

A black and white photograph of two shirtless men. The man on the left is in profile, facing right, and has a nose ring. The man on the right is also in profile, facing right, and has a beard. They are positioned against a background of vibrant, out-of-focus colors including purple, blue, and pink. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their muscular physiques.

Fate has a twisted sense of humor

SWITCHED AT BIRTH

Leigh Lennon

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Cover design by Najla Qamber

Alpha Reader: Ashley Cestra

Beta Readers: Paramita Patra and Kelli DeHart Littlehead

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Dedication

To Cassie:

You gave me the encouragement to write this story.

*“Write a story you believe in, and everyone else will.” Your
words stayed with me four years later!*

To the person I miss the most:

*Seven years is too long. I wish you were here to share this
dream of mine with me.*

I know you'd forever be my biggest fan!

I miss you every day Mom!

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Author's notes:

This is a love story. A deep love story. *But in this story* lies a taboo relationship. What happens if two babies separated at birth find each other, not understanding their lineage? This is the concept of this book. Please read with caution.

[For all content warnings please click here!](#)

ABOUT SWITCHED AT BIRTH

What happens when two souls meant to live their life together are separated at birth? Would fate find a way to reunite them, where they fall in love without knowing their lineage?

Could fate be that cruel? This is the question posed at the start of a story so complicated no one could predict how these men would find their way back to one another.

This is the story of Noah James and Ashton Brooks. Noah was born as a twin, with his brother Liam, leading an everyday life with wealthy and loving parents. Ashton was raised by a single mom. Even though Noah and Ashton always knew love, their lives were in complete contrast until they met and shared a chemistry that transcended time and understanding.

Both MCs are over 18. Written in first person.

[Check your trigger warnings](#)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SWITCHED AT BIRTH?

Wikipedia defines it below:

Babies switched at birth are babies who, because of either error or malice, are interchanged with each other at birth or very soon thereafter, leading to the babies being unknowingly raised by parents who are not their biological parents. The occurrence has historically rarely been discovered in real life, but in recent years it's becoming more commonly identified due to genealogical testing of DNA, which reveals true genetic parentage.

Mothers are often exhausted after the birth of their baby, coupled with the fact that babies look very similar, and a lot don't display distinguishing factors at birth. Each year security measures increase.

Although it's low, babies *are* switched at birth, raised with the wrong family.

Newsweek (Sept. 7th, 2021)

Two girls were switched at birth in Spain over twenty years ago due to negligent human error. A spokesperson for Spain's health department explained that the system back then had not been computerized as it is now.

BBC (Jan. 6th, 2016)

Two sets of identical twins were switched in the hospital, raised as fraternal twins in Columbia in 1998. These brothers were separated for twenty-five years.

Washington Post (Aug. 8th, 1998)

Two girls were switched at birth in Virginia in 1995. Paula Johnson and Whitney Rogers both gave birth to healthy baby girls. Both women left the hospital with the other woman's baby.

Please note:

This story, *Switched at Birth*, begins at their birth in the mid-to-late nineties.

PLAYLIST

Coldplay, "Viva La Vida"
David Bowie, "Andy Warhol"
Eddie Vedder, "Guaranteed"
Eddie Vedder, "Society"
Kodaline, "Brother"
Nat King Cole, "Mona Lisa"
Pearl Jam, "Better Man"
Pearl Jam, "Footsteps"
Pearl Jam, "Just Breathe"
Pearl Jam, "Low Light"
Pearl Jam, "Nothing Man"
Pearl Jam, "Yellow Ledbetter"
Rod Stuart, "Every Picture Tells a Story"

“If I don’t write their stories, who else will?”

-Kristi Webster

PART I

PREDESTINATION



The belief that people have no control over events because everything has already been determined.

(Via Webster's Dictionary)



Narrator

DO YOU BELIEVE IN KISMET—A force or personified power that determines the course of future events? This is the question posed with the start of a story so complicated—who could have foretold how life would intricately weave two lives together, where people would look upon them in both wonder and disgust.

Predestination, fate, and destiny are synonyms for each other. But could fate be so cruel to predestine the separation of two souls that should have been together from the beginning?

Love is that all-powering emotion and it can't be told what to do. And here lies the story of two men switched at birth.

“Evelyn, can you hear me?” The voice of the doctor cuts through all the chatter in the delivery room, but he doesn't get a response from his patient.

“Baby number one is healthy and happy and ready to meet his sibling. Now, I need you to push hard so he can be reunited with his little brother or little sister.”

“I can't do it!” The mother is heard throughout the room, and the father—who had just asked for the score of the football game—is now completely focused on his wife.

“Evelyn, honey. You can do it. I know you can. And Noah knows you can.” Almost as if their first twin understands the

conversation, the baby shrieks in indignation as the nurses continue their ministrations.

Noah is the name they decided on for their first boy. Naming twins had its difficulties, but not finding out the gender of the babies meant they had to pick out two boys' and two girls' names.

"Noah?" she echoes, as if she doesn't remember it was the one of two boy names they could agree on.

"Yes, Noah is doing well. Don't you hear the lungs on that kid?" His wife nods her head, acknowledging her husband. "Now, it's time to meet William or Layla. Come on, baby. Being a mother is all you've ever wanted. Let's make it official and meet the final member of the James clan."

The husband's encouragement helps the mother rally, and she begins to push.

"Evelyn, you're doing so well. The head is crowning. He or she will be here soon." Her doctor tries to walk her through the next couple of minutes of the grueling birth. Her eyes brighten at the doctor's words of affirmation; she's anxious to meet this little one who is making things so hard on her.

She understood from the beginning of their pregnancy that this would be the only time she'd carry babies. It was too hard on her body, after having several miscarriages. And when she was blessed with twins, she realized fate had intervened. She'd never have to wonder what it would be like to have multiple children. She'll know for every day of their lives. Her children will have each other even after their mother and father pass away.

"One more push?" she asks, and her husband squeezes her hand and rubs her back.

"Yeah, Evelyn. One more push. And then you'll have your family," the doctor explains, knowing that Evelyn has always wanted to be a mom. He's been with her through all the miscarriages. If anyone knew how much she'd always wanted to be a mother, he does.

She pushes, and suddenly feels relief, but it's short-lived. Evelyn doesn't hear the baby crying. "Did I do it? What do we have, Carl? A boy or a girl?"

His eyes look over the sheet covering her stomach, but he can't see anything. He stands to take in the scene in front of him while Evelyn clings to his hand in fear.

The doctor barks, "Get the pediatric NICU in here stat," and the charge nurse has an entire unit in the room within a minute.

"What's going on, Carl? Is the baby okay? What's wrong with—is it a boy or a girl?"

The husband's eyes stay focused on the too-still baby as the obstetrician walks around the end of the bed to both parents.

"Doctor, what's going on?" Carl asks.

"Evelyn, Carl. We've experienced respiratory issues, and the pediatrician..."

She hears the words *life line, helicopter, and should the dad go*. It's the only thing that permeates her fragile and emotional mind.

The same charge nurse responsible for calling the NICU team screams from the end of the table. "Doctor Ellis! There's blood everywhere."

"Evelyn?" Dr. Ellis calls, grabbing her wrist and checking her pulse. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes roll to the back of her head, and her husband comes rushing to her side, his eyes wide with panic.

"Stay with the baby, Carl," she commands of her husband, then moves her eyes to the doctor. "Save my baby. Whatever you do, save my baby." These are her last words before losing consciousness.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Evelyn James wakes. Something isn't right. Call it women's intuition.

Her eyes are heavy, with loud footsteps around her. It takes every bit of her effort to open one eye.

"Ah, it looks like you're awake?" The voice belongs to a woman she doesn't know, or at least she doesn't recognize the voice.

"Let me get the husband," another voice, belonging to a man, says. "You gave us and your husband quite the scare."

Evelyn is attempting to piece this puzzle together. One minute she'd been at home, and the next, her water broke. Where the hell are the babies? She can't remember, but with all the beeps and pagers and loudspeakers, she knows she's in the hospital. It makes the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, and fear takes over.

Someone touches her hand, and with the way he intertwines his fingers with hers, she understands Carl is by her side.

"Evvy, baby. What would I do without you?"

She hasn't been able to open both her eyes, but she forces herself to ask the question.

"The babies?"

"Evvy, sweetheart, you did good. Noah is in the nursery, waiting to meet his mother. He's a strong one, that kid."

Noah. That's right. If they had a boy, they would name the first one Noah Alexander. But, wait—every bit of motherly concern surfaces, and she opens both her eyes.

When their eyes meet, he begins to smile.

"Baby two?" she croaks out.

"We have another boy. He's okay," he hastily adds. "He wasn't breathing when the doctor delivered him, but he's doing wonderful now. They're keeping him overnight to run some tests, but he'll be back with us tomorrow."

Carl goes on to tell Evvy that in the moment that William wasn't breathing and she lost a lot of blood, he had a split-second decision to make—go on the helicopter with the baby or stay with her. He did what she asked in that desperate moment before she fainted and he flew with William to the NICU at the children's hospital, on the other side of Seattle.

She watches helplessly as her husband tears up at the retelling of the story. It had to have been an impossible decision. Carl's parents met him at the children's hospital while her parents rushed from Olympia to be with Evelyn.

“He's doing great. I had a chance to see him, and he's a beautiful boy. He had on a little hat, like Noah, so I'm not sure what color hair he has yet. But, twins, Evvy! We have healthy and beautiful twins.”

“And they don't know why he stopped breathing?”

Carl moves a strand of her black hair away from her face. “No, but it's why he's staying tonight, then they'll transfer him back tomorrow to his tiny little roommate.” He cracks a grin at his joke and she relaxes, knowing he wouldn't behave that way if there was anything to worry about.

“Could we call him Liam? William seems so formal for a little baby...” she asks.

“Of course,” Carl answers. After what they've all been through, he'll give her anything she wants.

Evelyn could have lost everything in one day. Her baby, her life, her dream. But she had it all. Noah and Liam would never go without love. Noah and Liam would be her life.



Noah

Nine Years Old

MY BROTHER IS my best friend. I'm only nine, but I know I'll never be closer to another person than I am with him.

But, as close as we are, he's never been able to tolerate sharing a bedroom with me. When I wake up in the middle of the night and can't sleep, I like to draw or paint. Liam kicked me out of his room a few years ago because he said I'm waking him up too much.

I'm good at football, like Dad and Liam, but I'd rather spend my time drawing, painting, and sculpting. Liam isn't artistic but is really good at most sports and much faster than me.

When my dad got a job offer he couldn't refuse, coaching at the university in Seattle, Mom resigned herself to living in the city, claiming I was a genius in the world of art and needed a school that would develop my talents anyway.

"NOAH, we're going to be late for your party." Mom stands at the entrance of my room with a scowl. She's planned a fancy party for our ninth birthday at the Science Museum at the Seattle center.

“Give me five minutes, Mom. I’m not quite done,” I beg.

I’m sculpting something and want to keep it hidden. But Mom doesn’t tolerate tardiness well.

“Noah Alexander. Your father and brother are in the car. Both your and Liam’s class will be there in half an hour. What happens if the birthday boys aren’t there?”

I know the party’s important, but I just need a few more minutes to finish this present. “It’s something for Liam, Mom. Please, I’m almost done.”

My mom’s face begins to soften, and I know right then I’ll get the extra minutes I need. “How can I say no to you wanting to give your twin a gift on his birthday? But, you have five minutes. Please don’t be any later, baby.”

I’m given a reprieve. The last of the paint on Liam’s gift has dried, and I place the football I made just for him in a sturdy box and attach an orange bow to the top. It’s Liam’s favorite color because it matches his hair.

THE SCIENCE MUSEUM at the Seattle Center is huge. I watch my brother disappear in the crowd with his group of friends. We’re at different schools this year, as my elementary school is aimed for those who excel in the arts.

I’m still the new kid and have only made a handful of friends. They’ve called and RSVP’d with my mother. None of them are here yet, or at least in the maze of kids, I don’t recognize anyone.

My eyes are searching the crowd when a display catches my attention. The words Microscopic Patterns in Mathematics catches my eye. It’s a paper mache, made to look like a huge piñata, but open in the middle. There’s a variety of explanations as to why this piece of art is indeed a science experiment. I couldn’t care less that this is science. All I see in front of me is a beautiful piece of art.

I'm in my own world, my brain attempting to navigate a similar piece in my mind, with my own twist. After all, I work with my hands to sculpt.

I realize I'm not alone, and turn to my left, assuming a classmate has found me. But, standing next to me is a boy close to my age that I don't recognize.

"Is that a piñata shaped like the sun?" he asks.

"I don't think it's a piñata, but it looks like one. This belongs in an art museum, not a science center." Mom swears I speak as though I'm a thirty-year-old when I talk about art.

"I wish I could make something like that," he says.

"Yeah, I'm trying to figure it out. I'd love to make this at home."

"Are you an artist?" he asks.

"Yes, and I think I can do this."

