found the courage to go in. His father's body had already been cremated, and Willow said they were just waiting for the funeral home to secure the date of the services.

They had never been particularly religious, though his mother had grown up protestant, and his father had come from an old Spanish Catholic family—but the practices had died out a few generations before Wilder and Willow were born. In truth, his dad would have wanted something small, something spiritual. He would have wanted it outside in rain and cool weather. His father should have died during a late autumn storm and his ashes released into a creek.

Instead, they'd tell childhood stories inside a stuffy mortuary chapel, and everyone would pretend to mourn and pretend like they cared. They'd eat stale potluck food, and then his father would sit entombed in a small ceramic jar on his mother's mantle until she died, and Willow decided what the hell she was going to do with everything left behind.

*He* wasn't going to be there when his mother was finally gone. She had drained the life out of him for years, and it was only because Wilder felt like he owed his father bare bones of mourning that he'd left Savannah behind and showed up for this.

His palms were so sweaty he nearly lost grip on his suitcase, but he made it inside. It smelled the same as it always did—like baked bread and dust from the fields. The AC was blasting, just enough to take the edge off, and the floors creaked and bowed beneath his feet.

The evidence of his mother's hatred of him was all over the walls. Each framed photograph showed not only the

smiling face of his sister, but his own stark absence from family gatherings. Every single one of Willow's mediocre accomplishments were displayed like grand trophies. She had graduated college after two extra semesters because she was too busy partying to pass her freshman year. She lost her financial aid, and it was only when her mother wrote a tuition check that her education hadn't gone down the toilet.

She worked for a credit card company's online support now, and made enough to fund her small apartment and her weekend drinking, not that Wilder was judging. Willow was a grown adult and lived as she saw fit, and he was happy for her. But it was a tough pill to swallow when everything he'd ever done was a failure. Every accomplishment of his own had been weighted with his hearing.

'If you were Deaf, you'd have to work twice as hard for that,' his mother had told him when he won third prize at the state science fair. His father showed up to the award ceremony and took a single picture, but Wilder wasn't sure it was ever developed.

He graduated with honors, but his mother left before his name was called for him to walk across the stage. He'd signed for every choir performance she never showed up to, and he'd interpreted every parent-teacher conference she made time for only for her to spend the next three hours telling him his education by hearing teachers was a waste.

He was grateful for the Deaf community outside his home for embracing him—the little lost CODA who didn't know what his life was meant to be or where he was supposed to stand. He was grateful to them because they were diverse, they made him feel welcome and wanted, and they showed him that his mother was just broken inside somewhere in the empty space her heart was meant to be.

It wasn't him—it was her.

It wasn't *him*—it was *her*.

It was a mantra he'd been telling himself since he'd been brave enough to inwardly whisper the word abusive parent,

even if he'd never been able to say it aloud. He was Deaf now, and he belonged to that identity, but not because of her.

Never because of her.

He passed by a photo of his aunts—his mother's sisters who had visited twice a year and always brought him and Willow the most wonderful, random little puzzles they found when they traveled. He passed by images of his grandparents who had died within four months of each other when he was sixteen. They had loved him until he couldn't breathe, but his mother had chosen to settle in a place a thousand miles away from the people who might have loved Wilder the way he deserved to be.

This place was not home. It was just a stark reminder of when he existed on an island, entirely separate and on his own. He wanted to go back to his life—desperately. It was hard to believe he'd woken up that morning wrapped in Luca's arms, and now he was here, in the house that had never brought him a moment's peace.

With a fortifying breath, Wilder made his way down the hall to his room, dropping his things off on his bed, which hadn't changed since the last time he'd been there. His mother had cleared it of all his childhood things and set up the room as a guest bedroom. The bed had a floral duvet, the curtains light blue, the walls a soft coffee. There was a brown dresser and a matching rug, and the closet held some of his father's old coats.

Nothing about him remained, but he recalled the day he set foot in there after he was released from the hospital and he'd asked her, 'Is this still mine?'

She'd looked at him, shrugged, and replied, 'For whenever you need it.'

It was impossible to tell if it was out of kindness or necessity, but he suspected the latter, and it was lying in the bed that first night that he resolved to save himself from this place. Scott had plunged the knife into his body, over and over, but Wilder had survived. He lay there, wounds itching, lungs

sore every time he took a breath, and he knew he was too strong to buckle under the weight of anyone's hatred.

He thought once it meant being alone for the rest of his life, but now...

Now, he had Luca. Now, he had soft, unending kindness from a man who didn't believe in a single inch of himself and yet made sure Wilder knew he was worth fighting for. That he was worth waiting for. That he was worth loving.

He allowed himself a smile, because although it would be a while until he could be in Luca's arms again, he knew that's where he belonged.

## CHAPTER 19

LUCA TOOK A BREATH, then affected a smile and stepped into the salon with his duffle bag over his shoulder just as Raphael was walking out. It was a crutches day, it seemed, so his progress to his desk was slower. He glanced up and looked happy to see Luca until he caught the expression on his face, and then he froze.

“You’re leaving.”

Luca rolled his eyes. “God, are you psychic?”

“I’ve just done this a lot. It happens when you work on the ground floor of a vacation rental.” He grunted as he sat, then shoved his crutches aside, the only real outward sign of his irritation.

Trying not to laugh, Luca came around the desk and propped up on the edge in front of his friend, laying hands on his shoulder. “My flight leaves in a couple hours.” Just the very thought of the airport made him think about Wilder. It made him think about driving him there and kissing him goodbye at the terminal before he got out of the car and left.

There were no promises to see each other again, just a promise to text—which they had. No details, just Wilder letting him know that he’d arrived safely, that he was tired, that he was having a bagel for breakfast. But it was enough.

“So, that’s just it?” Raphael asked, trying to push Luca away.

Luca tightened his grip. “I need you to watch my car for me. Make sure no tourist teenage assholes fuck with it, okay?”



Raphael blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that Nellie is looking for a listing for me, so when I get back, I can move some shit in and stay a while.” Luca’s cheeks ached from wanting to smile. “You grew on me. Like mold.”

“You mean to say you’re staying because your boyfriend sucks good cock,” Raphael fired back.

Luca finally gave in and laughed. “That has nothing to do with it, and it’s none of your damn business.” Luca took a quiet breath, then added, “He’s going to be away for a while though. His dad died last night.”

Raphael startled and pushed his rolling chair back with his involuntary movement. Luca’s hands slipped off him, and he slid down off the desk. “How?”

“Heart attack,” Luca answered with a shrug. He stared down at his feet. “I guess it was sudden. I called Dmitri for him, and Adam’s going to take over baking while he’s gone. And I damn well plan to be here helping out when he gets back.”

Raphael dragged a hand through his hair. “What can we do? I’m sure everyone will want to help.”

“Keep Whipped going, I guess,” Luca said with a helpless sigh. “I don’t know. I just want to make sure his life doesn’t fall apart while he’s gone.”

“And you didn’t want to go with him?”

It was a sharp question, and it hurt, even if Raphael didn’t mean it to be painful. “He didn’t want me to come, and I get it. He doesn’t have a good relationship with his family, and I don’t even know what we are yet. It’s so new, and I’m still a mess.”

“I don’t think he minds,” Raphael said.

Luca’s face eased into a half-smile. “I hope not. We need time though, and I can give him that. But I have to go home and pack, and I need to talk to my brother, and... I don’t know.” What he wanted was advice from Noah, who had lived

in Savannah most of his life. He wanted to know that he could plant roots there, that people wouldn't urge him to leave the moment things got rough. They had all seemed to forgive him for his early mistakes, but he wasn't sure he trusted them. At least, not yet.

"I'll protect your car, but I can't drive it without hand controls," Raphael said.

"Just prepare to fight people off if they get too close. Use your crutches if you have to." Luca dug into his pocket and pulled out his keys. "Jayden said he'd give me a ride to the city, and Nellie's going to hold my shit here until she finds me a good place to crash for a while."

"A while," Raphael repeated.

"Maybe forever, but I don't want to make promises." Luca started to step back, but Raphael grabbed his arm and used it to leverage himself up.

"I don't make friends easily."

Luca lowered his eyelashes. "I know."

"So I don't let them go easy."

He laughed and shook his head, curling one of his hands around Raphael's wrists. "I know. I'm not leaving you, even if I don't stay here."

Raphael made a soft noise, but he let go with one hand and used it to touch the side of Luca's face. "Be safe, yes?"

"Always."

"Call me when you land."

Luca felt his heart warm, the feeling cascading through his limbs, and it was a reminder that this wasn't all for Wilder. Wilder was his focus, he was falling deep in love, and he wanted to see when or if it would end. But there was so much more, and maybe that's why it felt so damn big. Maybe that's why he felt a fire deep inside him for the first time in his entire life.

“I promise I’ll call every day,” Luca said, and Raphael’s body relaxed some. “I don’t plan on being gone long though.”

“Good.” Raphael let go and backed into his chair. “If you talk to Wilder, let him know we have his back, okay?”

Luca swallowed thickly and took a moment to answer. “Thanks. I...thank you.”

He had nothing more to offer, and his flight was leaving, so he said a last quick goodbye, then headed out to meet Jayden, who was waiting for him at the steps. He flung his bag in the back, then climbed into the seat and offered Jayden a smile before he pulled away from the curb and out onto the street. Luca didn’t know him well at all, and wasn’t sure Jayden was willing to give him a chance. He offered to drive him to the airport after he overheard him talking to Dmitri about it, but only when Luca said it was a round-trip ticket.

“If you hurt him,” Jayden said once they hit the freeway, and Luca startled in his seat, turning his gaze away. “If you hurt him, I will get everyone I know to come with me to California, and we will hurt you worse.”

It should have annoyed him. He should have been insulted. He was a grown adult in his damn forties, and this kid was threatening him all for a boy, and it was ridiculous. And yet, all he could do was smile. “Okay.”

“That’s all you have to say for yourself?” Jayden’s tone was sharp and accusing, and Luca couldn’t help his shrug.

“It’s the only thing I can say. I can’t make that promise, you know. I’m not going to be like his ex. I’m not a monster. But I am human, and humans make mistakes.”

“I know,” Jayden said with a sigh, then was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t think you’re a monster, for the record. But he’s one of my best friends, and I will do everything in my power to protect him.”

“I know.” Luca wasn’t quite sure what else to say, but he damn well knew how he felt. “I think I love him.”

“Oh,” Jayden said with a small laugh, “I know you do. Anyone who has been within ten feet of you two knows you’re

both hopeless. But he's a good person, and I'm not...I'm not going to sit here while someone fucks with him."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" Luca asked.