"I paint, but I'd never be able to make that. I don't think I could." He has the same intense look on his face as I do.

"It's a pattern, see. You just have to count the number of colors and repeat the pattern in the front, the back, and the sides, creating an opening," I explain.

I'm counting the colors, and while several shades are similar, I can recognize all the pigment distinctions. "See, I've counted seventeen different colors. You don't have to do that many, or make it as big, but if you follow the pattern, it'll work for you."

"Noah," my mother calls, and I turn around to see three friends from my class standing at her side. "Look who is here."

I take one last look at the piece in front of me, and then at the boy, who is still inspecting the piñata. "I gotta go, good luck on this," I offer.

He turns to me, and it's the first time I see his face straight on. His eyes are a similar color as mine. He smiles, and I'm gone, finding my friends.

When I get home later that night, I begin my attempt to recreate the piece I'd seen today. It isn't perfect, but it's a start.



Noah
Age Seventeen

“I CAN’T BELIEVE Mom let us go tonight!” Liam shouts as he peels out of the driveway.

“You keep driving like that and Mom will track us down. You know she will.”

Tomorrow is our seventeenth birthday. Last year, we were given a car to share, which is tricky because we attend two separate high schools, but it works out most of the time, since Liam’s school is within walking distance and I take the bus downtown each day.

“I’m still in shock,” I admit.

After opening our present a day early—tickets to Pearl Jam—it felt like we were dreaming. Not only did Mom and Dad buy us tickets, Mom is letting us go by ourselves. I’m sure Dad is to thank for that one.

I’m checking my phone, finding the best place to park, close to Key Arena. It’s in the Seattle Center, but I’d rather not walk three miles. This concert was sold out months ago, and Mom and Dad told us when tickets went on sale that they were too expensive.

It’s only two in the afternoon. We’re leaving early, but hell, it’s fucking Pearl Jam, coming back to their hometown.

Everyone and their brother are going.

“You good, Noah?” my brother asks, turning toward the sign for Mercer Island.

“Fuck, yeah. We’ve listened to them since we were what, ten?”

He laughs at all the memories. “Remember Mom tried to take away the CD, until Spotify and Pandora became popular? It’s one of the few times Mom gave up on one of her rules.”

“Oh, don’t I know.” I’m giving him directions, and we find a parking lot near the Seattle Center. It’s thirty dollars for parking, and even at two-thirty in the afternoon, it’s packed. We exit our car and merge into a sea of others moving toward the arena.

“Hey!” a person calls out behind me. “You in the blue coat, and dark hair. You dropped something.”

“I think he’s talking to you, Noah.” Liam grabs for my arm, and we stop, turning around.

“Is this yours?” In his hand is my license.

“Oh, fuck. Thanks, man. I would have been screwed without it.”

I reach to grab for it, and our fingers touch. There’s an instant connection, and I back away, out of breath, looking into dark brown eyes, so similar to my own. He’s a little shorter, with black hair and dark-rimmed glasses.

“Glad to have helped you out.” He winks, and then blushes, dropping his eyes from mine. “Have a good time.”

He begins walking away with a girl, who is bundled up in a puffy blue coat. I stare as he walks farther and farther from me.

“Why didn’t you ask for his number?” Liam asks.

Wow. Could he be gay, too? I knew by eleven that I was into guys. And my parents never batted an eye when I came home with my first boyfriend at fourteen. It’s crazy, the way I came out, but they have always been my biggest supporters.

“Fuck, you’re sure dumb,” my brother whispers into my ear. “The cutie in the glasses liked what he saw. I bet if we hurry, we can catch up with him.”

It takes me a second to understand his words. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go.”

But the crowds are ridiculous, and he fades away in front of me in the stream of people. The concert is the best day of my life, especially since I’m sharing it with Liam. The cherry on top would have been finding the hot guy in glasses.

Age Nineteen

“We’re here tonight to recognize continued achievements in the arts. We’ve gathered this generation of young minds, full of talent and promise, showcasing their ongoing efforts to make art relevant in every facet of life.”

My mother made me wear a suit. Not only did she make me wear a suit, but she convinced me I would need one in my adult life. At nineteen, I’m still filling out. In three years, this suit won’t fit me, but as I loosen the death tie a little, I notice Liam is doing the same.

“I never had to wear a suit to a sports ceremony,” he grumbles, moving his chair forward as he scopes the crowd for good-looking girls. I know his MO. It’s mine, too—but, I’m looking at men.

“For achievements in abstract artistry, the night’s first award goes to Noah James, for *The Lady in Hiding*.”

My painting appears on the large screen at the front of the room and my voice is the backdrop, explaining the story behind this piece and how I crafted it. I wait for the video to end, then stand from the dinner table to accept my award.

I glance over to my brother, and am surprised to see him bent over slightly, all the color fading from his face.

“You okay?” I whisper.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Probably dinner.”

I carefully climb the steps to the stage to accept my award. I’m not a shy person, but my art is personal. I love to share it with others, but I prefer to be left out of the spotlight. It’s one reason I didn’t really enjoy sports.

I clear my throat and look out into the crowd. My eyes stop on my mom. She’s a lot, most of the time, but she loves us without measure and would run into a tornado for Liam and me. She’s wiping her tears, and the pride on her face is the one reason I can stand before hundreds of people to accept my award.

“I want to thank the Seattle Arts Association for this.” I lift the trophy in the air. “And the continued endeavors for the youth of today and tomorrow, and the legacy they’ll be able to follow. This means so much to me.”

My acceptance speech is short and sweet, and I take my trophy back to the table, where my father has moved to my seat to speak with Liam. I take Dad’s chair, next to Mom, as the MC for tonight’s event begins to introduce the next award for still-life paintings.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Her face is scrunched with worry.

“I’m not sure, Liam is complaining about his stomach. He says he’s in a lot of pain.”

My dad leans back toward my mom. “It’s on his right side. It may be appendicitis. I think we should go to the hospital.”

Well, at least I got my award and a dinner out of the whole thing. I would have loved to see the other pieces of art, but my brother is most important.

We quietly gather our things and are attempting a discreet exit when I hear the next winner announced. “And tonight’s award for still life in watercolor is Ashton Brooks, for *From Lake Washington to the Ocean*.” I take one quick look at the painting. It’s stunning, and the colors are so vibrant. But I don’t recognize the name.

PART II

FATE



The development of events beyond a person's control,
regarded as determined by a supernatural power.

(Via Webster's Dictionary)



Ashton
Present

MY BIRTHDAY IS ALWAYS a reflection of what I've accomplished in the past year, and I never get through the day without wishing my father was with us to celebrate.

“Happy Birthday, sweet boy!” My mom swoops in and kisses my cheek, then moves on to my sister. We're a small family, and it's only us, but we're tighter than most as a result.

My sister, with her wispy red hair, so much like our father's, sips on a margarita. I'm happy with my merlot, and my mother picks up her signature Riesling that I ordered in advance.

It's our tradition to meet at *How to Cook a Wolf* every year. The first time we visited, I picked it solely for the name alone, but then continued because the Mediterranean food is out of this world. Mom is in a better place than she has ever been financially, and it's one of her gifts to me.

“Thanks, Mom.” I'm glad to see her looking cheerful. I have walked in on my mom crying more than once on my birthday, for the same reason I'm sad. We all wish Dad was with us. I don't remember much about him because I was six when he died, but from time to time I get bits and pieces, small memories that seem to just pop into my mind.

A text alert pings, and I immediately look at who it's from, primarily to see if the manager of an art gallery I've had a couple pieces at has returned my last message. She's sold a few of my watercolors, and I'd sent her a quick snap of my current item, wanting her opinion.

"Sorry, guys, this is from Kate." They both know the name because we share everything with one another—within reason.

"Go ahead, baby," Mom replies, finishing up her first drink and attempting to get the waiter's attention for round two.

Kate: *I want that painting at my studio as soon as possible. BTW, you've heard about my featured artist here, right? I've set you up on a blind date, for Monday. You both are similar in many ways, plus you mentioned a drought, here of late, and Noah is a sure thing. The raunchier, the better. See, I think you two will hit it off. Don't say no. See you soon.*

I let a small chuckle escape my lips.

"What's so funny?" my younger sister asks.

"Kate. She's setting me up on a date."

The waiter has brought my mom another glass of wine.

"Do you mean a date or a booty call? I need to couch my expectations."

My mother will never marry again. Every once in a while she dates, but she claims she will never meet a man she'll love like my father, so why try? It makes me sad. She has so much love to give. She's only forty-four, having me early in her life. She's slender, and tall at almost five feet, ten inches, with long blonde locks that are a sharp contrast to my dark hair. Men eye her all the time, and it gets my hackles up. But then again, I hate seeing her so lonely.

"Mom." It's not me who admonishes our mother, but my sister.

"Tiana, my dear, it's the truth. Why are you so shocked I said it? You have the same filter I do."

"Which means none," I return, exchanging a look with my sister. We both shake our heads. Mom has always been a loose

cannon, saying what's on her mind, plus she's been honest with us from the beginning. She bought me condoms when I had my first serious boyfriend at sixteen. Caitlyn Brooks is a rare woman, and a rare mother. And we'd not have it any other way.

“Okay, let's talk about you today. I remember you had that scare when they thought your sugar was so low. I worried for years you were diabetic. Fuck, that was terrifying. It happened the one time, but then you started having breathing problems and was diagnosed with asthma. Raising kids is terrifying. One day, I hope you have a kid that scares you as much as you scared me—and someone you love as much as I love you—baby.”

Tia shakes her head, our mother's words making us laugh, and as we celebrate our Saturday, and my twenty-fifth birthday, I thank my lucky stars for my mother and sister.



Noah

IT'S a story my mother has told my twin brother and me to exhaustion, but as we celebrate another three-hundred-and-sixty-five days on this earth, for the twenty-fifth time, I think about how I almost lost Liam before we started our lives.

My twin brother is my other half, the man who looks nothing like me. My dark features are in contrast to his red hair, freckles, and skin so sensitive that SPF one million wouldn't stop him from burning.

"When they whisked Liam from the room, I hadn't even seen him. Didn't even know if he was a girl or a boy. Then I started bleeding, too." The residual fear is still present in my mother's voice from the day of our birth.

Our father sits at the other end of the table, not saying a word, his line of sight on the television—the game, to be exact. We're on the West Coast, and the pre-game coverage is still going strong. Mom went into labor on the night of the Super Bowl. And just like twenty-five years ago, the game is on tonight. He'd asked if we wanted to celebrate last night, but for the past nine years, my twin and I have had a tradition. We go out by ourselves, the eve before our birth. And this year had been no different.

"I can't get the doctor's panicked look out of my mind. I'll never forget it," our mother continues.

Mom is dramatic, but about this, she's not. We almost lost her, too, but she never brings it up. In her mind, her kids are the only ones that matter.

"And we never found out what was wrong with you, my sweet boy," she adds, kissing him where all the freckles line his forehead.

"Okay, Mom, enough of your sappiness," Liam jests. The story makes him uncomfortable, because he's not accustomed to being the center of attention, not in this way.

"Yeah, Evvy. What he said," my father echoes, turning up the volume of the game. Our home team isn't playing, but football is football, and in my father's opinion, it's life in the most Ted Lasso way possible, even if we're talking about American football. Carl James is a football coach, after all, and played as an offensive lineman until he blew out his knee at the age of thirty-two. Two years later, we came into his life.

He's a good father. We know his limits—and on Sundays from August to February, these are his limits. He coached at the college level but never traveled too far, because he didn't want to lose out on precious moments with us. His words, but likely scripted by our mother.

"So, tell me, boys, where did you go out last night? To your own celebration I never get invited to?" Our mother excels in passive-aggressiveness, but back in the day we never said anything and won't start now.

"It's a place not far from here, called *How to Cook a Wolf*."

"You ate wolf?" Mom asks, appalled.

Liam and I exchange a knowing look. "No, Mom," Liam begins to explain. "It's just an eclectic restaurant with mostly Mediterranean options."

Every year we try a new place, mainly so Mom doesn't show up. She has been our biggest fan, and after all the drama during the birth, our life became hers. She's having a hard time being an empty nester, even after all these years.

"You don't like eating out anyway, Mom," I counter.

“But it would be nice to be invited from time to time.”

She drops the subject and takes the takeout containers of our favorite Korean place, moving it to the dining room table. We never ate out, or had delivery. And I mean never. My mother was a stickler for home-cooked meals. With my dad’s early investments, and their family wealth, they never worried about money. It wasn’t a budget thing with Mom. It was all about health. She swore, still to this day, that home cooked and organic is always better. I think it had something to do with Liam almost dying at birth.

Our grandmother, my dad’s mom, took us out twice a year. She was the one who introduced us to a little Korean dive bar up the road. Mom finally gave in when we were twelve. It was one of our gifts. But, Liam and I would’ve traded in our presents every year for this meal.