Jayden scoffed and swooped into the fast lane like he wanted to get to the airport and get Luca out of his car. "I don't know. You waltzed into Savannah like you were lost, but somehow better than all of us..."

"Trust me," Luca interrupted with a half-laugh, "I have never thought of myself as better than anyone."

"That might be worse," Jayden answered. "You can't put all the burden on him to love you."

"How he feels right now is enough." Luca looked away again and missed Wilder like a limb. "I can't be there to take care of him right now, so I'm doing what I can from here. The first step is closing up everything I have back in California."

"And the second?"

Luca drummed his fingers on his thigh. "Planting seeds."

Jayden gave a nod, and he didn't say anything else for the long journey to Charleston. They passed by all the same sights they had when Wilder had taken him on that first, impossibly nervous date. He could close his eyes and breathe in and imagine that Wilder was there with him. He remembered what his hand felt like when it reached for his, and how anxious he was, and how much he trembled with that first kiss. He remembered exactly the way Wilder looked with the glow of the aquarium lights haloing behind him—like he was an ethereal demi-god with the power to bring Luca to his knees with a single word.

And he would have knelt and worshipped—gladly.

He wanted that again, and he was determined to find it at the end of this road. Jayden pulled up at his terminal and didn't offer anything like a goodbye, but Luca couldn't blame him. He gathered his bag and tipped a wave, then sent a text to his brother letting him know he'd be there in a few hours. It felt wrong, leaving this place. He felt cracked in half, and the

bigger piece was staying behind, but maybe that's how it should be.

At least, for the first time, it felt right.

## CHAPTER 20

ADRIANO'S PA picked him up in his Corvette, and Luca tried not to be annoyed by the lack of his brother's presence. He had missed him, but Adriano had texted saying he had a photo shoot and that Noah, who was in his second year of his grad program, was busy on campus, so it was hard to blame the pieces of his family who were too busy for him. Luca was used to it—and he wasn't really upset, it only made him miss the streets of Savannah where no one had to fight for shards of attention.

The man, whose name Luca had never gotten, dropped him off at his condo where his real estate agent was set to meet him to prepare the sale. Very little was required on his part—just that he hire the movers and someone to clean, and the real estate agency would take care of the photos and listing.

He was happy to do it. This place had been home once, but it wasn't anymore. It was a relic of a life that never wanted him in the first place, and he didn't think anyone would hold on tight.

He headed up the stairs, with his bag over his shoulder, preparing himself for the task at hand. The front door was half open, and as he peered inside, he saw two people at the counter. The first was the agent he'd only seen through her profile photo, but the second was someone he didn't think he'd ever see again.

“Gabs?”

She spun, her expensive pumps clicking on his tiled floors with irritation as she stamped her foot. Her hand pressed into

her hip so hard, he could see depressions in her jeans, and her full mouth was set in a furious scowl.

“What the actual *fuck*, Luca?”

He blinked at her. “Uh.”

“You disappear for weeks, then I show up and there’s a real estate agent here preparing your condo for sale?”

Luca rubbed his hands over his thighs as he walked toward them. “I’m...sorry?”

Maria cleared her throat, then slid a stack of papers across toward him. “Initials and signature. Everything’s marked.”

He felt Gabby’s glower as he pushed past her to sign as quick as he could, feeling strangely nervous with her staring at him like he’d done something to betray her. The back of his neck went warm and sweaty, and he fought the urge to swipe at it as he handed the papers back. “Anything else?”

“No, Mr. Moretti. I’ll be in touch. It was...nice to meet you.” She flicked her gaze at Gabby, then gathered everything into her folder and left, closing the door with a firm click.

The room went deathly silent, then Gabby huffed. “So, you’re just fucking off, is that it? You write me a check and then you disappear into the wind like I meant nothing to you?”

Luca took a moment to process what she was saying, and he swallowed thickly. “Why are you here?” His voice was low, raspy, the confusion gripping him, because he didn’t understand. She’d gotten what she put her time in for, and now she was here?

Yelling at him?

Gabby took three steps, then smacked him hard in the chest. “Why do you think, *pendejo*! You were supposed to go on vacation, not sell your damn house and leave.”

“I don’t understand.” He stepped back when she raised her hand again, but this time she curled her fist into his shirt and yanked him forward. Thrown off balance, he grabbed her, and her arms cinched tight around his waist.

“You’re such a dick,” she said, her voice muffled by the front of his shirt. “You can’t just abandon your fucking friends. You can’t just pay me off!”

Luca held tight. “I didn’t think,” he started, but the rest of the words lodged in his throat because he realized if he uttered them, anything real between them would shatter. He’d been a moron—so wrapped up in his own belief that he wasn’t worth friendship or love, that he’d painted her with that same, broad brush.

And how many others had gone the same way?

“I’m sorry,” he said after a breath. When she stepped away, he cupped her cheeks. “Gabby, I’m sorry.”

After a long beat under her heated stare, she let out a breath. “Talk to me.”

He didn’t want to. Not just to avoid the humiliation of admitting his colossal mistake with her and probably so many others over his life, but he was terrified of making her feel like she was worth less to him.

Because that was never the case.

“Luca,” she said. She pulled away from his hands and leaned against the counter. “This isn’t like you. You don’t just disappear off the face of the earth like this, and you don’t say sorry. Ever.”

But he should have, years ago. “I’ve always been a fool,” he started.

She scoffed. “Not news.”

Luca couldn’t stop his smile, even as his stomach twisted in on itself. “I didn’t think you’d miss me.” His words were barely there, not even a whisper, but she heard them. Her small hands curled into fists, her dark cheeks lighting up with blushing color. “I thought you...” He licked his lips. “I didn’t think I was useful to you anymore.”

“You mean after the check,” she said through clenched teeth. “You think I’m that shallow?”



“I think—I *thought*,” he amended, because he was trying, he really was, “that I was that worthless. I’ve never done anything good for anyone.” He dragged a hand through his hair and took a step closer, but her entire body went rigid with tension, so he stopped. “I’ve never been the kind of person who could offer much besides money.”

“What about love? Friendship? I mean, was any of that real?” He heard the tremor in her voice, and he hated himself for how wrong he was.

“All of it. I just never let myself believe anyone felt the same way.” The truth hurt—though it was such a sad, sorry way to explain that kind of pain, but he felt unburdened. “I’m trying harder,” he told her. He took another risk and moved to stand next to her, resting both elbows on the counter, and he dropped his head forward. “I know I deserve better—but I don’t know entirely how to believe it yet.”

Gabby licked her lips, then let out a heavy breath and leaned on the counter next to him. “I’ve been telling you for years that you’re a catch. You know that.”

He laughed. “I do.”

“But you never believed me.”

Luca dragged a hand down his face. “I’ve never been good at anything, Gabs. I’ve never been worth sticking around for.” He reached over and tugged a lock of hair that had escaped from behind her ear. “You and I both know this.”

“People are trash, Luca. You can’t base your self-worth on the opinion of someone who belongs in a dumpster. Besides, *I* stayed for you. Doesn’t that mean something?”

He closed his eyes and grinned, shaking his head. “It means everything, babe. But you’re the exception to the rule. You always have been.”

She grinned at him. “Well. Yes. I can’t exactly deny that.”

Luca breathed out, then tugged her close and buried his nose in the top of her hair. “God, I missed you.” And he had. He hadn’t let himself think about her much, because the moment he left, he fully believed she was gone—that she was finished

with him, like everyone else. And he both loved and hated that he was so damn wrong. He was in love with Wilder, but his relationship with Gabby had always been so far beyond the black and white of romantic and platonic, and he knew right in that moment they'd find their new way forward.

She bit her lip, then let out a shaking sigh. "You haven't been on social media, Adriano or Pietro won't answer a damn text. I didn't know what was going on. You have to tell me everything."

He released her, and she swooped around him for one of his wine bottles—the cheap store-bought shit for their John Hughes movie nights, and she cracked the top, dragging him to the sofa without glasses. She took a long drink, then passed it over, and the burn of the chardonnay was almost comforting.

"When I got to Savannah, it was a fucking disaster," he told her.

Gabby's eyes went wide. "How bad? Like no internet bad?"

"More like, I made a fool of myself from the moment I got there, had a cow almost break my dick, and..." He bit his lip as her mouth twitched into a half smile. "I think I fell in love?"

He knew it sounded like a question even though his feelings were the only sure thing about him in that moment. But he wasn't quite sure he felt worthy of it right then. Not after being such a moron.

"Who is she?" Gabby asked quietly.

"His name is Wilder. He's Deaf. He owns a gluten-free cupcake shop, and he runs a baked goods stall at a Farmer's Market on the weekends," Luca closed his eyes to avoid her gaze, because the weight of it was heavy. "He took me on a dinner date at an aquarium and kissed me next to the stingray pool."

"He sounds like some indie movie character," she complained, but something about her relaxed, and she took another drink before settling back against the cushions. "You're not going to fuck me tonight, are you?"

He shook his head. “No.” Then his breath halted in his chest, and he waited, because he wanted—so damn desperately—to believe she was more than he let himself think, but he couldn’t be sure. “I’m sorry.”

She waved him off. “I don’t care. I’m kind of getting serious with someone right now anyway. He works at this little bookstore like a mile from my apartment.” She sighed, and he saw something reflect in her eyes that he now understood profoundly. It was a look she never gave him, but that was okay, because he was realizing they had something more. Like he had with Raphael. Like Wilder had with Jayden. “Tell me more about your guy,” she said as she settled deeper into the cushions.

“There’s not much else.” Luca smiled as he realized how simple and easy it was to love Wilder. How he existed, but didn’t consume. “He’s good looking. He’s smart, and he’s funny. He’s kind of an asshole.” Luca sighed and stole the wine back. “I’m trying not to suffer too much from the irony of falling in love with a man in the same place Adriano fell in love with Noah.”

She laughed, then pushed herself up. “Maybe it’s the building. Or maybe it’s the Morettis.” Walking to one of his wall mirrors, she reapplied her lipstick, then sighed. “When do you go home?”

Home. She was talking about Savannah, not here, and suddenly it felt impossibly and overwhelmingly real. He stood, setting the wine on the table, and he dragged her back into his arms, holding tight. “Promise this isn’t it for us.”

“Why would it be?” she demanded, holding on just as fiercely. “I’m supposed to be your personal attorney when I’m done with school. Which still means no fucking up until I pass the bar.” She stopped, then groaned. “Does it have to be Georgia?”