“So, tell me. What’s going on with your significant others?” This is code for “*am I any closer to grandbabies?*”

“I ended things with Alyssa the other day.” Liam is matter of fact in his delivery and puts it out there for us to digest at our speed. Or in this instance, our mother’s.

My mom. God love her, because I sure do, but she can’t hide her reactions to save her life. “Oh, really, dear. That’s too bad.”

Liam raises a brow. “Really, Mom? You hated Alyssa,” he deadpans, dishing up Bulgogi.

My brother has a habit of dating women for six to seven weeks. They start off hot and heavy and when he realizes they aren’t his soul mate, he just up and dumps them. It leaves them confused and angry. A few of his lady friends have been emotional over the whole thing, and he’s had the occasional brick thrown through the window or the word *asshole* carved into his car.

Mom has learned not to get attached to any of his girlfriend’s right away.

“I liked her just fine, William Andrew James.”

Liam swings his attention to me, then to my dad. My father has learned throughout the years— there’s no use arguing with our mother. So, we don’t either.

“Anyone new then?” she asks. My brother typically doesn’t stay single long.

“Nah, I was thinking about taking a break from women for a while.”

His announcement makes us all break out in laughter, even my father. “Please, you’re a serial monogamist. You can’t be by yourself.”

“This time, I’m going to do it, so beware. I’m so confident about it, in fact, that I think we should wager a bet,” Liam proclaims.

“Fuck, easy money? I’m game.”

“Noah Alexander James, you better watch that mouth. You’re never too old to get it washed out.”

This is a threat I don’t take lightly. Evelyn James isn’t one to be pushed. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry, Mom.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” She moves her attention to Liam. “Liam, I agree with your brother. I feel like it may be a waste of your money.”

Even our mom, who always looks at us through rose-colored glasses, can admit the truth and recognizes that it would be easy money for me. “Thanks, Mom, for the vote of confidence,” he says dryly.

She leans forward, grabbing some soy sauce. “Just being realistic, son.” She moves her attention to me, and I prepare myself for her interrogation.

“What about you, Noah? Seen anyone new lately? Tell me there’s a guy that has made you look.”

Unlike my brother, I’m not typically in a relationship. I’m sometimes lonely, but I’m also not ready to give up my independence. If an inkling hits me at one in the morning, I roll out of bed, turn on my light, and begin to paint, or sculpt,

or work on whatever creative idea hits me, just like when I was a kid.

Fortunately for me, my pieces sell. I don't have a steady salary, like Liam. He's an investment accountant and a damn good one. He already has steady clients and is on the fast track to make partner.

But when I get a payday, it can be anywhere from a thousand to ten thousand dollars. And because all artists have to live in a trendy loft in an eclectic part of town, with natural light, it's a stereotype I had no problem fulfilling.

"Kate set me up with a guy who has a few pieces at the studio. It's a blind date. I have absolutely no expectations."

Liam's smile grows in that obnoxious way that brothers mock one another. "Yeah, it would take a special guy for you to settle down."

"Apparently it would take a special gal for you to settle down, too, bro," I throw back at him.

Mom turns her head for a second to look at the score, and Liam flips me off.

"I saw that, William!"

I cackle. There's no way she could have. She just knows firsthand how we are with one another.

"Just keep me posted, Noah. I hate that you're in that loft all by yourself."

Liam gets a look on his face I recognize, and my eyes convey *the shut-the-fuck-up* I can't say out loud. I'm not alone several nights a week. I'm a sexual being, and my brother knows my needs and desires, so while I may not share a bed with someone, I have several companions throughout the month, and it's enough for now.

His lips split into a smile, but he takes his thumb and index finger and moves it past his lips, miming that he's throwing away the key. And this part of the conversation is over, as we continue to celebrate our birthday.



Ashton

I HATE BLIND DATES.

But, I've not been laid in a month. It's affecting every bit of my creative process. Or, at least, it's my hope that the lack of my orgasms is what's disturbing my artistic ability. Kate promised me a good-looking hot guy, near my age, who loves dirty and raunchy sex.

If his art is any indication to the kind of man he is, I'm in for a great night. But I hate the charade of a date. Can I just meet him at his place, fuck each other's brains out for a couple of hours, and then get home by ten so I can finish this painting? Do I have to wine and dine the guy? He certainly doesn't have to wine and dine me. I bet if I were to ask him, he'd be fine with skipping the formalities.

I take a look at my spiked black hair. I've always worn it short to my head. I look more like a preppy frat boy than a starving artist, emphasis on starving. Kate is the first art dealer to take a chance on me. My first piece was bought just a month ago, and after the commission fee, I ended up receiving four hundred dollars. It was just enough to cover the rest of my rent for the next month with a little left over for art supplies and food.

My jeans are tight, but not so tight that my balls ache. My shirt is a burgundy button-up. With my septum pierced and my

black rimmed glasses, I figure this is the best it'll get. I don't have nice clothes; again, the whole starving-artist bit.

Greg is gaming in the living room, and Dave is in the kitchen cooking something. I lucked out with tidy roommates. We only talk when needed, but it's still a small blessing.

“Getting your dick wet tonight?”

They must have noticed my foul mood. “And what tells you I haven't?”

“You're a moody asshole on most days, but the last couple of weeks, you've been *extra* you.”

I guess I have. I snapped at Greg for not putting my mail on the table. It's a pet peeve of mine, and rightfully so, because I missed out on an opportunity with another studio. I made coffee one morning before I showered, and by the time I got out, Dave had drained the pot and hadn't started another one. Now that I think back on it, I had every right to be upset. Inconsiderate assholes.

“Well, we'll see. Just don't be thoughtless jackasses, and I won't be a jerk to you,” I quip, with a bite to it.

I guess I just proved their point. “Sorry, maybe I'll be a little nicer if I get my dick wet,” I concede, adding the last part as a half-ass apology.

“Have fun!” one of them yells, but I don't stop to see who it is. Apparently drastic times call for drastic measures. I'm all about a quick fuck, as long as the guy is on board.

WITH THE DATE being a couple blocks from Kate's studio, I need to bring along the last good painting I have to drop off to her while I'm in the area. I slip the canvas into my carrier and heft it on my arm like a giant tote bag, then trudge onto the bus. I hate public transportation, but...starving artist and all.

I'll Uber to the restaurant from here, but Kate has promised me a fair price on this piece, if it sells. She has a

couple of clients who love my work, and I need a good payday. Even a couple hundred dollars would buy some food and art supplies.

The public bus drops me off a block from the studio, and I'm feeling very good about the piece I'm bringing. It's of a young man, his profile against a deep turquoise color, and he's smoking a joint.

A man, a couple inches taller than me, holds the door open as I enter the studio. I can't speak, but feel his intense gaze on me when I cross through the door. I don't see Kate at first, so I linger in the reception area until her head pokes out of her office. She crosses by all the displays in the main showroom, beaming at me. I want to ask her who that guy was. He was stunning, and so easy on the eyes. There's a familiarity about him, and I loved knowing he was watching me, too.

"Ashton! Oh, I'm so glad you're here. I have a client who is coming today to view your picture."

I slip thin gloves on my hands, not because it's cold outside but to prevent transferring any of my prints or oils from my skin to the piece. Pulling it out gently, I set it on the easel in front of the reception area.

"Oh, fuck, Ashton. This is unbelievable!" She tugs gloves on her own hands, grabbing for her magnifying glass, examining the finer details of the painting. "And your strokes are so smooth, with the acrylic paint. Shit, Ashton. You've been holding out on me. You told me you're having some sort of artistic block, but this is definitely not a block."

I'm elated by her enthusiasm. "This was the last good piece I've done in a while." I could expand my inventory if I could get past *The Bride* painting. I have this vision of the finished product, but I can't transfer it to paper.

"I'll take this and display it at our next open house, if it's not snatched up before. Mr. Martin called me today, and is interested in anything you paint. He'll be by tonight. Let me research paintings similar to the detail you provided and I'll get back to you with your bottom line."

Kate takes thirty percent of the agreed upon amount. I trust her because she knows what my pieces are worth.

“Thanks, Kate. I appreciate it.”

She’s still mooning over the painting as I’m discarding my gloves.

“Oh, and, Ashton? Go get laid, and maybe you’ll have more art to bring to me. And *do not* even think of selling to another studio without coming to me first. Ashton Brooks will be a household name one day, mark my words.”

Could it be true? But, she’s not done.

“And Noah James is one of the good ones. He, too, was impressed by your last piece.”

Noah James. I’ve seen his work around the studio. He’s the featured artist—hell, his work is plastered around here, if it doesn’t sell right away.

He’s elusive, rarely coming to his premieres, and sharing virtually nothing on social media. Sometimes being mysterious drives up both demand and price.

“He’s pretty popular. Why would he want to go out with me?” I blurt out, the insecurity that plagues me rearing its ugly head.

She chuckles and flicks her eyes from my painting to me. “You’re not looking for anything serious, and neither is Noah. I figured you could both use a fun night. You two can get what you need from each other, and maybe I’ll get more pieces from both of you.”

“You mean use him as a muse?” I ask, snorting at the idea.

“Not necessarily,” she murmurs, but her attention is already refocused on the piece.

MEETING a blind date at a coffee shop is so fucking cliché, but here I am, waiting for the man Kate generically described as

dark hair, dark eyes, and tall. Fuck, she just described *me*.

“Ashton?” a velvety smooth voice asks from behind me. The words send shivers through my entire body.

I whirl around to take him in. Fuck, *it's him*, from today. Noah James was leaving the studio at the same time, and hell, he has similar features as me. His hair is kept short like mine, and his eyes are a similar deep caramel color. He's taller by about two inches, and I'm not a short man. Fuck, he must be six-four or maybe even six-five.

“It's you. From earlier,” he observes as he rakes his fingers through hair as thick as mine. “I kicked my ass for the last hour, wishing I'd stopped to introduce myself. And now, you're here.”

“Noah?” I ask, and I know that if he's not Noah, this is the guy I want to take home. No one else will do.

“That's me.” His smile is contagious, and I match his, because I'm happy. This date may actually go according to plan.

“Thank goodness,” I say out loud.

“I guess it's a good thing I'm me, then.” He winks. I love it when a man winks, and I think it's his way of saying he agrees with me.

I lean in, and I'm being rather forward, which isn't something I do, but I don't care. “It's a really good thing.”

I start to pull back but he catches me by the waist, tugging me flush with him. “On my end, it's a really good thing, too.”

This is a connection I can use to my benefit. I could say, let's skip the pleasantries and go back to his place, but I find I don't want to.

He lets go of my waist and I back up, but just a smidge. I like the closeness with him and it's natural, as if I've known him my whole life.

“I had every intention of taking you back to my place to fuck you, but that seems like a waste of such a good-looking guy like yourself, don't you think?” he muses.

“Same, man, same.”

“Wanna get out of here and get some dinner?” he asks.

I find it’s exactly what I want to do. “Yeah, I really do.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here, then.” He makes a beeline for the door, and I stay close.

THE BANTER between us is natural. We’ve been sitting at the table for over an hour, but Noah’s assured the waiter he’ll take care of him with a sizable cash tip.

“My art is a little more abstract, and dark. I’ve been told I must have lived a dark life in one of my previous lives.”

I sip on my wine. It’s only my third, because I need a clear mind tonight. “I’ve noticed, but you’re a genius. It inspires me.” He covers his face with his hands, fidgeting and squirming. Compliments must make him uncomfortable. “You have to know your art is astonishing.” Noah shrugs his shoulders, but I know the truth. His work sells. He’s been the featured artist at Kate’s studio for the past four months. The money has to be piling in for him. “So, tell me about your family.”

In our time together, we’ve spoken mostly of art, and for both of us, we could talk about the history, our influences, various museums we’ve been to, and our techniques, but I find I have to know more about what makes Noah James tick.

He’s been drinking a milk stout, and he’s almost done, setting it down. He doesn’t attempt to get our waiter’s attention, and I hope we’re not done with our date for the night. “I’m a twin, actually, and fuck, you and I look more alike than he and I do,” he quips, and I can’t help but let a laugh loose at the idea. “My twin is a carrot top, fair skin, burns with sunblock, and is a serial monogamist.”

He brought it up, so I clarify the statement. “And you’re opposite of a serial monogamist?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t say I’m the *opposite* of a serial monogamist.” His chuckle fills the little distance between us, and I attempt to burn the melody into my mind. “I don’t believe in exclusively dating someone. I don’t need a person constantly around me, like Liam does.”

It’s a weird thing to say on a date, but I was the one to bring it up.

“Shit, that gives you the wrong impression of me,” he groans. “I may not be looking for a relationship, but if one falls in my lap, and there happens to be an obvious connection, I’m not against it. And it’s then I’ll say I want to be exclusive with someone.”

“Well, if we’re being honest, I had no idea I could hit it off with someone like I have with you. And I was all about a hard and good fuck, but I think...”

“You don’t want to fuck me?” he asks. His eyes play off the glimmer of the candlelight in front of us.

“Oh, whoa, don’t be putting words into my mouth,” I tease, finishing off my wine and placing it to the side.

“So, you *do* want to fuck me?” he asks, his smile growing with every second that ticks by.

“I think I want to get to know you.” I attempt to be the voice of reason and civility, but it’s not the whole truth. “However, fucking you is certainly one way to get to know you, right?”

His lips split into a large grin. “I knew there was something about you I liked.”

Any other booty call would have me dropping some money on the table, but I’m not in a hurry. I want to stay and talk more, even if we’re here all night.

“But,” Noah begins to speak, dancing his hand over to mine. “I like this, too, for now.” This has me grinning, returning his smile from earlier.

“I’ve told you about my family. Can you tell me about yours?” he asks.

His fingers thread with mine over the table. His touch electrifies me, and my brain almost short circuits with his question. I right myself, clearing my voice. “I was raised by a single mom. My dad died when I was six. It’s just her, me, and my sister, Tiana.”

Tiana is my person in life. With the way Noah speaks of his brother, I know he’ll understand a strong bond.

“Tia and I, like you and your brother, are polar opposites. She, too, is a ginger—and the smartest person on this planet. She’s working full time and goes to college. She wants to operate in the world of finance. It’s what our father did. But he died when we were four and six.” I pause at the direction I’m letting this story go and divert. “She’s probably my best friend.”

His interest in me isn’t fake, or at least that’s the vibe I get. This date is more than a simple swipe right and fuck each other’s brains out. No, right now, with him, this is everything.

“Hey, wanna get out of here?” He tosses a hundred-dollar bill on the table for the tip even though he paid an hour ago.

I may not know him well enough to decipher if this is code for let-me-take-you-to-my-home, but when he extends his hand, I take it.

I know one thing: This night could go on forever if it were up to me.



Noah

THIS IS UNEXPECTED. *He's* unexpected. How did Kate know we'd hit it off?

There's an overhang across the street looking out over the water. Queen Anne is elevated, and I find the views are stunning. I take his hand, and we walk together in comfortable silence. How will this date end, and do I want this to simply be a one-night affair?

"I never tire of this view. I've lived here as long as I can remember, and it's still something I can look at for hours." I don't talk like this to my friends, brother, or hook-ups. But Ashton is shaping up to be someone entirely different.

"Yeah, whenever I'm in Seattle, I find I want to sit on the lawn at the Seattle Center, reading or sketching or just thinking."

Good, he's opening up to me, as I am with him.

"I have a confession," I admit.

Ashton meets my gaze with wary eyes.

"It's not bad. We talked about it at dinner. I don't want this date to be over, but I'm not sure I want to take you home and fuck your brains out tonight." Did I say this out loud? By the way his eyes bug out, I have.

“Wait,” I blurt, stopping him from responding. “Let me clarify—I want to take you home and have my way with you, but you’re different than anyone else I’ve ever met, and I’d rather not fuck it up with sex.”

He lets out a howl in laughter. “I’m a pretty sure thing, Noah. I’ve wanted you since passing each other outside the gallery. But, I don’t disagree with you. So, we’ll see each other again?”

“Fuck, yeah. I’m a pretty sure thing, too, after maybe a couple more dates,” I answer, and it earns me Ashton’s sexy smile.

Using the sides of his unzipped jacket, I pull him closer. He comes without protest. I’ve wanted to taste his lips on mine since I first saw him. He lets out a slight gasp, and I reach for his chin, bringing his even with mine. “I’m going to kiss you now. If that’s okay?”

“God, please, yes. I’ve wanted this all night.”

I won’t deny him because I won’t deny myself. The second he presses his hips into me, rubbing his erection against mine, I’m starving for anything he’s willing to give me. My tongue traces the fullness of his lips, and when his mouth hits mine, a spark of need catches fire and burns through me. My arms tighten around his waist like I’m the predator and he’s my prey. But he’s not running. He wouldn’t get far. I’d follow him. Our pull is magnetic, and my need for him is overpowering.

My mouth brushes against him as I speak. “You’re fucking sexy, and there’s not a part of your body I don’t want to touch, lick or nibble.” His vibrations reverberate off of me. “You like that?” I ask, continuing to kiss down his neck and over to his throat.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard. “I hope you stick to your promises.”

I tip his lips to mine. “I’m fucking positive I’ll stick to *that* promise.”

I can't hold back, and my lips collide with his, his body quivering, and it's not because of the cold. We're making our own heat. I drink in his taste, and I never realized what I could be missing with the right person. Could Ashton Brooks be the right person? I continue to melt into this kiss, one for the record books, and don't want to let go. His hands slide up my back, and mine lower to his ass.

I can barely breathe anymore, and I reluctantly pull away. His chin and cheeks are slightly red from my five o'clock shadow. I love seeing what I can do to him.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, caressing his cheek.

"Only in the best way," he answers.

"I could kiss you for hours," I utter, dropping my mouth down toward his face, grazing his lips with a light peck, moving to his nose, and finishing at his forehead.

"You'll get no complaint from me." He drops his head to mine, and we stand here for several minutes. He smells of lemons and sandalwood, and his body, though a tad bit shorter than mine, is so similar to my own build that it's familiar. His breathing is labored, as if he's trying to calm his racing need for me. I know this only because I'm doing the same.

I pull away for a brief moment, tugging him over to a set of large rocks that make a barrier from the wind but also within the landscaping, can be used for sitting.

He rests his body up against one rock and I push my back against the other one. We can't hold hands, but our feet touch. He takes out his phone, typing and such, and I watch him as the light of his cell brightens his face.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Just ordering a car. I don't want to take the bus, and—"

"I'll take you home," I offer. It never crossed my mind that he doesn't own a vehicle. Living in Seattle, you don't particularly need it, but it's not like New York or LA—not yet, anyway. More people have cars than not here.

"Oh, it's okay. It really is, Noah."

In my nature, I want to demand he cancel the car, but there's a hesitation with him, and I won't push. Maybe he's had a bad experience with first dates? What if he doesn't want me to know where he lives yet? It could be anything. But I know one thing—I have to have another night with him.

We talk for twenty more minutes until his Uber arrives. He leans in, initiating the kiss this time. It's chaste, compared to the first one, and he leaves with a promise to text me when he gets home. I feel more like floating than walking as I head back to my car, elated at the thought.

“DID YOU GET LAID FINALLY?” This is how my brother answers the phone.

“And what if I had Mom in the car with me?”

“But you don't. We both know it. Are you sated and ready to work all night long?”

I let out a hiss, because he's reminding me how much I want Ashton Brooks. “That would be a negative, Ghost Rider,” I admit.

“I thought you'd fuck a duck at this point. How long of a dry spell have you had?” There's commotion in the background.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Loading the dishwasher, asshole. Now answer the question.” He's so fucking moody when he's digging for details.

“The date was um...unexpected. Very unexpected.” I think of Ashton's lips on mine. They felt like home.

“And you what? Are you going to tell me what *unexpected* means?”

“You need a vocabulary lesson, William?” If I were with him, he'd flip me off, but I get a semi-intelligible *fuck you*. I know my brother too well. “There was something about this

guy. And fuck, I'm about to sound as sappy as you do when you claim you found the one. *I'm not saying he's the one*, but I didn't want to ruin something good with a basic fuck."

There's a large thud on the other end. I don't ask. Again, I know my brother too well. "Did you hear that, Noah?"

"Yeah, I heard it." I act as disinterested as I can with Liam.

"It's me fainting in disbelief."

"You recovered quickly, little brother," I quip.

"Yeah, I didn't want to miss this. My brother, finally falling for someone. Tell me everything. I have to know who has Noah Alexander James so up in his feelings that he walked away from a one-night stand."

"I'm not a slut. Don't make me out as one."

"Oh, *yes you are*, and don't act as if you're not. You know it, and it's okay to love sex. But that's not what we're discussing. Tell me about him."

I picture the dark hair, the eyes a little lighter brown than mine, and that smile. Ashton has a smile as sexy as his ass, and his ass is really fucking sexy.

"He's an artist. Not as dark or abstract as me. He was raised by his mom, after his dad died. It sounds as though his sister and he are as close as you and me."

"Did they have to share a uterus together, too?"

I roll my eyes. My brother is ridiculous at times. He's also my ride or die. "No, they're not twins, you imbecile."

"So, what now? What will you do next?" he asks.

"Tomorrow, I'm taking him to Parson's Park." He's quiet on the other line, remembering our promise to one another.

"Oh, shit. You're me, going in hot and heavy. But he must be the one if you're willing to share that part of us with him."

"I can't explain it. It was like we were made for the other. We're meeting tomorrow, and if I have my way, the next night and so on."

“Fuck,” he sighs as he exhales a long and deep breath. “You have it bad for this guy.”

I do. I’ve never fallen for someone like this. But I think Ash returns the feelings.

“There’s a connection.” I pause with my admission then bark out a laugh. “Oh, shit, I really do sound like you.” *And I don’t want to let go of Ash in six weeks like Liam does with all his girls.*

“There are worse things, brother. But hey, I’m happy for you, and you never know, maybe he’s the one. Mom will be so thrilled.”

I let out a groan. “Don’t you dare tell Mom about this. Fuck, that woman will be planning our wedding and the adoption of any kids by the next time I see her.”

“No worries. I wouldn’t do that to you, but if it works out, I have to meet him. Like, right away. I have to know the guy who has snared my big brother.”

“My God, you’re ridiculous. Goodbye.” I hang up, meditating on his words. Maybe this is something I can hold on to.



Ashton

I ESCAPE the comments of my roommates, who are both still up when I get home. Greg and Dave aren't bad, just a little invasive sometimes. I don't open up to many, and honestly, they're a means to an end. With our apartment in the seedier part of Seattle, split three ways, the rent is cheap.

I stare at my phone, wondering if I should text him. He didn't like me Ubering home, but I'm not ready for him to see where I live.

Should I send him a message? He asked me to, but then again, will I come off as desperate? He's so confident and full of himself, and I'm anything but. I'm weighing the pros and cons when an unknown number shows up.

Unknown: *Did you make it home okay? You never texted. BTW, this is Noah.*

My heart leaps in my chest and I can't stop the grin from forming.

Me: *I'm home. Was feeling a little weird about texting.*

While I'm adding his number and name into my contact list, another text comes through.

Noah: *Afraid you'd come across clingy?*

Me: *Yeah, a little.*

Dots appear and then disappear, and I wonder if I messed something up. The text comes through a minute later, and I read it eagerly. My stupid smile doesn't disappear.

Noah: *Let's get something straight, Ash. I do what I want to do, and you are someone I want to do.*

I blush at his text, and love him shortening my name to Ash.

Me: *Thanks. And maybe—no, most likely definitely—I'll let you do me one day.*

His text is quick.

Noah: *Abso-fucking-lutely.*

Another comes before I can reply.

Noah: *Have a good night's sleep. I'll pick you up tomorrow, around five?*

Noah comes from money, and he does well for himself. I'm not ready for him to see where I live. It could be worse, but it could be better.

Me: *Yes, we're still on, but can I text you tomorrow, time and place? I have several errands to run.*

It's not entirely a lie.

The bubbles appear, then disappear, and then reappear.

Noah: *Sure, that's fine, as long as you realize one date with you isn't enough.*

The blush creeps up my face again. Yeah, he's doing something to me.

I PULL out my phone to text Kate with an update. She called me in the middle of my date to let me know she had a buyer for the piece I dropped off, and the minimum price she'd take. But she's a born negotiator, and was hoping for more.

I'm surprised to see there's another text from her already, considering she called me just over an hour ago.

Kate: *Your cut after my commission fee is a thousand dollars.*

A thousand dollars? *A thousand dollars*, I repeat in my head. No way. It's got to be a typo. I begin to reply to the message.

Me: *Am I reading this right? One thousand dollars?*

The dots appear right away, and my body is buzzing. I have never made that much, and if I were to have sold it on my own, I would have asked for a hundred. But Kate—she sees my value.

Kate: *Yes, a thousand. It was sold for \$1500.*

I take a moment in my head to do a touchdown celebration, but another ping sounds from my phone.

Kate: *Btw, how did the date go? Did it get your creative juices flowing again? Shit, it's still early. Please tell me you hit it off.*

I laugh at her text. She's rather intrusive.

Me: *Yes, we really connected, but not in the way you're thinking. We said goodbye after the date, and are seeing each other tomorrow night.*

Kate: *Not what I had in mind when I set both of you up. Don't be getting your heart hurt. I need more pieces. So, The Bride is coming soon?*

The Bride is the name of my next painting, and right now it's more of a pain in my ass than anything. Something is off with it, and I can't seem to transfer it onto the paper the way I imagined. But I'm unable to figure out what's wrong.

Me: *It's coming.*

I should skip it and go to the next piece and try it at a later date, but my mind doesn't work that way.

Kate: *Okay, keep me posted and be sure to stop by the studio tomorrow to pick up your check unless you want me to*

mail it to you.