“Probably,” he told her, then pulled back far enough to kiss her forehead. He thought about Raphael—about how Raphael would love her to pieces, and how she’d fit in there. “I love you.”

She looked started, then bit her lip. “I’ve been waiting a long fucking time to hear that from you.”

He cleared his throat. “I was afraid. I’m still terrified, but...I should have said it years ago. I love you.”

She laughed, then kissed the corner of his mouth. “Wish me luck. I’m going to get laid, and I feel like you have a lot of packing to do, which is not my thing.”

It wasn’t a lie. “Tell him if he hurts you...”

“You have enough money to make him disappear. And you have brothers on your side who will make sure no one ever touches you,” she finished for him. He’d used that line before—just never on her. Not until now. “I know. Call me?”

“Yes,” he promised, and this time he meant it.

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LUCA WAS SLIGHTLY drunk and halfway through clearing out his closet when the doorbell rang. He barely heard it, buried under a pile of old hoodies, but he noticed the flashing lights he’d installed for Adriano. At the door, he found his brother, Noah, and a few bags of what smelled like dim sum take-out hanging from their hands.

‘What’s up,’ Adriano signed, pushing past him. ‘Sorry I couldn’t get you earlier.’

Noah smiled, all shy dimples and soft freckles, and he offered a slight nod as he followed Adriano to the kitchen to set everything down.

‘I don’t remember inviting you,’ Luca said when he had his brother’s attention.

Adriano rolled his eyes, then grabbed Noah and kissed him under the ear before murmuring something. Noah nodded, then went back out, and Adriano turned toward him. ‘You weren’t going to eat.’

‘How the hell do you know that?’

‘I know you,’ he signed with an easy grin. ‘You were going to get drunk and wallow because your boyfriend’s gone.’

‘He’s not gone,’ Luca answered, his face sullen. ‘His dad died.’

At that, Adriano’s expression dropped to something like sympathy. ‘Is he okay?’

Luca busied himself with the bags of food just to avoid answering right away, because the truth was, he didn’t know. Wilder had texted just the one time, and then there was silence, and Luca wasn’t sure he had the right to disturb him.

Adriano tapped him lightly on the arm to get his attention. ‘I’m sorry.’

Waving him off, Luca grabbed plates, staring down at the hideous, thin gold pattern and resolved to get rid of them. Everything, actually. Apart from his clothes, he didn’t want any of his old crap. It wasn’t him. Hell, it was barely the man he had been pretending to be.

Adriano touched his arm again, and Luca looked up with a sigh. ‘It’s going to be fine. By the time he gets back to Savannah, I’ll be there.’

Adriano’s eyes widened. ‘You’re going back?’

‘I like it there. It feels...’ But he didn’t quite have the words, in ASL or English, but Adriano’s face softened like he got it.

‘We’ll be back soon.’

‘To live?’

Before Adriano could answer, the door opened again, and Noah walked back in wearing a small grin. ‘My brother says hi.’

Luca groaned. ‘Great.’

Noah and Adriano both laughed, and they carefully dished out food and moved to the sofa to sit and eat. ‘Adam said

you're going back,' Noah signed with one hand as he forked rice into his mouth.

Luca shrugged. 'I am. Nellie's finding me a real apartment to stay in, and I told Dmitri I'd help him with the accounting books when I got back so the shop doesn't fall apart before Wilder gets home.'

Noah blinked, and for a second, Luca swore he saw tears. 'How are the renovations going?'

Luca shook his head. 'I don't know how different it is from when you were there, but it looks good, and Wilder said your brother isn't as angry about it anymore.'

'I'm glad. I was worried,' Noah answered, and Adriano set his fork down so he could pull Noah into a kiss. When he pulled back, the tension in Noah's grin had eased. 'I'm glad he's happy there. I'm glad it's doing well.'

'They all miss you,' Luca told him, and that much was true. It was hard to go ten feet in that city block without hearing about the bakery that was, even if they loved the bakery that stood there now. 'They're proud of you.'

Noah flushed, and Adriano grinned at Luca. 'Me too. And I'm proud of *you*. I didn't think you'd find anything there.'

'I had to find something somewhere,' Luca answered, biting his lip. 'Couldn't be a waste of space forever.'

Adriano's face hardened, and he shifted closer to his brother. 'Is that what you think?'

'I—' Luca began, his finger hovering pointed at himself.

Adriano made a scoffing noise in the back of his throat. 'You spent your entire childhood taking care of me. You were the only one who learned my language. You stood up for me, fought for me. Taught me how to fight...' His fingers hovered as he trailed off, then he shook his head. 'How can you think you're a waste of space?'

Luca's cheeks were hot, and his throat felt tight. 'I never did anything meaningful with my life. All of you had goals. You had passion. I never did.' He stopped and shrugged. 'I

wasn't sure what the hell I was looking for, but I think I found it.'

'In Wilder?' Adriano asked.

Luca shook his head. 'He's part of it, but he's not everything. He helped me see that, though. That Savannah could be good for me.'

'Wilder's a good man.' Noah set his plate down and swiped a napkin over his mouth before he went on. 'I think you two could make each other happy. And I think that matters—even if it isn't everything.'

It wasn't what Luca was expecting, and he took a minute to make sure he'd read the signs correctly, but the looks he was getting from Noah and his brother said everything. They saw his worth—even if he wasn't much more of anything but a man sitting on the couch of an apartment that was about to be sold.

He was still a person worth loving.

'I hope so,' was all he could say.

But Adriano nodded, and Luca realized he was making the right choice. Even if it crashed and burned in the end, he wouldn't regret it. Wilder was worth this fight.

## CHAPTER 21

IT WAS ALMOST comical that Wilder woke up the morning of the funeral with vertigo so bad, he could barely stand. He went through his routine of lying on his back, of putting his feet on the floor, and a towel over his face, and breathing through his nose.

All of his usual techniques only took the edge off, though, and it was a struggle to walk in a straight line. He made his way to the kitchen, hoping some caffeine would help, and his fingers itched to reach for his phone and text Luca because all he wanted was to be home with him.

But Luca wasn't home. At least, not the last time they spoke. Wilder was holding himself back only to preserve their fragile beginning, because he was in a place that brought out the worst in him, and the last thing he wanted was to take these angry, ugly feelings out on the man he was falling for. He didn't want Luca to know this side of him. Ever.

This side of him only existed here, in this place, and he was ready to leave it behind.

After he'd gone to meet his family, his mother had all but ignored him other than to hand him a list of people to call for funeral appointments. He didn't bother trying to remind her he couldn't, and instead went upstairs to get his best friend on Skype for the help. It was a mark of Jayden's love that he didn't ask questions, just made all the appointments and got it all settled.

He managed to find interpreting services for last minute, but only after his mother demanded that he interpret the



services instead of hiring someone.

‘You can still hear enough,’ she said, narrowing her eyes at him and reminding him that even deaf, he would never be welcome. ‘I don’t see what the problem is.’

He wanted to defend himself, but he was just tired. His heart was battered, and all he wanted to do was go home and shut down.

Willow, however, took his side for the first time that he could remember. ‘His dad just died. He’s not going to interpret even if he could hear.’ Her fingers were angry, slapping, reflecting the frustration on her face that he rarely saw directed at their mother.

She had been the obvious favorite, and as a kid seemed to relish whenever their mom had been cruel to him. She enjoyed her privileges, and she wasn’t shy about admitting it. And maybe it was different. Maybe she’d matured. Or maybe she was just feeling the loss of their father more profoundly than either of them expected to.

His mother relented about the interpreter eventually, but it was up to him then to find someone decent, and it took nearly the entire day to track someone down that last minute. There wasn’t enough in his mother’s savings to cover it, and his father’s policy wasn’t paying out right away, but Jayden told him not to worry, and the next day he got the invoice that was marked paid in full.

Wilder: I can’t let you pay for this.

Jayden: Yes, you can. Tim and I are more than happy to. Please don’t sweat it. I love you. Come home soon.

Wilder didn’t have the strength to respond, but he held the phone to his heart like maybe he could imprint that text and keep it with him when the day got harder—and he knew it would. His mother was calm, which meant the storm was on its way. He’d never trust her, and he didn’t want to be here when she broke and unleashed her hell on whoever was around.

His mother had loved the man she married, and in a sort of dark, unfair way, he understood her pain. Someday, he might know it. Someday—if he and Luca made it as far as his parents had—he might know what it was like to lose him, and the thought of it made him sick.

As he stood there, staring at the coffee machine and waiting for it to finish brewing, he let himself think of Luca without restraint. He let himself feel the empty, gaping hole that came with missing him and fearing he wouldn't actually come back. Luca hadn't said much in his last text, just that he'd talked with a few friends and spent the night with Noah and Adriano, and Wilder hadn't asked for assurances or promises. He was afraid Luca would remember he liked it back in California. He was afraid he'd miss his life of luxury too much, and that Wilder wasn't enough to come back to Savannah for.

It was ironic, in a way, because he had begged Luca not to need him. He'd told Luca he couldn't shoulder that burden of being the one he stayed for, and now that was the only thing in the world he wanted.

He startled a moment later when he felt the counter under his hand vibrate, and he looked over to see Willow leaning against the cabinet with a frown on her face. Growing up, everyone always said they could see the resemblance, but Wilder had never been able to. She favored their dad, with coarse curls and darker skin and rich eyes, and Wilder had inherited almost everything from his mother. And maybe that was why she despised him—he had been her protégé who failed her at birth. And maybe that's why Willow hated him, because the one thing she could never give her mother was proof on her face that she had come from her body, because Wilder had stolen it all.

'What's up?' he asked her, then reached for a mug.

Willow crossed her arms, and then his eyes went wide when her lips moved. She had never voiced—ever in her life, as long as he could remember. Laughter, screams, but never words. His mother had put her foot down at even the slightest hint of speech therapy. Willow was Deaf—totally and

completely from birth, and sign would be her language, and she would never have to accommodate a hearing person.

And to this moment, she never had.

*'Do-do?'*

'You can't hear me at all, can you?'

He turned his face away and sighed, the feeling ragged in his throat.

She tapped his arm hard, and he looked over. 'How long has it been since you lost it all?'

With a shrug, he poured his coffee and took two long drinks of the bitter liquid before he answered her. 'I haven't lost it all. I can still hear some, but it's been getting worse over the last few weeks.'

'Your eyes are dancing,' she pointed out. 'That happened after you got out, but I thought it was from the injury.'

Wilder shook his head. 'The vertigo is bad today.'

She hooked a finger over her ear. 'Where are your hearing aids?'

'In my bag.'