Opening up my banking app, I realize I'll have to go pick it up.

Me: *Will be by mid-afternoon.*

Perfect. I can have Noah meet me at the studio. I fall back on my bed, a huge smile on my face. And if I were to wager a guess, I'd say it's how I'll sleep all night.

I ROLL out of bed the next morning and stare at *The Bride*, which is lying on my art desk. Frustration hits me immediately.

Water colors tend to streak if painted at an easel, though I'd rather paint at one. Sometimes I do, using it as a technique, if I need my colors to run into each other. And, I hate sitting down. Adjusting my desk to waist height, I gaze upon the subject of my painting. She's beautiful, with high cheekbones and her black hair wispy to give it the effect that it's wind-blown, just like her wedding dress.

But she's not smiling, or at least smiling like a bride should on her wedding day. Why did I paint a sullen bride? I work out a sketch on a separate piece of paper, trying to decide what's missing in the backdrop. I don't have anything painted yet. Should I add something? I wanted simple and elegant with this piece but it's not coming to me.

I turn to my watch and jolt when I see it's nearly one in the afternoon. I've not eaten all day. I started this project, straight from waking up, without my cup of coffee, and time has slipped away.

The shower is quick, and I think of Noah. What is this chemistry I feel, and why is it so strong?

I grab for my phone and my wallet. I have eight minutes until the bus arrives, and it's a block away. I tug on my heavy coat and slap a hat on my head before hurrying into the late winter weather, still cold by Seattle standards.

The bus isn't at the stop, but all that's on my mind is the upcoming date with Noah, and I don't even notice the cold.



Noah

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN the subjects of my paintings, though in an abstract way. It's still obvious it's a human being. Last night, however, my vision was on one thing and one thing alone. And it was the profile of Ashton. My strokes are still not as precise as Ash's are, but it's a different feel from my other pieces.

I'll show this to Kate and no one else. I most likely won't sell it, though I'd love to showcase it with the rest of my work, eventually.

I pull back the door of the art studio, immediately graced with the familiar profile of a man who is invading my every fucking thought. Kate's behind the receptionist's area, a large, high countertop that hides all the various stuff that is needed at the front desk.

"Noah. Hey. I hope you're here to deliver new paintings for me?" Kate says as her greeting.

My painting is secure in my portfolio bag, and I have no intention of showing Ashton how much he's affected me already.

Ashton twirls around with the mention of my name, and his lips split into an incredible smile that has my knees weak for him.

“If you’re going to be in your office later, I’ll bring it back to show you, Kate.”

She lets out a chuckle. “Well, I know when I’m not wanted.” She hands Ash an envelope and disappears to the back.

“Um, hey, you,” I say, uncharacteristically unsure of myself. Will we still have the strong connection we had last night or was it just a moment in time?

“Hey to you,” he replies with a smile, stuffing the envelope in his pocket. “I was going to text you, to let you know I was ready and was nearby. And if I had to wait, I thought I could walk around the studio and take a look at all your pieces. Maybe get some inspiration.”

“Well, funny thing, I’m here.” I tug at his belt loops, bringing him closer to me. “I need to show something to Kate; can you give me five minutes?” I ask, placing a kiss on his forehead.

“Sure, of course.” His phone begins to ring, and he brings it to his line of sight. It’s a picture of a young, attractive, red-headed woman. “Good timing. It’s my sister. I’ll wait. Take your time.”

I grab for him again and kiss his lips. It’s gentle, and as soon as I touch his mouth, I pull back, or we could be here awhile. “I’m glad you’re here,” I whisper.

“Me, too,” he replies. “See you soon.” He walks away but I hear him answering the phone. “Tia? Hey, little sis. What’s up?”

I love that he’s as close to his sister as I am to my brother. I make a mental note never to introduce my brother to his sister, if we continue to see each other. And sure as fuck, it’s what I hope. My heart hurts thinking of never kissing him again. What is he doing to me?

Retreating to Kate’s office, I knock on the open door. “Hey, can I come in?”

“Of course,” she answers, and I shut the door behind us. “This must be serious, but first: I didn’t hook the two of you

up to start a relationship. You break each other's hearts, and my inventory will suffer. So, be warned—I'll hurt you."

It's hard to take her threats seriously, because she's not quite five feet tall, and has to get her clothes specially made since the smallest size is always too big.

A wicked grin crawls over my face.

"Don't laugh at me, Noah James," she threatens.

"You ever meet someone, Kate, and you can't describe the connection, the chemistry, or attraction? It's how I felt the first time I saw him. I don't do relationships typically. I haven't been looking for something, but I know I can't get Ashton Brooks out of my mind. It's not my intention to fuck this up for any of us."

"Holy fuck. You're human, after all." She drops a pen that had been in her hand, and her countenance changes. "So, do you have something for me?" She points to my canvas carrier.

"I probably won't sell it, but I wanted your opinion. It's rough, but give me your expert advice anyway."

I unzip the carrier and pull out my charcoal sketch. Who knows if this is the end product, but charcoal tends to be my go-to when I sketch.

I set the heavy paper on top of the desk, and her jaw drops.

"I know it's not what I typically do, but it still has a level of abstractness to it..."

"Holy fuck! And you don't want to sell it? Tell me right fucking now why you'd not sell this. You could get top dollar."

"Well," I start, raking my fingers through my hair. "It's special, something for me, and given I don't share much with the public concerning my private life, I'm not ready to share Ash. This sketch of him is from memory, the way my mind took him in."

Kate chews her lower lip, staring at the picture. "Well, shit. I can't argue with you. I get it. But use this technique with

things you can share with the public, Noah. People will go crazy over it.”

“Let me think on it.” It’s not a bad idea. I’m always looking at ways to keep my art fresh. “It was inspired by Ashton. I’m not ready to show him, but I will. Can you keep this for now, and we’ll talk about it later? Is that fair enough?”

“Yeah, and, Noah? Have fun tonight. Don’t break that boy’s heart.”

I’m just as afraid of breaking my own.

I’M ABOUT to share something I hold near to me, for only the second time in my life. And it seems right.

“We could drive, but it’s only a five-minute walk.” I’ve not let go of his hand as we exit the studio. He’s still what society would deem a complete stranger, but some part of me feels I’ve known him forever. I grab for a bag out of my car I packed for tonight.

He’s quiet as the day turns to a perfect early evening. I don’t take the silence as anything bad, because his hand is still in mine.

“You cold?” He has on a heavier coat. After all, it’s the end of February in Seattle. His collar is pushed up around his neck, protecting the skin from the harshness of one of the most brutal winters in the Pacific Northwest.

“Nah, I’m good.”

I stop in front of the spot and twist him around, facing me. “Can I tell you a secret?” I ask.

At over six feet tall, this man isn’t small, but against my taller body, he feels somehow vulnerable.

“Sure,” he answers, looking as if he’s unsure of what I might say.

“I really like you. Like, I wanna see you again, and most likely the day after that and so on.”

“So, it’s a date?” he asks, his other hand sliding up my torso, landing on my cheek.

“I think it just might be, Ash.” My answer carries a flirtatious tone.

He widens his eyes. Is it too soon to shorten his name?

“I like you calling me Ash. It seems appropriate.”

I open the gate in front of us and take his hand, escorting him into a small park.

“You may have heard of this little treasure; it’s not a secret, but I’ve always been able to hide away from the world here.”

I remove my hand from his, lowering it to the small of his back. It’s a possessive move, and I hope he recognizes it. He starts to sit down on the bench when this possessive move turns to hunger. My hand slides up his back toward his neck, and he can’t move, but I don’t want him to.

“Is this okay?” I ask, and he inhales, then releases a whimper of desire. I know it’s desire because his dick grows between us.

“Fuck yes, Noah.” His five o’clock stubble is light, but there’s enough friction to cause a slight burn. I look at his eyes; there is a flame of desire flickering with need and I see how much he wants me. “Please kiss me. Please.”

And I do just as he asks. My hand holds his head still, and the other one moves to his shoulder, caressing his arm all the way down. “I can’t wait to taste you again, Ash,” I utter. My body is frenzied for the man, and in it, I realize he’s different. I’m gentle as my lips touch his, and he opens up willingly. He’s submissive in nature; this part is clearly obvious. My tongue touches his, and though the kiss is anything but chaste, I savor every point of contact with his body and mine.

My hand continues to hold his head in place while the other travels down his back and to his ass. Even through a pair of worn jeans, it’s shapely. I want to pull back and tell him in

no uncertain terms what I desire to do with him, but I can't take my lips from his.

He moans into my mouth, and yet it only makes me want to deepen the kiss. Thoughts of him naked under me, skin to skin, quickens my need for Ashton Brooks. I rub my hard-on against him; he begins to writhe, too, and if we're not careful we'll get banned from the park.

The thought of losing my special place has enough of a chilling effect that I make myself pull away, and we rest our foreheads together.

"I liked that, a lot," he reveals, fighting to catch his breath like I am.

"I did, too." And I pull him next to me on the bench.

I place my arm around him and bring him close into my body. His jacket is heavy, and is an appropriate coat for Washington State during winter. I don't even own a big coat like his. I'm too hot natured.

"What is this place?" he asks me, and I realize I've not talked much about the park.

"It's Parson's Park. Liam and I would come here to escape the momma-ing of our mother. We love her, but a helicopter had nothing on Evelyn James."

Trees act as an overhang, giving us privacy.

"So, Liam is the only other person who knows of this place?"

I shrug my shoulders. "We told each other that we'd share it with someone who was special to us. And with all his relationships in the past, he has never brought a girl here."

I watch his eyes widen. I've scared the man. He's made me believe that we were on the same page. But what if I go in hot and heavy like Liam does, and share this with someone who will be another notch on my bedpost? I'm not one to overthink. I leave that for my twin brother.

"You think I'm special after just one date?" he asks, and I can't measure any emotion in his voice.

“Technically, we’re on our second date. But, I’m coming in hot and heavy, and I—”

Ashton stops me with a kiss. The kiss may not be hot and heavy, but it’s enough to fill me with the confidence I typically have in myself. For some reason, with Ash, I constantly feel uncertain. Maybe it’s because I want him so much.

“You feel this connection, too?” he asks.

I nearly sag in relief. Thank fuck. We’re on the same page. “I do. I sure as fuck do.”

He nuzzles his head into the crook of my neck. “You’re warm. And just so you know, I’m honored you’d share this place with me.”

I don’t know how to respond. “Are you cold? I brought a blanket.”

He sits up, looking at me and then at my bag. “It looks like you brought a lot more than a blanket.”

“Yeah, I thought we could share a bottle of wine and some pastries I picked up at a bakery down the road.”

I lean over and pull out the blanket, covering our bodies, and the heat is instant. “I brought the one bottle I had that was a screw top,” I explain, pouring a fair portion into two red solo cups for the both of us. “Classy, right?”

He takes his drink. “I love it. This is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me.”

“I’m just starting to be nice. I find there’s a lot I want to do with you, for you, and to you. But warning: some of it is downright filthy.”

The last part I deliver in a very suggestive and seductive tone.

“Oh, yeah. I’m looking forward to it.” He takes a bite of the cheese Danish and begins to moan.

“Watch that. We may not get out of this park if you moan like that again. I’ll attack you, and we’d get arrested for indecent exposure.”

He moans again, a grin on his face as he takes another bite. “So, before we get arrested, tell me, did you grow up around here?”

“Yes. My parents moved from Issaquah right before we were nine. It was obvious to my parents that I had talent in art. There were better opportunities in the city than in Issaquah, plus my dad coached at the university.”

“And does your brother draw?”

I think of all the times I attempted to teach Liam how to draw and the best he could do was a stick figure. “Um, no. His brain works differently than mine. He’s all about numbers and sports. And while I played football, because it made my dad happy, it wasn’t my thing. I’ve always been the happiest with my art.”

“You sound like me.” He finishes the rest of his pastry and washes it down with the merlot I poured. “Tia can’t draw for shit. She enjoys things she can see and make sense of. But, she’s the smartest person I know. I have a feeling she’ll be running a company one day, or the stock market. She’s going far in this world.”

“You’re protective of her?”

“I sure am, but I also know she can look out for herself. Still, if someone hurt my sister, I’d destroy them.”

“Spoken like a true big brother. I guess it’s different when you have a brother. Liam isn’t as big as I am. He’s not small, but I’m built like my dad. And Liam must take after our mom. She’s almost six feet tall and thin as a rail. Liam is 6’ 1” and has a runner’s body. Makes sense since he runs three miles a day.”

The conversation is steady, and we sit and talk until the park closes. We stroll hand in hand to my car. Without my knowledge, he has ordered another fucking Uber and he can see by the look on my face that I’m unhappy about it.

“I live south, on the other side of Seattle. It’s a long drive for you both ways, and it’s not a big deal for me to Uber,” he

explains, but I don't care. I want to take him home, like a proper date.

“Can I please take you home next time?” I ask.

“Let me think on that. But tomorrow night? Are we on?”