'Are you going to tell Mom how much you've lost?'

At that, he laughed hard enough he heard the sound, full and robust against the inside of his skull. 'Fuck no. She won't care. She'll never care. She's going to hate me for the rest of her life.'

Her eyes went soft and filled with a profound sort of grief before tears spilled. It was startling, and more so when she threw herself into his arms, and he was forced to wrap his own around her to keep from falling over. He was dizzy, but she was steady, and up to this moment, it had always been the other way around with them.

'I hate that you left,' she said after pulling back, swiping her hand under her nose. 'I was so scared.'

Wilder frowned. 'Of what?'

‘Scott,’ she spelled his name with a look of such utter vitriol, he found something inside him that was able to love her again—just for that. ‘He got out of jail so fast, and then he disappeared, and I thought he went looking for you.’

‘I’m not afraid of him,’ Wilder told her, fingers sharp, face even sharper.

Willow shook her head, then reached out and ran her thumb over the scar on his arm. ‘You could have died.’

And that was also true. The stabbing itself had come too close, and then the risk of infection after. Scott was let off easy for mental health—for him being unable to control his feelings, but Wilder knew that wasn’t the case. He was a sociopath. He saw Wilder as a possession, not a person. He wanted him—he had never loved him—and Wilder trying to leave had threatened his control.

It wasn’t a crime of passion. Scott was just evil, and Wilder had paid for it dearly.

‘I’m safe in Savannah,’ he told her, then sipped his coffee again. His head was starting to calm down, even though the stress of the funeral was growing heavier. ‘He doesn’t know where I am, and I have family there who will take care of me. People I chose, who love me no matter what.’

He saw the hurt that caused, and he wanted to care, but Willow had been too much like their father. She enjoyed her power, and she was too afraid of losing her mother’s favor to ever stand up for him. It was easier that way—it was safer that way. He understood it, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to forgive it.

And it didn’t look like Willow had any intention of apologizing. One small gesture wasn’t enough.

‘Are you going to speak at the funeral today?’ she asked when the moment passed.

Wilder sighed into his coffee. In truth, he wasn’t sure. He had a speech written, because for all his suffering, any of the love he had known growing up had come from his dad. He hurt—a deep, visceral sort of ache knowing that they’d never

have a chance to make it right. And it wasn't the sharp pain he might have felt if he'd grown up with someone who openly cared for him, but he would grieve.

And he would miss him.

'Wilder.' She used the old sign name his dad had given him when he was young—and maybe it was to trigger something in him that would take the dead look he knew he had out of his eyes, but it didn't work.

It wouldn't work.

'I don't know,' he told her, and that was the only answer he had. He might get up there in front of family and friends, and he'd let the words flow from his fingers, and hope that none of the bitterness would well up and spill out, because he didn't want to ruin the pieces of his dad that everyone had left. But he wasn't sure that he could say any of it without saying all of it. 'I'm tired.'

Her shoulders heaved with a sigh, and she glanced at the clock before looking back at him. 'Today probably isn't the best day for Deaf Standard Time is it?'

At that, he laughed, because even growing up hearing, those pieces of his community were so deeply ingrained in him. He could play the hearing man for the moment though. He could watch the time, and get ready, and stop conversation, and get them all moving. His aunts and uncles were in the house, and his mother was God only knew where, and he had just enough time for a walk and to feed the chickens before he took this final step.

It occurred to him that with his dad's death, he'd lost so much more than the man. He'd lost the remaining link to what was and all that was left was what could be. He could have handled it, knowing it was just Savannah—and his friends and Jayden. But knowing that it might also have Luca meant he could more than handle it. It meant he was ready.

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WILDER HADN'T GONE to church much as a kid. In spite of their Catholic roots, his mother had never found one with enough Deaf people to satisfy her need to be apart from the hearing, so religion fell by the wayside. It felt strange to gather in the parking lot, and it was even stranger to walk through the chapel doors.

Even though it was a funeral home and not a place of worship, it still felt sort of heavy and important in ways he'd never entirely understand. His family milled around, and his hearing aids sat heavy in his pocket because it was far easier to shoulder the burden without the weight of ambient noise.

His mother hadn't bothered to approach him all morning—in fact, he could count on two hands the times she'd even looked him in the eye since he arrived, and it helped make his decision to throw all of his bags in the rental car before they made their way to the services.

It was over. This moment marked it—the end of whatever he had been, and it was on to whatever he would become.

Scott was gone, only scars left behind, and now the link to his biological family had been severed as his father's body burned to ash and was poured into a little ceramic urn covered in soft blue flowers. The funeral was nothing like his dad, and everything his mother had wanted, and it was a reminder that Wilder only had memories left that were untainted by her hate.

He watched her across the room, watching the way her face moved just like his own, the similarities between them like knife wounds. She dragged her hand over her hair the same way, and bit her top lip like he did, and shuffled her feet when she wanted the conversation to be over. He also watched her face soften into gratitude and kindness when she stopped to talk to the interpreter, and the old familiar ache in him rose.

Why were strangers good enough to earn her kindness but never him?

He took his seat in the front row on the far end from where she'd be sitting, and he tried to nod and tried to smile whenever a distant cousin or a family friend's son walked by to say hello. His sister sat two seats away, and she tried to

catch his eye, but he knew if he was going to do this, he couldn't let her in.

He couldn't let his cracks show.

His mother requested the services to be short, so there would be a prayer, which got started right away. There was a hymn, led in poor Signed English by the church choir that had some people wiping their eyes but left his mother scowling into her lap, refusing to watch.

His aunt went up next to talk about what it was like growing up with his dad—all those stories he watched play out on her hands of family get togethers over the years, and he found he could smile at those. He'd always liked his aunts and his cousins. They'd been better people than the ones he lived with at home.

His sister was next, and he couldn't let himself watch her. Her signs would be poetic and strong and big. She would recall all the times that their father had guided her and held her and helped her find her Deaf identity so she could live in the world without compromise.

His dad had loved him—but with conditions. His dad had loved him, but never enough to help him become the person he was. He was left to sink on his own, to recover on his own, to define his own worth.

He had clawed his way out of that pit with wounds that would never heal.

Wilder swallowed when Willow was finished, and he felt his mother's eyes piercing and intense on him as he climbed to the podium and spread his hands on the soft wood. No one had bothered to set up a mic—only the pastor had used a hand-held one, so there was an unobscured view of his face as he took a breath and found himself surprised by his own tears.

'My father had a boring name. Ron. Not Ronald—just Ron. He liked telling people that more than he liked sharing his sign name, because they always asked.'

He saw a few people smile, saw his uncle laugh.

‘He used to tell me how much he loved my name, even though he wasn’t the one who gave it to me. My mother picked it out when she was eight months pregnant, and he said he thought he understood the concept of sound the night she shared it with him.’

He swiped at a tear and looked over at his mother, who was watching him with her jaw clenched and her eyes wide and watery.

‘He taught me to walk. He taught me to spell by pretending like he forgot ASL and only responded to fingerspelling. Because of that I was ahead of my kindergarten class by leaps and bounds and that was after the teachers told both my parents that me and my sister would never catch up to our peers because they put ASL ahead of English.’

He felt something burn in his chest like fire, and his tears were flowing, but they didn’t hurt. They were a relief.

‘He was the one who explained to me that I was different. That I might never fit in. My father told me that I might do great things, but those great things wouldn’t matter as much to everyone else, and if I wanted to feel important and special, it was up to me to make other people see it in me. I felt lost after that, because I didn’t understand what he meant for so long, and I’m sad that he’s gone, because I would love to tell him now that I get it. My life is small, and it’s humble, but I am so very loved. And to some people out there in the world, I am important.’

He blinked, trying to clear his eyes, but it was hard. His mother was still watching, looking betrayed and a little bit scared, and a small piece of him was glad for it. She had made him scared all of his life, and now he was showing her how it felt.

‘I forged my own way—this family gave me the strength to do that. The Deaf community did that. Almost all of you sitting in these seats gave me a piece of yourself to help mold the person I am today. And so did my dad—in ways I never expected. He didn’t have a big life either. He was humble, but he has a legacy left behind in me and in my sister. And in my



mother. It's the thing I'll take with me when I walk through those doors and into my own future. And I think it's one he would have wanted for me.'

He stared down at the urn, then curled his middle and ring finger toward his palm, but he kept it low because that I love you wasn't for anyone else. He didn't like his dad for leaving him to the wolves, but he loved him for the strength he helped build in Wilder. And he owed him that much, at least.

He walked away, and he knew people were watching, knew his sister had risen, knew people were waving at him to stop, but he kept going. One foot in front of the other, and then he was in his car, and it was started.

He found his phone, this time with less fear, and his fingers tapped the screen and opened up Luca's contact. A lingering message sat there from him, and he smiled the first genuine smile since he'd arrived.

Luca: I know today will be hard, but you're not alone.

Wilder: I'm on my way home.

Luca: I can't wait.

The message came in before he had time to set his phone down, and it was those words that carried him to the airport and kept him on his feet and in his last remaining solid piece as he left the past behind.

## CHAPTER 22

LUCA'S STOMACH swooped when he stepped outside and saw the little car waiting for him at the curb, Raphael peering over the wheel with a faint grin on his face. His fingers spasmed on the handle of his bag, and he felt rooted to the spot for a second like he was almost afraid to believe he was back.

That he was *home*.

Someone behind him knocked into his side with their case and swore, and it pushed him into action, his feet closing the distance between him and Raphael's car. He wrenched the door open, shoving his bag into the back before he climbed in and looked over at his friend.

Raphael's grin got a little wider, and he shook his head. "You really couldn't stay away, could you?"

Luca glanced down at his hands, which were holding his phone in an iron grip, and he shook his head. "Is that stupid?"

"It's never stupid to come home." Raphael reached across the console and wrapped his fingers around the back of Luca's neck, pulling him in for a clumsy half-hug. "I'm glad. Nellie gave me the address to your new place. Your things have been moved over."

Luca swallowed thickly. "I don't deserve..."

"*Bitte hör auf damit!*" Raphael muttered sharply and squeezed his fingers hard. "You deserve to have a home, and it's here. Now, I'm missing work for this, so let's make it worth my time off. We're going to go have a nice dinner on the way, and then we'll get you settled." He released Luca and

gripped the wheel with one hand, using his other for his hand controls, and soon enough, they were on the open road.

Raphael had a place in mind, it seemed, because he avoided the freeway and ended up at a little kitschy restaurant on Hilton Head Island. It looked mostly like wine and starters, which was perfect for Luca since his stomach was twisted in knots, and he enjoyed the outside table the hostess had selected, settling into his chair near the heavy, wrought iron fence.

“You haven’t said more than five words since you got in the car,” Raphael pointed out after they placed their orders.

Luca drummed his fingers on the table nervously, then picked up his water glass and drank. “I’m happy to be home, and seeing you made it feel...real, I guess?” He stared at a line of water cascading through the fog of condensation along the ice line as he set his glass down, and he wondered if maybe he was just being pathetic. “Wilder hasn’t texted much. And it’s stupid to be upset about that, you know? I mean, his dad died.”

“It was poor timing,” Raphael said. The server interrupted for a moment to set down their antipasto plate and refresh their drinks. Raphael pulled some of the cheese and meats and a handful of olives before pushing the board toward Luca. “You can’t take it personally.”

“No,” Luca agreed. “And I don’t think I am. It just feels unstable. I’m falling so in love with him, but what if he doesn’t come back?”

“He will,” Raphael said, like it was a simple fact of nature—like how people breathed, and how the sun set and rose each day, and how water was wet. “He has too much here to leave behind—and one of those things is you.”

The food was good, but it still tasted like ash in Luca’s mouth. He had never put himself out there like this, had never given up his life for anyone or anything, and although he could pick himself back up, the thought of losing it all still terrified him. “You said you’ve been in love, right?”

Raphael laughed and put an olive in his mouth, chewing for a long while like he was trying to delay his answer.

“Twice.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good twice.”

“One was...impulsive,” he said, shrugging. “She was from Rome, and she was like walking fire. Beautiful and dangerous. She saw the world differently than most people—she saw things she wanted to collect and take with her wherever she went.”

Luca heard what he wasn’t saying. “Why didn’t it work out?”

“I was just part of her collection. She knew how to love, but not in the way I needed her to. But I don’t regret it. She was fantastic, and she helped me find a freedom I didn’t know was possible. My mother,” he breathed out a sigh and shook his head, his mouth curved in a slight smile. “She loved me to a fault. She never quite stopped believing those old doctors who told her that I would never be able to live on my own. Her fear was suffocating, and Chiara helped me breathe again.”

“Tell me what happened,” Luca begged, because part of that sounded like how Wilder made him feel, and he needed to know it could end differently than breaking up.

Raphael rolled and unrolled some of the prosciutto, then set it aside and folded his hands in his lap. Luca could see a tremor in his body, which probably meant his legs were spasming, but Raphael ignored it. “I wanted to do something with my life, even if I couldn’t have NASA, so we traveled. We stayed with a friend of hers in Oslo, and he let me work for him in his salon doing massages—and he taught me other things about the business. I didn’t love it, but I loved being there. Only, she was getting restless. I woke up one morning, and she was just gone. She left a note, and she promised she’d be back in a few weeks, but I knew better.”

Luca’s heart twisted in his chest because he could hear the hurt inside Raphael. “Did you ever see her again?”

At that, he smiled, a soft and sad thing that reached his eyes. “Once, right before I left for America. I was with Cody then—he was the American, on vacation when we met. We dated for the weeks he was in Oslo, and he asked me to come back with him when his trip was over. I couldn’t say no. I wanted the adventure.”

“And you loved him too,” Luca said. Raphael had told him this before, but he’d been so vague.

Raphael shrugged. “I think so. Not the same sort of love I felt for Chiara, but it was enough. I thought it was enough,” he amended. Raphael had shared the barest bits and pieces about his life before he’d come to Savannah, but not like this, and Luca heard the gift for what it was. “I don’t regret him. Cody and I were together maybe six months before he decided that loving me was too hard. That loving me in a body like this was too much work.”

“Raphael...”

He held up a hand and looked Luca directly in the eye. “When it doesn’t work out with love or with friends, it’s not always my body, but sometimes it is. Most of the time I’m just a way for people to prove to themselves that they’re not shallow. Usually, though, they just show the world they were right the first time.”

“Is that why...?”

“Yes,” Raphael interrupted. “It’s why I don’t make friends so easy, and it’s why I don’t date. But I’ve become an expert at being able to spot those kinds of people.”

Luca looked down again, guilt threatening to choke him. “I came to Savannah to prove I was a better person. That I was capable of not being shallow.”

Raphael reached across the table and grabbed his hand. “But you didn’t use me for it. And your goals didn’t come at anyone else’s expense. And that’s why you’re home now.”

Luca swallowed thickly, but by the look on Raphael’s face, he realized that his friend was right. “Thank you.”

Raphael laughed and let him go. “That’s what I’m here for. Now, eat up. We have a long drive ahead, and you have a new apartment to settle into.”

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SETTLING BACK into the bakery was a lot easier than sitting around his empty apartment waiting for Wilder to text. He hadn’t let him know he was back yet, mostly because he was consumed with fear over the tiny risk that Wilder might have changed mind. So, he got up at the crack of dawn and met Dmitri at Whipped, spending most of the morning on the books, then offering to help after Adam got in. He wasn’t good at baking, but he was passable at taking directions, and that’s how he spent most of the day.

Luca flicked his wet hands into the sink, then turned to find the towel that was resting on the bench a foot away. He caught Adam’s disapproving stare and Dmitri’s smirk, and he sighed. “Look, at least I didn’t wipe them on my ass again.”

Adam rolled his eyes and moved to the baking table, gesturing at the spinning cake stand. “I’m going to finish up these fillings, because if I try to teach you this anymore, I may actually strangle you.”

Luca pursed his lips and hip-checked Adam gently as he moved to the table. “I am not that bad.”

“You are. This is not your forte, and I think you’d be better off putting your ass back in the desk chair and finishing the books,” Adam said with a sniff.

Luca couldn’t help the smallest sigh as he grabbed the cake stand, a cupcake he was sure to mutilate, and the bag of icing. “I just want to help.”

Dmitri touched his arm. “You are helping.”

Luca glanced over at the small pile of ruined cupcakes and knew that he should probably give up, but he wanted to be able to do something tangible to show Wilder that he was worth keeping around—that he could hold down the fort and

keep the place running if shit went sideways. He'd been back in town for three days, and he'd only shared a handful of texts with him, but the fact that Wilder responded at all made him feel like it wasn't over.

"Listen," Adam told him, "Talia is an amazing baker and even more amazing manager, but she can't cook for shit. She can't tell the difference between sugar and salt without tasting it first, and she's fucked up more orders than she's gotten right." Adam's whisk moved expertly in the small silver bowl he had cradled in his arm with all the tenderness one might use to hold an infant. "I want her in my kitchen, not because she's good at being useful, but because I love her with every ounce of my soul and even if she's screwing things up, I want to be near her. And trust me when I say Wilder feels the same way about you. What you're doing is enough."

They were surprising words of kindness from Adam, who had been irritated by Luca's presence since he showed back up at Whipped and demanded to be allowed to participate.

He stared at his final and mangled cupcake, then sighed. "Okay, fine. I give up."

"Finally," Adam muttered, and Luca shot him a dark look. "Why don't you help Jayden out front, and Dmitri and I can finish this."

Luca pulled his apron off and marched out without answering him, only to be met with Jayden who was frowning.

"Don't you have a salon to run?"

Jayden shrugged. "I have the luxury of having clients who forgive me when I shut down for a few days to help a friend." He turned and grabbed a paper cup off the counter, then held it out with a smile. Luca took it with a suspicious frown, then lifted it to his nose like he might be able to detect something wrong with it.

"It's not poisoned, Jesus Christ," Jayden grumbled. He stepped back to the register and leaned against the counter. "It's an apology latte."

“What for?” Luca took a sip, and while he preferred black, unsweetened coffee, it was made well.

“I was a dick on the way to the airport.” Jayden shrugged, then hopped up and swung his legs in the space below the counter. “I think Wilder’s going to be super fucking annoyed with me when he finds out about it.”

“Are you going to tell him?” Luca asked, his brows lifted.

Jayden laughed. “No, but don’t you plan to?”

“Not on my agenda.” Luca leaned opposite him and really looked at Wilder’s friend for the first time. They were probably close to the same age, but Wilder’s life gave him more weight on his shoulders, more wrinkles by his eyes, early greys in his hair. He had lived twice as long as most people his own age, and Luca had lived maybe half that, but somehow, they fit. “He’s dealing with a lot right now. I don’t want to add to that.”

Jayden cocked his head to the side, then laughed. “You’re a better man than I am.”

“Trust me,” Luca muttered into his drink, “I’m not. I’m glad he has you.”

“I kind of forced myself on him, but I don’t think he regrets it.”

Luca chuckled. “He doesn’t seem to. He knows he’s lucky. It seems like it might be the norm in Savannah to have that—but it isn’t like that everywhere.”

Jayden cocked his head to the side as he studied Luca. “Adriano wasn’t as sad as you.”

Nearly choking on his drink as he laughed, Luca set it aside and wiped his mouth. “Adriano is...different than most people,” said, struggling to find the words. “He grew up having to fight for everything, but he always kind of liked it. And he never lost—ever. He got used to getting his way. I mean, he strolled into town and took one look at Noah and was like, yes, I’ll have this one. And Noah couldn’t resist.”



“Noah was already in love with him before Adriano even got here,” Jayden said, then flushed and looked away. “I mean, that’s what everyone’s said.”

“Noah has been in love with Adriano since they met on campus before he became an international porn star,” came Adam’s voice from the doorway. He was smiling a little more now—just a bare hint of it, really, but it looked good on him. It was a smile he only ever got for his brother, and Luca liked that about him. “Adriano is the one thing Noah let himself have when he’s denied himself almost everything else. And I think he still struggles to believe that it’s real.”

Luca shook his head. “I’ve never seen Adriano so gone over anyone. He’s...he’s not a different person, but Noah brought out something in him that he never indulged before. He’s happy, you know?”

“I do,” Adam said quietly. “Not everyone gets happy.”

“No. They don’t.” Luca picked at his cuticle, then felt a sudden and powerful need to be with his friend since Wilder wasn’t there. He wasn’t going to abandon the bakery, but the little house Nellie had managed to get for him wasn’t near the Manor, and it wasn’t near Raphael’s, and he suddenly didn’t like that.

“Some people don’t need happy,” Adam went on, “but my brother did. Not many people realized that about him.”

Luca bit his lip, but the bakery door swung open, and he looked over to see Fitz and Knox, the tall, broad man in a firefighter t-shirt with very black, wavy hair and glasses, stroll in.

“Hey,” Jayden said brightly. “When did you get back?”

“Last night,” the man answered. “I need to eat my feelings. Where’s Wilder?”