I nod, and after making plans for the next day, I hold him close to my body, kissing him, hoping to burn my flavor into his palate. After tonight, I realize I finally know what it's like to truly *want* another person. I want Ashton Brooks.



Ashton

I'M HOME a half-hour when a text comes in from Noah.

Noah: *I like you. Text me. Call me. Fuck, come over to my place. Anytime.*

Underneath the text is his address.

I don't think, I just do, and hit his name, to FaceTime. He answers right away.

"Hey. Thanks for believing me, Ash. *And believe me* when I say, I want you."

How does he do that? He calms me. It's like he sees my insecurities and takes them on as his own.

"Can I be honest with you?" he asks.

"Yeah, please do," I answer.

He looks just as good as he did an hour ago. His hair is a little wild, mussed as if he ran his fingers through his dark strands a hundred times since we said goodbye. In his dark brown eyes is a spark, and it feels like he's staring right through me.

"I like you. I meet men, take them home, and fuck them. Then I'm done. No going back for seconds. But with you, I look forward to seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, and so on and so forth."

His words send shivers down my spine, and every time Noah's gaze meets mine, my pulse quickens. My heart wants him as much as my body does. "No one has ever been this honest with me," I admit.

"You've met no one like me before, Ash." His simple reply is delivered teasingly, but his words are sensual, as his tone raises an octave or two.

And that's the fucking truth. *I've not met anyone like him, ever.*

"Anyway," he continues. "I was going to come back and work on this sculpting project, but I'd rather talk with you."

In the backdrop, I'm privy to Noah's apartment, but the lights from the city are what my eyes focus on. "Are you at your home, or in a warehouse?"

His velvety laugh hits different than any other man ever has. He's like my home away from home. How can I feel this way before I get to know him? There's a connection that goes beyond attraction, but it doesn't make me want him any less.

"I guess it's both. It's a cliché, really. An artist living in an old warehouse, reinvented as loft apartments."

He sweeps his phone three hundred and sixty degrees. The entire place is open. "This is my bedroom." He stands, doing another three-sixty of his apartment. He's pointing to a set of steps. "I guess you wouldn't classify it as a room, but it's where I sleep." He has a bed on a raised floor, four or five steps above another part of his loft. He walks down the stairs to an open kitchen and small living room, furnished lavishly with plush leather couches facing one another. "This is where I sketch and normally get projects started."

He moves to his kitchen, where open countertops separate the living room from another space. He walks further, toward the windows. "This is my TV room." Behind him are two huge leather recliners and a pool table. "If I didn't have this, my brother would never visit me."

I'm getting to know him a little bit better through this tour. He takes a different set of steps back to his bedroom level,

which lead to another raised floor, closest to the windows. “This is my art studio.” The pride in his voice is obvious. He’s proud of his work, and he should be. He’s amazing.

“The tour doesn’t do my place justice. I love it. I bought it when I became a featured artist at Kate’s studio.”

He doesn’t elaborate on his success but brings the camera back to his handsome face. “Okay, so tell me more about you. What’s your age?”

Getting to know him some more. I can do this.

“I’m twenty-five. Just turned twenty-five on Saturday.”

Noah’s lips part in surprise, giving way to an irresistible grin. “No shit? Your birthday was this past Saturday?” he asks, like he needs clarification.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, my twin and I turned twenty-five on Sunday. So, you’re technically older than me. One may say you’re robbing the cradle.”

He’s a tease and a flirt. I love it. “Yeah, I guess I am. So, tell me, where were you born? It would be funny if we were in the same hospital.”

“As you know, my parents are from Issaquah. Liam and I were born at the Swedish hospital there,” Noah answers.

“Well, I guess we weren’t born in the same place. My mom had me at Swedish in Edmonds.”

“But what are the odds, right?” He opens his mouth to speak, and I stare longingly at him. What I would do for his lips to be fused with mine right now.

“Ash, you there?” he asks and yeah, I missed that he’s still talking. I’d been too focused on his lips.

“Yeah, sorry. Go ahead.” I wonder if he’ll ask me what had me zoning out. But he doesn’t.

“So, what’s your favorite food?” *That’s his question.* Phew!

“Hmm, let me think on that. I’m a foodie, always have been. So it’s hard to narrow down. But, if I had to pick one, it would be Fettuccine Alfredo. And yours?” I ask.

“Oh, that’s easy. It’s Korean food. We never ate out. My brother almost died when we were born, and my mother swore we’d have organic, home-cooked meals every day of our lives. We were allowed Korean food two to three times a year, once on our birthdays, and whenever our grandmother visited.”

I couldn’t have heard him right. “You’ve never had McDonalds? Arby’s? Chick-Fil-A?”

His velvety laugh overflows through his phone. I wish I could bottle it.

“Not until I went off to college. And let’s just say, it was like I was given the kingdom of candy land. I went crazy, eating everything and anything I could get my hands on that *wasn’t* organic or all vegetables. I found a balance, eventually, but believe me, I love junk food.”

“Having a single mom, we were lucky to have food on the table some nights.” I realize I’ve given more of myself to Noah than I have to others. No one, not even Kate or my roommates, understands the poverty in which we lived in until I was ten years old.

He doesn’t know what to say, and I give him a bit more. “One day, my mom found out about a program to help single moms. She qualified, and we moved to a home in Bothell. They put her through school, and she became a nurse. In ten years, she owned the house, and was given a stipend.” It also paid for college for my sister and me, but I keep this part to myself. I feel like I’ve given more of my sob story than was necessary. But he’s easy to talk to.

“Do you get along with your mom?” he asks as if I’m really that interesting, but I’m not. But in it, he makes me feel special.

“My mom is crazy. But I mean that in the best way. She always, even in the hardest days, found a way to be our rock, or make our life fun, when in reality she was dealing on her

own with our shitty lot in life. It was just her way. And yeah, I'm close to her. Tia is in college right now, and she goes home every weekend. They're a bit codependent on the other, but I get it; it was just us three growing up after my dad passed away."

He's intently listening to every word I say. "You're a good listener, aren't you, Noah?"

He moves his eyes from one side to the other. "Hmm, I've never been told that before. I guess it depends on who's talking. It's easy with you because I find you fascinating."

He finds me fascinating? I blush at his words. I push to my feet and move to my dresser to grab a bottle of water.

"Hey, go back. What's on the wall?" he asks. I step back and realize he's talking about my most recent project.

"Is that the bride painting you mentioned that was giving you grief?"

"Yeah, it's the bane of my existence. I decided this one was speaking to me, asking that I use watercolors, but it's almost like a completely different person is painting this versus what I typically paint. And this other person doesn't know what the fuck he's doing."

I watch him intently as he nods his head. "I'm an abstract painter who sculpts people. I get it. Where I don't want to give much details in my paintings, and leave it to the eye of the beholder, I love to capture lifelike images when I sculpt. I don't think as artists, we need to put ourselves in one category. If that makes sense? But if you want my opinion, your painting is beautiful. The curves of her face, the way the fabric moves with the wind. Is she running from or to the wedding?"

I never gave it much thought. "I don't know. Does it matter?" I ask.

"I think it does. All my art has a story. It may be my story, and no one may ever know it, but it gives me reason to continue with the piece of art I'm creating."

Well, fuck me. "Shit. You may be onto something. No, scratch that, I know you are. Fuck, you're a genius."

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. But you can say I’m sexy, and that would be true.” He grins, and his deep dimples show through. My hands ache to caress those sweet divots.

“You’re so fucking hot, Noah.” Shit, why did we both have to be so adult about sex? I’m horny, and I want him.

“Me? That’s all you, babe.”

And that’s the way the conversation continues until three in the morning when we both fall asleep, still on FaceTime.

I CAREFULLY REMOVE my painting from the wall, transferring it back to my art desk. The woman I created in this water color is beautiful, but what’s her story? Noah was spot on. I sometimes have a scene in mind that tells me a little about what I want to paint. But I’ve never attempted to hinder my creative process into a single, linear approach. I’m optimistic that giving her a story will help me to develop this painting into something I’m proud of. Something *right*.

She’s not smiling, or at least smiling like a bride should on her wedding day. Is she forced into this marriage? It’s a present-day painting, but to say arranged marriages still don’t occur would be ignorant. Does she want to escape? Is she being the good daughter? My mind is telling me the story silently as I watch her. Did she have cold feet, but now is sprinting *back* to her groom?

I take a quick look at my clock, and it’s nearing 11:00 a.m. It’s the second day in a row I’ve crawled out of bed and gotten stuck on this painting. But I’m confident I’m closer than I’ve ever been to knowing where to go with this.

I don’t have a chance to make these additions since I have to be to work at noon. I still have to shower and catch the eleven-thirty bus. My mind is buzzing at the idea of another potential payday.

All I think about as I’m getting ready is Noah. His caring nature sparks something inside of me. I’ve never been able to

be myself with another man. On the inside, I'm that scared boy I was when we lived in the bad part of town, and everyone was bigger, meaner, and hurt me. It got better when my mom moved to a new area, and to a safer home. But the damage had already been done, and lowering my guard has never felt like an option until now.

I GET the last seat on the bus and am sitting next to an older man. I'm writing a text to Kate when he attempts to peek over and read it. I angle it away from the nosy guy and shoot him a dark look. Fuck, I hate public transportation.

Me: *I think Noah helped me see what I was hung up on with my painting.*

Kate: *Really? Well, I guess it was a good thing you both didn't fuck right away.*

I startle the old man with a loud chuckle. But this time, he keeps his eyes straight ahead.

Me: *Yes, but I'm renaming it.*

The more I think about it, naming this picture *The Bride* is fucking boring. It doesn't invoke anything I want it to.

Me: *I'm on my way to work. I'll have an ETA on that piece later in the week.*

I flip to my photos and the albums marked projects. I have a few rough sketches of my next couple of possible pieces, but looking at them through a new lens, maybe I'll have inspiration. And if Noah is my muse, then so be it.

HOW MANY WAYS can one person order his coffee? A large hazelnut latte with three pumps of vanilla, half with whole milk, and half with two percent, extra froth made of coconut milk, hold the whip cream, extra hot with five ice cubes, a

teaspoon of cinnamon, and a quarter teaspoon of salt. Fucking salt in a coffee? I hate my job, but coffee shops are as popular in Seattle as pasta is in Italy.

The infuriating order rounds the corner of our drive-through and hands me a ten-dollar bill. I expect him to say keep the change. After all, his coffee is almost nine dollars, but as I count back the change, he greedily takes it and drives off while I'm still speaking.

I shake off the rude customer. I'm determined my day will end with Noah in my arms, or it's my hope.

I need to get out of this place. But it affords me the bare minimum to live on and gives me time to volunteer at the boys and girls club down the street from my apartment. My kids, as I call them, hunger for their weekly art classes, and they have a lot of talent. I hope I'm an inspiration to them, as my art teacher, Mr. Greer, was to me.

The morning is tedious, and the only bright light is I'm by myself. People continue to order crazy coffees, but my mind stays fixed on Noah.

A worried voice comes through the speaker outside. "*Hello, is anyone there?*"

Shit! I better take the poor person's order before she bursts a blood vessel at her lack of caffeine. "Sorry to keep you waiting, ma'am, how can I help you?"

I do what I need to do to survive the day, until someone comes to replace me almost an hour late. I hate this job, but it's a means to an end, at least for now.



Noah

MY LIPS TURN into what I'm sure is a sappy grin when his text comes through.

Ash: *I got caught up at work. My replacement didn't come in when I was scheduled to leave. Let me run home and shower and change. I don't want to go out smelling like coffee.*

I didn't know he worked an outside job. I guess I was lucky. First, I had both of my grandparents' trust funds. I worked on my art through college, and I'd caught the eye of Kate before I ever graduated, and was successful early on. She calls me the outlier.

Me: *I don't mind coffee.*

Ash: *Non-negotiable. I have to shower. Wanna meet there?*

I've not told him what I have planned.

Me: *Why don't I pick you up at your apartment?*

It's quiet on his end and I wonder if I've hit a nerve. A text finally comes through.

Ash: *Actually, here's the address for the pharmacy I use. I need to pick up a prescription. Why don't you meet me there?*

There's something he's hiding. And he needs a prescription? What for?

Ash: *I have asthma, and I forgot to pick up my inhaler.*

He answers my question before I can ask. It still seems odd, but we're essentially strangers with an immense chemistry I can't explain. And frankly, I'd meet him on the moon if I could have five more minutes with him.

Me: *Sure. What time?*

His text is quicker than the last few.

Ash: *Give me an hour. See you then.*

Ash: *And thanks for being understanding.*

I stare at the picnic basket I scoured the stores for today. It's not picnic season, but I found something. I think a picnic is quite special, and romantic. He's special, and it's time to show him that. *Shit, I really sound like Liam.*

HE'S SOUTH OF ME, and I leave shortly after his text. I'm parked in front of the double doors for the drug store when he walks past me, and I press gently on my horn, giving it a little toot, and he jumps about a foot in the air.