Jayden laughed quietly, then moved to the cupcake counter, which gave the man full view of Luca, and he stared openly. “He had a family thing, but he’ll be back soon. We’re holding down the fort.”

“New employee?” Knox asked.

Jayden looked over his shoulder and snorted. “God, no. This place would be in shambles in a week.”

“I’m good with the accounting books,” Luca defended, and Jayden smirked before looking away.

“So not boyfriend benefits?” Knox asked.

Luca pushed past Jayden to extend his hand to the other man and liked that his grip was firm and friendly. “Wilder and I aren’t a couple. Not officially.”

Jayden rolled his eyes. “Sure. Anyway,” he shoved the box at them, “it’s a welcome back gift. Wilder would kick my ass if I charged you for these.”

Knox smiled, holding the box close to his chest, and Luca felt a small pulse of jealousy as he wondered if he’d ever fit in like that.

He loved it there, and he wanted to hold tight to whatever Savannah would allow him to have.

Digging in his pocket, Luca pulled out his phone and stared at the black screen that refused to light up. He wanted to call Raphael or text Wilder—he wanted some connection, but the damn thing was dead. “Fuck.”

“Want mine?” Jayden offered after Knox and Fitz walked out.

Luca dragged a hand through his hair. “No. I’ll plug it in the office. You got this?”

Jayden waved his hand at the empty lobby. “I think I can manage the swarm.”

He didn’t rise to the sarcasm bait, instead pushing through the kitchen doors and moving around Adam before he had to deal with any more smartass comments. The door to the office was half open, the lighting dim and soft the way Wilder liked it. It smelled like him, and there were photos of people around town eating his cupcakes on the walls, pinned to the corkboard, and there were cards from kids from birthday parties he catered.

It was sweet, and it was perfect. It was pieces of Wilder leaving marks on the city like gentle scars of pride, and Luca wanted some of his own—desperately. He rubbed at his arms, then sat down and fished around for the phone cord, finding it tucked under the desk. He waited for the battery symbol to light up, then he set it down and reached for the one single framed photo that was on the desk.

He'd seen it earlier, and he knew instinctively the dark-haired woman next to him was his sister. He was younger in the photo—probably before his ex, before everything had gone to hell. But he didn't look like a child, and Luca was pretty sure that Wilder had lived too many experiences long before he knew his ex's name. He wished he was there with him, like a physical ache, just to provide some barrier between Wilder and the people who had created those caverns of doubt that lived ugly and present behind his ribs.

Luca knew better than to think he could heal them, but he could soften the blow maybe—if Wilder let him. But maybe Wilder needed this, and Luca could only hope that being here when he got back mattered.

With a sigh, he checked his phone again, but as he set it back down, he heard someone coming down the hall. He braced himself for more of Adam's acerbic comments, or maybe even Dmitri's quiet frustration, but instead the door swung open, and Wilder filled the doorway.

Luca blinked, then blinked again, like maybe his desperation had driven him to hallucination, but Wilder stayed the same. He was exhausted, and his hands were shaking a little, and his mouth was drawn in a tight line as he gripped the doorway like he might fall over if he didn't brace himself.

Luca rose to his feet and took a step forward, then stuttered to a halt. "I—" he said, but he wasn't sure Wilder wanted voice right then.

Wilder pushed forward, then shut the door behind him before reaching out and grabbing Luca around the back of his neck. "Say my name."

Luca breathed out, "Wilder."

“Again,” he demanded.

‘Wilder.’ Luca signed it—the name sign Wilder had showed him all those weeks ago.

His lover released a small, strained laugh. “Now, kiss me immediately because I’m about to lose my goddamn mind.”

Luca had a thousand questions, but every single one of them could wait as he crowded Wilder back against the door, pressed a thigh between his legs, and propped him up so their lips could meet. He tasted stale and sour, like coffee and spit. His tongue was warm, and it was soft as it tangled with his own, like he needed those kisses to breathe, and Luca cupped his face and held him still as he devoured him.

“I missed you,” Wilder murmured. He pressed his palm to the side of Luca’s throat, right over his pulse, like he was confirming it beat just for him—and right then, it did. “You’ve been here the whole time.” This he said with wonder and disbelief, and it made Luca laugh because of course he was. Where the hell else would he have been?

“I didn’t stay in California long. It only took me a day to get my shit together, and Adriano’s helping with the rest. He says hi, by the way.”

Wilder dropped his forehead to the top of Luca’s shoulder, and for a moment, he thought he was laughing, and then the tears began to soak in through his shirt. He let out a panicked breath and held him tight, and suddenly a raw, angry sob ripped from his lover, and Wilder clung to him with clawed fingers and an open mouth.

Luca wasn’t sure what to do. No one had ever cried like this, no one had ever trusted him enough. He wanted to hold him and rock him and promise to never let anything bad ever touch him again, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t bring himself to allow a single lie between them—even if it wasn’t intentional.

So, he just kissed the side of his temple and the crown of his head, and he held Wilder back just as fiercely as he was being held until Wilder’s grip relaxed, and his breathing began to even out. When he pulled back, he looked like he could fall

asleep on his feet, and Luca brushed the remaining tears from his cheeks with his thumbs.

‘Did you cry at all while you were there?’ he asked as Wilder pushed back to give him signing space.

Wilder shook his head. ‘I wasn’t sad. I’ll miss him, but I wasn’t sad.’

‘Why now?’

Wilder didn’t answer, instead tracing the tips of his fingers around Luca’s mouth, around his jaw, his ear, down his neck. He leaned forward and took a breath, like he was trying to confirm he was real—just as Luca had done moments before. “You’re here.”

“I am.”

Wilder kissed him again, softer this time, just a press of lips, and he held it until Luca felt his body start to crave a soft, warm bed. “Come upstairs?”

There was no other answer but yes, as he locked his fingers with Wilder’s, opened the door, and left everything but them behind.

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“YES,” Wilder groaned, his face buried in the pillow. He had two more pillows under his hips, his legs spread, his hands gripping the sheets as Luca spread him wide and ate him like it was his last meal. It was tangy and full of musk and a little bit of lube, and he felt like he could do that for hours, but the tremor in Wilder’s body told him he was getting close.

Luca raked his nails up Wilder’s sides and felt his own spent dick twitch against the sheets as he leaned forward to take him in hand. It was harder with the pillows, but he knew it wasn’t going to take much. His fingers from his other hand sought the space behind his balls, his thumb rubbed in a slow circle as he grabbed Wilder’s hard, leaking dick and gave a single stroke. His tongue pushed into his hole and stayed there.

Wilder gave a violent shake, and a moan ripped from his throat. He fucked his hips against Luca once, then twice, and then he spilled in hot ropes against the pillowcases that would need to be washed. Luca didn't care about that now—or ever, really. He'd happily toss them out and buy more every day to let Wilder cover them with his seed simply because Luca lived to make him come.

He pulled his face away, swiping his mouth on the back of his hand before kissing his way up Wilder's spine. They both rolled off to the side, Wilder kicking the pillows off the edge of the bed before he snuggled back into the circle of Luca's arms and breathed out, heavy and soft.

“Good?” Luca asked against his ear.

Wilder laughed. “Not even close to what it was. There are no words for what you do to my body.”

Luca grinned, feeling a sort of absurd pride rushing through him because he was able to give Wilder something no one else in the world could. It was just his—just theirs. He rolled Wilder onto his back, then kissed his neck, down his collarbone, down the length of him. He never paid special attention to the scars, but he never avoided them, either. He hated thinking about where they'd come from, but he knew they would always be a part of Wilder, and he wanted to treasure each and every piece of him that existed—because each of them were proof he survived.

“Can I ask you something?” Wilder murmured, and it startled Luca, who wasn't expecting to hear him in their afterglow.

They hadn't talked much since Wilder had come home. He was jet-lagged, and they traded lazy hand jobs, ordered Chinese, and then slept. Luca stayed on the next day, and Wilder gave him full access to the technical side of his business, and Luca knew he wasn't imagining the relief on his face when he could focus just on the baking.

It was something Luca was good at—and better than that, it was something he was enjoying. Maybe not forever, maybe not even for long, but for now was enough.

They got through the day, then he let Dmitri take over that week for the Farmer's Market prep and the stall, and Wilder was able to close up early. Luca cooked, and they watched TV, then Wilder had turned to him and lowered his voice. "I want you to eat my ass."

Luca had nearly come right then, like a man who had never experienced dirty talk before. Then he scrambled to obey, and it was the most glorious hour he'd spent since arriving in Savannah.

Luca smiled and reached out, tracing a touch down Wilder's cheek. "You can ask me anything."

Wilder bit his lip like he was unsure, then took a fortifying breath. "Do you think you're ever going to get tired of this?"

Luca blinked in surprise then propped up on his elbow and laid his hand in the center of Wilder's chest. "Tired of what?"

"This," Wilder said and waved his hand between them. "Fucking like this. Me having limits?"

"I don't know," Luca told him, and he saw the pain flicker in Wilder's eyes, but also the appreciation for his truth. "I don't think so. I think I might get tired of only fucking *one* way—but there are so many ways for me to love on your body without being inside of it that I doubt I'll ever get bored."

"You're so cheesy," Wilder groaned, but he grabbed at Luca and pulled him in for a kiss. "I don't want to let *him* dictate what I can and can't have," he said after they broke apart. "And maybe someday it'll be different, but..."

"Hey," Luca interrupted, pressing another kiss to his lips. "It doesn't need to be. This isn't about your ex." Luca ran his fingers around the pad of Wilder's nipple and watched it peak, watched a flush rise on his neck. "It's about you and what you need—and what you want. Being with you, however we're together—it doesn't feel limiting. Nothing about you has ever felt limiting."

Wilder flushed a little deeper, and he ran his thumb over Luca's bottom lip. "Thank you."

He wanted to ask what for or maybe what he'd done to deserve a man like him, but Wilder deserved better than second guessing, so he kissed that thumb, and then he kissed his palm, and then all the way up his arm to his mouth. "I love you. I love you so much."

Wilder closed his eyes and breathed out. "I love you too. I want to take you on another date."

"Yes," Luca said.

"Tomorrow."

Luca grinned. "Yes."



## CHAPTER 23

“OKAY ... IT OUT ... SYSTEM,” Jayden wheedled as they pushed past a cluster of bushes and made their way to the bank of the creek.

Wilder blinked at him behind the dark glasses. They were an ill fit and designer and less comfortable than the ten-dollar ones he bought at the gas station, but it had given Luca a little thrill when Wilder picked them up and asked to borrow them for the afternoon.