I'm laughing, but he seems caught off guard. He points to the doors and raises his index finger, telling me he'll be a minute. Asthma. I know asthma attacks can be serious, because of my years playing football. Athletes can have it, and the coaching staff is careful with them, but you can lead a healthy and full life. That said, I've seen a couple of scary situations and wonder how serious Ashton's is.

He reappears through the doors and walks straight to my car. Fuck, he looks good enough to eat. He's in a hoodie and track pants, with a pair of worn-out Jordan's. He slides into my car, placing the brown bag on the floor at his feet.

"You get what you needed?" I ask.

"Yeah, and fuck, you scared the life out of me."

My eyes fall on his face, and it's game over. Good thing the car is already in park. I unfasten my seat belt and lean over and pull his body to meet mine. The center console is the only

thing separating us. But, it's not a problem, as it's apparent we're both hungry for the other.

I open up my mouth to take him and begin nibbling on his lower lip. I said he was good enough to eat, and fuck, I didn't lie.

My hands cross over the console and land immediately in his lap. He lifts his hips, grinding against my touch.

"Fuck," I groan into his mouth. "We can't make out in my car all night. I mean, we can, but we'll both come in our pants if this persists." I pull my lips from his but don't move my fingers from his groin.

"You. Shit. That was a greeting." He smiles against my face, his words tickling my skin.

"Yeah, I walked around with a semi all day. Barely got any work done, and jacked off a couple times because I was just so fucking horny for you."

"That was quite descriptive." He rests his head on mine. "Are we gonna sit here all night and give the pharmacy a show?"

"No, we're not. But I have a feeling I'm going to come undone when it's just you and me."

"And we're going by ourselves, no one else?"

I let loose a devilish smile and leave him to decipher the answer on his own.

Leaning back into the driver's seat, I buckle my seat belt. "How can you look better than yesterday?" I ask.

"Me? I'm spent after catering to the most high-maintenance coffee drinkers on Earth all day."

I move my arm over and reverse the car, touching his shoulder.

"You didn't mention a job yesterday. I guess I can't find out everything about you in two days, but I'm assuming it's a means to an end, yeah?"

“It’s my hope, anyway. I’d rather spend my days creating art than creating people’s coffees. And get this shit—one person wanted *salt* in his coffee. A quarter of a teaspoon. Pretty specific and not at all an inconvenience.”

I don’t have to know someone to interpret sarcasm.

“Yeah, but it pays the bills, I assume.” He shrugs as an answer, and I won’t push. Finances are as personal as they come, up there with politics and religion.

“So, where are you taking me?” he asks again.

“There’s a marina. My dad houses his boat there, and I planned a picnic dinner. It’s colder, but if we huddle up together, after dinner we can sit on the bow of the boat and watch the sunset.”

“Your dad owns a boat? And there’s an inside?”

I give him a quick bob of my head as we leave the area I know as South Park and get on the 99 heading northwest. “Do you live far from the pharmacy?” I ask, and I’m pretty sure I understand the reason for him wanting to meet somewhere else.

His answer is quick and still vague. “A couple blocks.”

“I don’t care, Ash. That much you need to know about me right away.”

He’s quiet for a few beats. “Can you elaborate, so I fully understand what you’re saying?”

The traffic comes to a standstill. Not a complete shocker; it’s Seattle after all.

“I don’t care where you live,” I announce.

“That’s easy to say, you know. It’s obvious you come from money.” His tone is neutral, and the remark isn’t delivered with animosity.

I won’t deny that I come from money.

“Sure, it’s easy for me to say those words. But status has never fucking mattered to me, and I know I’m very privileged.”

The traffic picks up, and soon we're driving fifty-five miles per hour. Not bad considering it's the height of rush hour. "I want to get to know you, all of you. And if that means an apartment you're ashamed of, then I'll be the one to tell you I love it, because it's where you are. And I want to be where you are, or I hope we're working up to that."

"I hope so, too." His tone is low, and there's a plea in it. "Give me time, would you? This isn't easy for me."

"That I can do, Ash," I answer, moving my hand to his leg.

"Thanks. So, tell me, has your dad always coached?" It's not an unexpected question, since I admitted my dad owns a boat. And when he sees it, he'll probably have more questions.

"He played in the NFL for ten years. He invested well, plus both he and my mother come from money. He works hard, and now he's at the stage in his life where he can play harder." Ash stays silent. "But my family's money doesn't define me. I was happy to be a starving artist, doing what I love. But, Kate found me when I was in college, and it gave me a leg up early on."

"Thanks for being honest with me. I guess it would have been easier to keep some of this truth to yourself, and you didn't. And that's everything."

Ash moves his fingers to my hand, as we turn from 99 to the 509, and we're closer to the marina. "Is it near the Space Needle?"

"A couple miles, give or take," I reply, turning to his profile. His cheekbones are elegantly carved, his lips full. His black hair glistens like polished shoes. He has a gentle nature, maybe a product of growing up alongside two women. Nature versus nurture is always up for debate, but it would be my guess. "Hey, do you have any ink?"

He lets out a small hiss. "Hell no. The idea is great. I love it on other men, but I'm scared to death of needles. I have a friend who is a very successful tattoo artist and wanted me on board to do flash and originals with his first shop. I really wanted to work there, and it would have been good money, but

the idea made me nauseous, and I fainted on my first customer.”

I howl at his story, and I find that I’m imagining it in my mind like an old family movie.

“What’s so funny?” he teases, squeezing my thigh. “You think it’s funny passing out?”

“No, not funny. Okay, fuck, I won’t lie, it’s a little funny, but I’m the same way. I can’t handle needles. My dad is like that, too, but Liam has ink. He reined it in because he’s in the world of finance, and it’s a world where everyone is so straight-laced. But his shoulders and biceps are all tatted up. I drew all the art for him, but could never actually use a human canvas. Too fucking much for me, so I could imagine I’d pass out, too.”

We exit near the Space Needle. I’m still in awe over the genius of its design.

“I’ll never tire of the view.” He’s leaning forward in his seat, taking in the entirety of the architecture marvel.

“I couldn’t agree more. In college, I thought about majoring in architecture. I felt like I needed to have a steady job. But, it was more important to do what I loved,” I admit.

“I had the same thought,” Ash begins, moving his gaze, continuing to stare at the Space Needle when I turn. “I was going to major in industrial design. Took my first course and it was so fucking boring. I have my degree in art education. I love teaching kids, but just not in a school setting.”

We’re close to the marina, and I turn toward the only road leading to it. “Do you teach kids now?”

A smile covers his face. “I volunteer at a local boys and girls club that offers free childcare for parents who work. I love it. But there’s no funding. I don’t get to do more than one or two projects a year, though we work on sketching most of the time.”

I can see it in his eyes, how much excitement he gets from talking about it. I park nearest the boat slip and turn off the car.

“I want to know more about this. Can we revisit this subject later?” I ask.

He leans in to kiss me but pulls back before I can tug him over the console and attack him. “I hope we can revisit *this* later, too.” He’s pointing to us, and I realize he’s speaking about the kiss. “And, I’d love to explore this sooner than later, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think I can make that happen.”

MY BODY IS THRUMMING at the idea of being in a closed space with Ash. My father’s boat certainly affords us some privacy, especially with the shades pulled down. I’m toting the picnic basket, and he’s carrying an insulated bag with two bottles of wine and a heavy blanket. My feet carry me as fast as they can, and I drag Ash behind me.

We step onto the aft part of the boat, and I’ve lost Ash. Not physically—he’s standing right in front of me—but he’s lost in the beauty of the 2019 Jeanneau NC 9. The cabin of the boat isn’t under the water line, but sits at the same level as the stern of the ship.

“Fuck, this is amazing. Does your dad take it out often?”

“Like me, he loves to just sit here, even if he doesn’t leave the marina. Can’t beat the view. But yes. We go out often.”

From the aft of the boat, you can enjoy Mercer Island and the Space Needle. From the bow, you can appreciate the beautiful water view.

I drop the picnic basket, and he pulls me near him. He’s the aggressor this time, and I find I like him manhandling me, walking me backward into the cabin of the boat.

“This is the third date, right?” He speaks against my skin, sending goose bumps throughout my entire body.

“Yeah, it is. Why?”

He pulls back taking a few steps away from me, and his gaze lazily roves up and down my body.

“I don’t know. Isn’t there a rule about third dates? Don’t you think we’ve suppressed our desires long enough?” He stalks toward me when I let out a deep chuckle.

“Considering I normally fuck on the first date, then in a way, I guess we have. But I normally don’t have second dates.”

“If we do fuck tonight, will we see each other again, or is this it?” he asks.

Like a summer storm, I’m both impulsive and volatile. I pull him to me, fierce with need and want. “I can’t NOT see you. So, when we fuck, this isn’t the end, not by a long shot.”

“Good, and just so you know, the rougher the better.” His grin changes, and his hooded eyes flame.

“Well, it just so happens I like some rough sex, too. But I can be gentle at times also.” I rake my eyes over his lean, hard body.

“So, are we done talking?” he asks. He had come across subservient before, but with the idea of sex, he’s a completely different person.

“Bossy, are we?” I ask, but his body is pressed into me, and I’m barely able to focus.

“No, but I’ve never wanted a person like I want you. So, what are you going to do about it? Take charge, or should I just drop to my knees and blow you?”

“Oh, fuck, Ash, how the hell can I argue with you? Do as you wish.”

He doesn’t hesitate, falling before me. I attempt to help him, but he slaps my hands. “I got it from here, Mr. James.”

His fingers unbuckle my belt and unbutton my jeans. He slowly unzips my pants, prolonging my anticipation. I fidget with my fingers and bounce on my toes, as if this will make things proceed quicker.

“Patience, my young Padawan.”

“As if I didn’t think you were already sexy, you’re quoting *Star Wars*. Holy fuck.”

He pushes down my jeans but my boxers still cover my raging cock. “Shit, I can’t wait to have this in me.”

He’s a bottom. I’d not asked, but I’m not surprised, although my guess is he’s a power bottom.

“And you can’t make me come if you want me to fuck that ass.”

He tips his eyes up toward me. “We have all night, right?” he asks.

“Um, yeah, we do.” I’d never thought we’d stay overnight, but I’m not against it. Actually, the idea has me dizzy with so many ideas. We can fuck *several* times.

“I have nowhere to be in the morning,” he says, and it’s my turn to be bossy. I push down my boxers, precum leaking from the tip of my cock.

“If we’re doing this several times, we better get busy.”

My dick bobs at his eye level. “This cock is a vision.” His focus is on the end of my cock, and I know what he’s staring at.

“Holy baby Jesus, it’s fucking Christmas.”

He gawks at my Prince Albert.

He points to my very erect penis, and I can’t help but laugh. “And why am I just finding this out? How did you get this with your fear of needles?”

“Yeah, surprise! But I’ll go into the whole sordid story later, ‘kay?”

His eyes stay fixed on it. “You sure as shit are going to have to fuck me tonight with that masterpiece.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

He doesn’t look away, and I enjoy every ounce of curiosity painted on his face.

He leans in, and the tip of his tongue laps up my pre-cum. I suck in a deep breath. His connection with me is fucking everything.

His mouth covers my cock, and between his tongue and the suction, I reach for his head, pushing it forward. Yeah, he gets the clue I want him to deep-throat me, and it's what he does.

“Good boy, Ash. You're such a fucking good boy, baby.”

His pace increases, and I know I'll paint his throat with my cum. But he slows down. I can't blame him; the best things come when we're patient. Not that I'm patient. I thrust my cock into his mouth, and he again slows down just in time. Oh, the sadistic bastard is taking something out of my own playbook. He's an edger. I love to dish it out but hate being on the receiving end.

“Your mouth on my cock is amazing. I want more days like this.”

I've not hidden my intentions. We're not a one and done. The chemistry is more than I can explain. It transcends understanding.

I thrust my cock deep in the back of his throat. His strokes speed up, and he's not stopping this time. “As I said earlier, I'm gonna paint your throat with my cum, baby, so be sure to pull out in case...”

But he doesn't, and I peak with a ferocity I've never known, my release streaming from my cock just as I warned and promised.

“Oh, fuck, baby.” He releases my cock, and I fall to the floor with him, pulling his head to mine, and I can't wait to taste my flavor on him. My mouth crashes to his. My hands hold his cheeks tight, his arms are wrapped around me, and we're plastered to each other. I won't let go. I don't think I can. My composure is absolutely destroyed with the need I have for Ashton Brooks. Our night isn't over. *Right now*, isn't over.



Ashton

HE PULLS BACK, and it takes everything in my body to let him.

“It’s your turn, baby.”

I could tell him I did all of this for his pleasure without the need for a payback. It’s the truth, but fuck, if he wants to blow me, I’m not opposed to it.

“You okay?” I ask, scared he may say more.

“You tasted me, now it’s my turn to taste you, Ash. I can’t wait to see your beautiful cock.”