“Say that again.”

“Get it out of your system. The complaint,” Jayden clarified, leaning in close so Wilder would be able to hear him over the water. “The fact that I dragged your skinny, pale ass out here for some sun because you were wallowing behind the counter, and now you feel unproductive.”

Wilder sighed as they climbed onto a flat boulder and sat side-by-side. “I’m not going to complain today.”

“Yes, you are. Complicated sex thing or dead dad thing?” Jayden asked.

Wilder chuckled at his lack of tact, and he shrugged. “Both? I don’t know.”

Jayden grabbed a handful of rocks and tossed them in, one by one, before he spoke again. “Has your mom texted you?”

Wilder let out a bitter laugh and shook his head. He wanted to push the sunglasses off his face, but he’d been suffering a post-flight headache since he woke up from his sex-induced

nap. And Luca was a pleasant distraction from the pain, but he knew he had a few days left before it went away entirely.

“I wasn’t expecting her to. I basically dragged her to hell and back, and trust me when I say that my Deaf family is adept at reading between the signs.” He smirked a little. “I mean, they had to know how she was.”

Jayden rubbed his fist in a circle over his chest. ‘I’m sorry.’

Wilder shrugged. He’d moved past his anger at them for never stepping in—for only offering bare-bones comfort when they were around. It wasn’t their job, even if he would always feel let down, but it was hard to be angry at all now. Not when a different path might have taken him away from Savannah. He didn’t like to imagine his life outside of it—of what he would be doing, and who he would know. He was happy here, really and truly and properly. He wasn’t going to give that up for a second of peace in his childhood.

“How’s the new salon building coming along?” Jayden had purchased property a few months back, and right before Wilder got back into town, they finally broke ground so he could move out of the old tourist building and have something that was just his.

“Stressful, wonderful. I hate design, and Tim loves it, so he’s taking over most of that. I just...” Jayden let out a small sigh, but he looked happy. “I’ll feel better when it’s done, and it’s ours.”

“Sounds nice,” Wilder said.

“Deaf joke?” Jayden asked.

Wilder laughed again. “Not this time.” He bit his lip, then stared down at his hands. “It’s nice, you know, having him here? Having someone who speaks my language. It makes me feel like all those bits of home I lost when I walked away have come back.”

“I’ll be better,” Jayden promised. “I’ll practice more.”

Wilder shook his head. “Just give it to me when I ask for it, okay? I’m...I’m okay in both worlds now. I don’t need *her*

approval. I am who I am. I'm Deaf, and I'm hard of hearing. And I'm in Savannah with people who give a shit about me. I'm not lonely."

"I'll be more, when you need me to," Jayden promised, and Wilder leaned into him. "You love Luca, right? Like you're *in* love with him?"

Wilder nodded and let his cheek rest against Jayden's shoulder. "I feel like those words aren't enough, though."

Jayden chuckled, too soft for Wilder to hear, but he saw the way his smile twitched and the way his shoulders moved with the quiet laughter. "I know that feeling."

"And you don't regret any of it?" Wilder asked after a beat. He hadn't been around for Jayden's grand tumble into love with Tim, but he'd heard about how long it had taken for Jayden to trust him enough to let him close.

It wasn't the same for him and Luca, but that was okay, because he didn't need a love story like Jayden and Tim's. He had too many scars to ignore, and he didn't want someone who would try to pretend like they weren't there. He wanted to be embraced for who he was, as he was—and then leave room for what he would become years down the road.

He wasn't sure Luca could give him all of that, but Luca was a man who wanted to try. And that was enough.

"What are you going to do now?" Jayden asked.

Wilder smiled. "I'm going to take Luca on a date. And I'm going to kiss him at the end of it."

"Are you going to let him walk you to the door and make out with him like a fifties teenager?" Jayden asked with a small grin.

Wilder hugged himself around his middle, and he nodded. "And then I think I'm going to invite him over to stay."

Jayden didn't ask for how long, but Wilder didn't need him to. They both already knew the answer was forever.

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WILDER FELT LIKE A PARODY, like a comic strip, the way he and Luca were jammed in a tub that wasn't meant for one grown man, let alone two. Luca's new apartment was bigger and a little more modern than the rooms he had at the Augustin, but they lacked in the sort of indulgent decadence he knew his lover was used to.

Luca didn't seem to mind, though. He was holding Wilder's arm out with one hand, washing him down with his lathered palm as the milk soap sat on the edge of the tub. They were sitting up because it was the only way they could squeeze together there, and his knees were knocking against the hard porcelain.

"I can't live like this," Luca muttered after he let Wilder's arm fall into the water. He sloshed and then grabbed Wilder and pushed him until his back was against the slant, and his legs stretched toward the faucet. He laid his body over him, the water coming dangerously close to the top, and Luca's knees dug into his sides painfully. "I want to bathe with you."

"Then you're going to have to figure something out," Wilder said.

Luca dipped his head in low, nosing along his jaw. They were both hard—had been since they'd gotten to the little house and abandoned all pretense of going out for the date. Luca set up pillows and blankets on the living room floor, and Wilder ordered dinner for delivery from his phone app, and with a fifty-minute wait, Luca suggested the bath.

It didn't help the throbbing need between his legs, but it was distracting enough because it felt like hours before they'd be able to crawl into bed and explore those other ways of loving that Luca had promised he wanted. For now, Wilder shifted so his cock brushed against Luca's stomach, and the pressure had his head spinning a little.

"You," Luca groaned against his ear.

"What about me?"

Luca pulled back, and he didn't answer with words, but there was a novel of emotion behind his eyes that didn't really have language. It was just feeling, and Wilder didn't need him to try, because he had the same quiet simmer just behind his ribs. He turned his head and let Luca kiss him until he felt like all the air had been ripped from his lungs.

"I don't want to wait for food," Wilder gasped.

Luca pushed up to stand, then stepped out and grabbed his robe, throwing it on without drying off. "We don't have to wait. Someone's at the door, so I'm going to pay, and you get in the bedroom and wait for me."

Wilder hated being ordered around, but he knew it was a request that was tainted with desperation of what was to come. The food could wait—everything could wait—until their other appetites were sated. He slipped a bit on the floor, but he took the time to wipe the remnants of soap from his skin before wrapping a towel around his waist and padding across the hall to where the bed waited.

It was unmade from that morning, from waking up in Luca's arms like he was always meant to be there. He was still a little bit wrecked from the funeral, and still in a bit of shock from his own bravery at confronting his past during his father's funeral. And he knew there was no way backward for him when it came to his family. There was only this, and going forward with the people he had chosen to spend his life with.

But it felt good, because these people had earned him. They deserved him.

Especially the man in the next room who was setting up this night to be one quiet moment in an eventual sea of everything. It made Wilder smile as he stripped the towel off, as he laid his back against the cool sheets and spread his legs, waiting with his cock in his hand.

Luca came in a moment later, stuttering to a halt in the doorway. His chest heaved with breath, though Wilder couldn't hear it. But he saw the way it moved him, the way his lips parted and nostrils flared like he was using every single one of his senses to drink Wilder in.

He gave a stroke, felt something soft rumble in the back of his throat. Luca was across the room in seconds, his knees on the bed, his hands parting Wilder's thighs so wide it strained his tendons—but the pain was so good. It rippled up his spine hand-in-hand with the agonizing pleasure of Luca's mouth as he dragged open lips up his shaft and then sucked at the head as Wilder's hand fell away.

Luca's nails were blunt, but Wilder could feel the stinging pressure of them as they grazed the sensitive spaces on the insides of his legs. His tongue pressed into his slit, then he pulled back and swirled it around and then sucked him all the way down until Wilder's hips thrust in a shallow rhythm, desperate for more friction—more heat—more everything.

“Please.” The word tumbled from his lips in what felt like a jumble of consonants and vowels in an entirely new language that only they spoke. He wanted more—he needed to feel Luca heavy and present against him. His hand moved to Luca's hair and gripped tight. “Please,” he begged again.

Luca understood. He cupped Wilder's balls in his hand, then sucked hard all the way down, a faint graze of teeth on the way back up, and then he did it again. And then again—faster this time and sloppy. He felt his cock throbbing harder, in time with the way Luca sucked him, and Luca's other hand pressed bruising fingers into his hips, leaving wanted marks on his skin that Wilder could look at every single day for the rest of his life if he was allowed to.

“I love you.” Those words were rich with a messy newness that sounded like he felt—lost and completely confused and utterly gone for this disaster of a man who loved harder than anyone Wilder had ever known in his life. “I love you so fucking much.”

And then he came. He had been so busy paying attention to the way his heart was growing and thrashing that he missed the slow burn from his dick to his belly until the heat erupted, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Luca drank him down, his throat constricting around him, making it almost hurt with pleasure as he emptied himself.

It was freeing, he realized, just like Luca had said. There would be things that would always be too sore and too scarred to touch, but they weren't limits. They were just new shapes of who he was now that he had tripped into this life and accidentally made himself a home.

He came down with soft, gasping breaths, and his hands pulled and tugged until Luca was on top of him, then he rolled toward the nightstand as Luca tucked in behind. His dick was hard, the head leaving a trail of precome, and he reached in his nightstand for lube before flicking off the cap and wetting his hand.

“Wilder?” Luca murmured behind his ear.

Wilder spread his legs and smeared the inside of his thighs, and behind his balls before he turned his back to look at Luca's wide eyes. “Like this.”

“Oh god, *yes*,” Luca breathed out. His fingers dug into his hip again, in those same, twinging places, and Wilder grinned as he felt Luca's cock press into his tight space. He squeezed his legs shut, and then his eyes, and he allowed himself to appreciate another first. “God. I...” Luca's voice stammered to a halt, and then he felt a tentative thrust, like he wasn't sure.

But that was okay, because Wilder was sure. There were stumbles, and there were roadblocks, and there were awful and sometimes the best surprises. But he knew himself, and he trusted himself, which was long-fought and hard-won, and he wasn't going to give up ground to fear.

He squeezed his thighs as tight as he could, and then he moved with his lover. “Tell me what you want,” he said.

Luca let out something like a sob, wrapping his arm tight around Wilder's chest. “I want to fuck your thighs hard. Please...please let me...”

“Yes. I want it. I need to feel you,” Wilder said.

Luca held on with a vice-grip, and then his hips slammed against Wilder. He could hear it—he could hear the sound of their skin slapping—a faint, muffled thwack that got his spent cock half-hard all over again and sent zings of a totally

different, sated pleasure rippling through him. He let his head fall back and closed his eyes as Luca mouthed at him and nipped at him and bit down as his skin heated and cock swelled. And then he came.

The white-hot spurts unleashed against his bare skin, and though it wasn't inside him—it was almost better. It was practically perfect. Luca's breathing hitched, and his tiny gasps right against the back of Wilder's ear almost sounded like tears, but the cheek that rubbed against his was dry.

His heart was still hammering, almost like he'd run a marathon—and in a way, he had. He had been running his entire life, and Savannah, and Whipped, and Jayden, and Luca—they were all his finish line.

He was home.

This was all he had ever needed.

“Love you,” Luca murmured against his ear, and then Wilder smiled.

Because there was also that.



## EPILOGUE

WILDER SUPPOSED the storm should have been the indicator that the day wasn't going to go well. It was unexpected, entirely unpredicted, and knocked out power on the entire block, which ruined a massive batch of cupcakes for a bulk order that was due for pick-up at nine the next morning. The front of the shop flooded from the sudden downpour, and Wilder managed to save only half the paper stock he had stored beneath the front counter.

His phone was buzzing non-stop, probably from both Jayden and Luca checking up on him since they were both out of town helping Tim and Adam pick up supplies for Adam's food truck.

"Fuck," he whispered softly to himself, feeling the harsh rush of air against the back of his throat. He'd hit a hearing decline over the last three months, and his audiogram had showed that it was going faster than expected.

He lost most of the running water, along with the birds. And speaking voices, even with his hearing aids at full volume, mostly just sounded like a dull murmur. But he could still hear the timber of Luca's voice as he rumbled up against the back of his ear when they were in bed together, and he could feel his voice through rough vibrations against his skin, and he didn't need anything else besides his long fingers signing and the soft lips drawing deep moans from his core.

The bakery door flung open, and Wilder almost jumped out of his skin when Fitz came tumbling in from the downpour. His t-shirt was plastered to his skin, and his hair

had half-fallen from his bun, and water beaded at the ends of his eyelashes as he approached the counter.

‘Bad outside,’ he signed, one hand stiff, the other flowing easily.

Wilder sighed and nodded, his gaze flickering to the window. ‘I have an entire order fucked.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘You-need-close. Sorry. Repair-take-a lot-long.’

Wilder wanted to hit something or scream or maybe even cry a little, because he was doing well, but not well enough he could afford to let down clients like this. ‘How long?’

Fitz’s face dropped. ‘Tonight-maybe. Tomorrow-maybe.’

Wilder groaned and dropped his head, taking a few breaths until Fitz’s tentative hand gripped his shoulder. He didn’t look up right away, instead letting his frustration simmer until he felt like the world was steady again, then he righted himself. ‘Sorry.’

Fitz shook his head, opened his mouth, then frowned and closed it. Wilder knew that signing was harder for him than most people thanks to his less than responsive fingers—and he knew in an ideal world people would just happily learn for him. But the world wasn’t ideal. Savannah was home—and home was never perfect.

‘Go UPSTAIRS, I-leave SANDBAGS on-DOOR.’ He spelled more than he signed, but it got his point across, and Wilder knew there wasn’t anything left to do but abandon the ruined half-baked batter and then hunker down and wait it out.

Lightning flashed outside, and he felt the rumble of thunder under his hands, shooting all the way up to his sternum. He looked back at Fitz with wide eyes. ‘Dangerous for you?’

Fitz waved him off with a laugh. ‘I’m fine. Go.’

Wilder backed up, then moved to the kitchen to turn out all the switches and unplug the ovens. He dumped the trays in the bin, then stomped up the stairs, relishing the feeling of the

hard wood under his feet in a cathartic expression of his emotions.

The apartment was dark, and the skies were rich with blackened clouds marring the skyline. The rain was still coming down in sheets like a damn hurricane, and the air was still and humid. He cracked open the window that was farthest from his furniture, and he breathed in the rush of breeze before he went in search of candles.

When he had a few lit, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and saw Luca's name on the screen, and he felt suddenly choked up and tired and desperate to feel his arms around him. He was meant to be home soon, but he wasn't so sure now.

Luca: The road is washed out pretty bad. How are you doing?

Wilder: All the power is out, ruined my baking, shop flooded. Fuck my entire life.

Luca: Babe.

Wilder: It's fine. Fitz is putting up sandbags, and I'm upstairs. I miss you.

Luca: Take a bath, get some rest. It'll be okay. I love you I love you I love you

He felt each I love you like a kiss to his battered emotions, and he closed his eyes, pressing the phone to the center of his forehead as he told himself it was just temporary. He could fix it. He'd be up all night baking if he had to once the power was back on.

Right now, he was powerless, and that wasn't the end of the world.

He was grateful that his water heater was entirely gas, and he filled the tub as he lined the sink with candles, and the darkness was suddenly comforting as he eased beneath the hot water and let it surround him. His clothes sat on a pile near the toilet, the phone perched so he could see if it lit up, and he

leaned his head back and let himself miss the sound of the rain for a brief moment.

Those were the things he shared with Luca and no one else. The quiet mourning of small losses that most people thought they couldn't live without. There were days he burned for the sound of the wind or for the lyrics to his old favorite songs or even the full-bodied laughter that brightened Luca's face like the sun.

But nothing about that loss made him regret his life. His regret simmered firmly in the opinion of others.

Living in Savannah was nice, but it didn't spare him thoughtless comments and assumptions from people who hadn't grown up around people like him. They were terrified of change, terrified of adjustment—the thought of losing a sense they believed absolutely essential to their lives threatened to crush them with fear.

And it was hard to soothe their worries without pretending like there were never bad days or frustrated moments. The moment he admitted to a weakness or had a moment of bitterness, their opinion on being disabled, or being Deaf, or being sick was vindicated. What life was worth living if the world didn't hold up to their ideal? So, he was forced to keep those things to himself—forced to lie and say every second of every day was bliss.

But in reality, that fantasy wasn't too far from the truth. He was content, and most of the time, his life felt like bliss.

Wilder swished his feet through the water, the very tops of his toes making ripples along the surface, and he thought back to his life six months before—to a tired, defeated man sitting on the edge of a bus bench trying to find a plane ticket that would take him far from the city that had done nothing but remind him of how alone he was.

And how different would his life be right then if he hadn't given in to that urge to leave his shop and offer just a small hand of comfort? He didn't like thinking about it—how much power he held in that moment, because that was on him. Luca would not have stayed, and his life would have gone on, and

he wouldn't have this one, massive piece that fit so perfectly in his present—and would continue to fit in his future.

Wilder pushed himself up and missed Luca's physical presence so much, his sternum hurt. He reached for the bar of soap that sat on the edge of the tub—one of the first things Luca had ever given him.

He smiled thinking about it, the nervous way Luca had presented the little gift. It was soap—it was just *soap*. It was a bit of nothing, and it barely had a smell, and yet it was one of the things Wilder treasured most.

He turned it in his hands, then dipped it in the water to lather up. As he began to scrub it over his fingers, though, he felt something different in the center. It was hard, and a little sharp at the edge, and for a second, he thought maybe it was one of those mini peacocks Will liked to throw in.

Feeling his heart speed up, he cracked the bar in half, and something spilled out onto his hand. Yes, it was a peacock, but nestled next to it was a small jar with a corked top and something sitting inside. His fingers trembled as he tried to pry the cork away, but it stuck with his slippery, wet hands, and he was half-panicked as he climbed out and fumbled for his towel.

He dried off and managed to get the stopper out with his teeth, and the smallest little note toppled into his palm, tied with the barest bit of thread. Six months old—it was six months old, and he could see ink soaking through the back.

Wilder shuffled closer to the candles, squinting in the dim light as he broke the thread and unraveled the parchment.

*Wilder,*

*Will suggested this, and I'm not sure what to say. I don't have much room, and I barely know you. This might be weird, I know.*

*I think it's important that I tell you that whatever happens in the future, wherever we are in life when you get this note, you are the best thing that ever happened to me. When I felt like nothing, you looked at me like I was something, and that made a difference. I hope after you read this I can kiss you, but if I can't, know that in this moment, right now, I want to.*

*Always yours, in some way or another,*

*Luca*

Wilder bowed his head and felt his throat get hot. He felt trapped in this fucking bathroom, in this fucking house, with Luca miles away in the storm and washed-out roads and no way to get to him. He wanted to throw his arms around him and maybe drop to his knees and make him understand that every word in that note was something he felt every moment of every day after meeting him.

But he was powerless—again. He was stuck, and he'd just have to let these feelings simmer until Luca walked through the door.

Wilder carefully rolled the note up, then dressed in some sweats and a long sleeve shirt before walking into the room, and he came to a stuttered halt when he saw a man just inside the door. He was wearing expensive jeans and a leather jacket, and his hair was a matted mess, but he was smiling.

Wilder launched himself at Luca, crashing them into the door, their lips meeting in a frenzied kiss like Wilder thought maybe he'd never get this chance again, which was absurd. But it was what it was. His head was spinning, but in Luca's arms, he was steady.

Pulling away, Luca cupped his cheek, then kissed him softer, slower, pouring every ounce of relief into that gesture before taking a breath and stepping back. 'I saw the shop. I'm so sorry.'

'I don't care,' Wilder replied.

Luca blinked. 'I know insurance will...'

'I don't care,' Wilder repeated. 'You're home, so I don't care.' He stepped in close, cramping his signing space, but it didn't matter. 'I found your note.'

Luca's brows dipped in a heavy frown. 'What? What note?'

Digging into his pocket, Wilder drew it out and unrolled it, letting Luca take it and hold it up against the light from the window. After a beat, his frown melted, and he looked embarrassed. "Oh my god," he said aloud. 'This was so dumb.'

Wilder laughed and curled one hand around his wrist. 'It's beautiful.'

Luca set it aside on their little table by the door, then cupped Wilder's face with both hands. He didn't answer him, instead drawing him in for a kiss as he walked him backward until his legs hit the sofa. They collapsed, a tangle of limbs, shared breath, lips parted and tongues soft and hot as he was pressed into the cushions and possessed and consumed and loved with every physical piece Luca had to offer.

When he pulled back, he straddled Wilder's thighs and looked down at him. 'I meant every word.'

Wilder grinned. 'I know.'

'I still do.'

Wilder curled one hand around Luca's shirt, not caring that he was sopping wet, or leeching cold into his bath-warmed body, or that they would probably ruin the slipcover. He only cared that he was kissing him again, messy and perfect.

"I know," he said aloud, his voice rumbling along their pressed lips.

Luca closed his eyes and smiled.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the southeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

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