“Okay,” I say hesitantly, “but not until you tell me about your piercing. I have to know.”

His deep chuckle radiates through his whole body. “Okay, short version, I got drunk and was dared. When you meet my brother, you’ll get it.”

I accept his quick answer. He stares at my lips as we lean into one another. And if his lips crashing against my lips is any indication of what his mouth can do, then sign me the fuck up. He gropes for a blanket on one of the couches flanking either side of us, placing it behind me then gently easing me down on it.

“Track pants are so convenient to remove, baby,” he croons, pulling them like they’re the table cloth and I’m the

table. He stares shamelessly at my cock. I may have no piercings adorning my penis, but he clearly likes what he sees. I tug my hoodie and T-shirt over my head, and his eyes lock on my pierced nipples. Funny, two men with piercings who are afraid of needles.

“How do you have piercings when you hate needles so much?” He mimics my earlier words with a smartass grin.

“My friend with the tattoo business needed some experience. Let’s just say a bottle of whiskey and five hundred dollars later, I was his guinea pig. It’s when I got my septum pierced too.”

His eyes move south, to my cock.

“Fuck, that’s the most beautiful cock I’ve ever laid eyes on, and that says a lot since I look at my cock every day and always thought it was mighty pretty. However, I could stare at yours all day.”

He sees something he likes, and it boosts my ego. With his hand, he starts to stroke it. Long and lazy caresses have my cock jumping, and I’m as hard for him as a steel pipe.

“Do I make you hard, Ash?”

I can barely speak but utter, “Fuck, you know the answer. Look at my cock. It wants anything you want to give him.”

His body is parallel over mine, and he keeps himself up with his one free arm.

“It’s a good thing I want to give you everything of me. Every fucking thing of mine is yours, Ash.”

His words are sweet. I thought he was more the power top, but I’m a bossy bottom, and he seems to like it.

“Tell me what you want, Ash. Be exact, because I’ll do whatever you say. Nothing is off limits.”

I want everything with him, right now. Every fucking thing, but I start out slow. Well, as slow as I can get with his body over mine.

“Your mouth on my cock is a good start. Any way you want to. I need you now, Noah. So fucking bad.”

He pushes up on his knees, only to shift down to settle himself between my legs. “I was hoping you’d say that, baby.”

He lowers his mouth to my cock, and I expect he’ll lick the precum from my tip, but he dives in face first and takes me deep. I curl my fingers into the short spikes of his hair and search for pleasure points, anything to return the favor for what he’s doing to my aching dick.

He moves his hand under my dick and begins massaging my balls. He’s not edging me, not like I had with him. He’s giving me pleasure now. His hands trace a path from my balls to my ass. He lays his hand near my hole, and the orgasm comes on me long and hard. He removes his mouth from my cock midstream and my seed spills all over my stomach.

“I always wondered if I was a whore for dick, but seeing my hard work gush from your beautiful cock like the fucking piece of art it is, I think *I am a whore*, for you.”

He dips his finger into my cum, smearing it over my body. Lifting one of my legs over his head, with my cum as natural lubricant, his long finger enters me. He wastes no time finding my P-spot, and pumps in and out. He’s playing dirty, but dirty is what I love.

“Oh, fuck, baby. Yeah, right there.” I gyrate my hips, giving him more access to me.

“I’m just getting you ready for later, if you still want my cock.”

“How is that even a question? Fuck yeah, I want your cock, and sooner than later, Noah James.”

“I’ll give you everything.”

He’s not done, shifting his body so he can access my rim. My head falls back when his tongue swipes across the ultrasensitive spot. I don’t share this intimate act often with another, but this is Noah. My unexplained connection is just that. And I want to go in deep, and quick and fast with him.

His tongue traces over my rim, and sensuous bursts of ecstasy fill me. I don't think I can come again, but he's just given me a gift.

He lifts up to look into my eyes. "I hope that was okay with you, Ash. I find I don't want to hold back with you, baby."

"And I find, Noah James, I don't want you to hold back with me."

WE CLEAN UP, and I'm back in my track pants. He's grabbed for a pair of sweats he keeps on the boat. I don't have the words to describe the contentment I feel while we sit on the stern, my body leaning up against his. He has a basket of grapes, berries, salami, pepperoni, crackers, cheeses, and wine. We're hungry, for both food and round two.

"There's not a wrong answer here, Ash. But we can fool around a little more, enough that I'll be okay to drive after the wine, we can go back to my loft, or we can stay here all night."

I've never been on this type of boat before, the sea air is comforting, and I want to wake up with the gentle roll of the waves rocking us and Noah's arms around me.

"I'd love to stay here, if that's okay, and your dad is all right with it."

"Oh, believe me, if they knew I was here with a guy I've seen more than once, they'd probably gift me the boat as they plan our wedding and future children."

I pop a berry in my mouth, and when he doesn't continue, I raise a questioning brow his way. He looks absolutely appalled. "Shit, Ash, that would be *their* words. Forget I said it."

"But we're starting hot and heavy, as you mentioned. Do you think you scare me? Anything you say about us, as an *us*, doesn't scare me."

“Yeah, but I never want to push you.”

I tip his chin to mine. “Let’s get something straight, Noah James,” I say, beginning with the same sentence he said to me the night we met. “You don’t scare me. Anyway, if your mom is anything like my mom, she just wants to see you happy.”

He snorts next to my ear. Even his fucking snorts are sexy.

“It’s more like my mother wants grandkids.”

I sip my wine, this time, in wine glasses, though I prefer the simplicity of the red solo cups.

“Well, my mother does, too. Do you want kids one day, Noah?” I ask.

He lets out a long deep breath. “I think so. I mean, it’s something I want to share with my partner, or husband, if he wants kids, too. But if I found the right guy for me, and he’s against it, it’s not a deal breaker.”

He can’t see it, but a smile comes before I give it permission.

“What about you? Do you want kids, Ash?”

He moves his face around me, staring into my eyes. “I do. And I feel the same way. I won’t push it on the man I love if he doesn’t, but with my volunteer work at the boys and girls club, I always thought I’d adopt from the system. There are so many great kids in need of a good home.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right; we were going to table that for later. Tell me about your volunteer work.”

“It’s such a big part of my life. I’d volunteer more, if there were better resources. I love it. Like I said earlier, I have my degree in art education, but I don’t want to conform to a curriculum like I’d have to in a school setting. So, until my art takes off, I teach there, prepare ridiculous coffee orders, and now, it looks as if I’ll be sucking your cock in my down time.” While I speak that last sentence, he shifts and drops to his knees in front of the back seat of the boat.

“Your dream job is teaching art to underprivileged children. Be still my heart.” He kisses my hand. It’s simple but

intimate. “You’re fucking amazing, Ash. I’d love to go with you, if I’m allowed to.”

He leans forward and wraps his arms around my middle, resting his head on my chest. “You’re the one that is fucking amazing, baby.”

Noah pulls me down to the floor of the boat, bringing our wine with him. “I guess the good thing about staying over tonight is we can drink as much as we want.”

We toast to everything we’ve just discussed. But we’re not over, not tonight and if I have my way, not ever.

HE’S WASHING THE DISHES, and I find it’s a good time to disappear to the bathroom. I’m hopeful that tonight is the night. With Noah, I find I can jump off a cliff, and I’m protected because he’s my safety net.

Three dates is all it’s taken for my heart to fall for him.

I came prepared with condoms and lube. I don’t top, not if I can help it. And it seems like Noah is happy to top for me. I take the time to prep myself, stretching my tightness. I want this to be a beautiful and a fucking hot moment in the history of us. Yeah, I may be getting ahead of myself, but nothing that Noah has said gives me false hope. He wants to see where this goes.

There’s a knock on the door. The bathroom is small, and it’s right off the tiny galley inside the boat.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m good. Are all the blinds closed?”

There’s a chuckle that reverberates off the door. His chuckles are sexy AF.

“Yeah, baby. Everything is locked up and secured tightly.”

I’m naked, and I figure there’s no sense in getting dressed. I push out of the tiny bathroom, and his eyes drop down to my

penis, hunger flaring in their depths.

“Oh, fuck. You’re ready to get down to business right now.” His arm wraps around me. “And I’m so fucking down for it.” He tugs me out of the galley, bringing me closer to him and the couch he’s made into a bed while I was preparing myself.

“I feel overdressed, baby.”

I rake my eyes up and down his body. “Yeah, I’d say you are.”

He happily strips, and fast. I’m unable to enjoy the process, but then again, I’m staring at his trail leading down to his dick and his V, which is nicely designed, if I say so myself.

“I love your body, Noah James.”

His wink has my heart leaping. “Ditto, baby.”

He steps up close to me, and we’re skin to skin. When he picks me up, I wrap my legs around his waist, marveling at his strength. His muscles flex with my weight on him, but his chiseled cheekbones are what I focus on. Kneeling onto the bed, he gently places me on it. His body is parallel to mine, and he takes a moment as he stares into my eyes.

“Are we crazy?”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific,” I say with a snicker.

“How close we’ve become in a matter of days.”

“If it’s crazy, then we can be crazy together.”

My response seems to be the correct one, and he covers my body with his. I never imagined that anyone’s touch would feel so inviting, like a home. But his does.

Our kiss deepens, and we’re too lost in each other to think rational thoughts. I never dreamed that someone’s touch on my skin could be so electrifying.

He pulls back, and his lips curve up into a large smile.

“You’re so responsive every time my body moves closer to yours.”

His fingers massage my head as he tenderly looks into my eyes.

“I can’t wait to be one with you, Ash. This is different. *You’re* different.”

No one can convince me otherwise, either.

I move my hand down our bodies, and I begin to stroke his cock. “Don’t worry, I want you inside of me as much as you want it, too,” I assure him. “I’ve already prepped myself,” I add, letting him know that there’s nothing stopping us from being together. “But also, I can wait, and make out with you more. There’s a lot of things I’d like to do to your body, baby.”

“Yeah?” he asks. “Well, good thing we have all night and the next night and the next night and then after that, more nights together.”

His answer is everything. “Then what are you waiting for? Take me, Noah. Make us one together. I have a feeling tonight is going to change everything.”

He pushes my body down. “I love that you took the initiative, but next time, I must see you stretch yourself, baby.”

Why is it hot thinking about him watching me as I stretch my hole for his cock? “No problem, Noah. No fucking problem at all.”

He settles himself between my legs, kissing the skin on the inside of my thighs. His whispers are intelligible. “I want you so much, Ashton.”

“And I want you too.”

He flips my legs up, my ass in the air. “Your ass is so sexy, and this hole, when I fill it up, there will be no doubt we belong together.”

“There’s no doubt now, baby, no doubt at all.” My words come out as a breathy whisper.

His laughter is the prelude to the melody that will play on continuous repeat for us.

“Tell me something about you. Something I don’t know.” There’s a pop in the air. It’s distinct. He has the lube. His finger breaches me, and it’s welcomed.

“You trying to distract me?” I ask.

“No, I want you to feel every part of me, whether it’s my finger or my cock. I need to know more about you, while I bring you a little pleasure.”

My mind isn’t firing on all cylinders, and I try to think of a time I’ve been this happy.

“My mother didn’t have much money, but one time, she brought us down to the Seattle Center. All I wanted to do for my ninth birthday was go up into the Space Needle.”

“Yeah? And?”

“I didn’t know this until several years later, but she took extra shifts at this bar her friend owned to make it happen. She hated working there, guys’ hands were all over her, but she worked two weekends to save for tickets to the Space Needle and lunch downtown. It was the best day, spent with my mom and sister.”

He withdraws his fingers and works his way back over to my face.

“It was one of the happiest days. But, my mom gave me so many good memories. And I don’t know if it’s because she worked so hard, or money was always tight, but it seemed extra special because she was creative with how we spent time together. At Christmas, Mom would make us hot cocoa. We had thermoses we’d use just for the holidays, and she’d pop us her special popcorn and we’d drive around for hours, looking at Christmas lights. It was one of our favorite times of the year. Plus, she’d work at that crappy bar in order to buy us Christmas presents.”

He’s listening to every single word that falls from my mouth, and my heart feels like it’s going to burst from my chest.

“I can’t wait to meet your mom. She clearly loves you with her last breath.”

“I didn’t mean to get so sappy. But not only do you want me, you want to know everything about me.”

Noah moves down my body, kissing every part on the way to his destination. “You’re right. I want to know every fucking thing about you. How you writhe under my body, or the moans you make when I fill you up with my cock, and how your face contorts when I make you orgasm.”

Holy shit. How does he always know what to say?

“Noah, I need you.”

“And you’ll get what you want.”

His body slides down me, his lips on my cock. They begin to suck the tip, then he lowers his mouth all the way down, and he’s neither fast nor slow. After a minute or two, the pace picks up. A tremor begins to build inside of me, but he seems to have a sixth sense and pulls off just in time.

“Sadistic bastard,” I groan. His head bobs up, and I can see the grin. Yeah, I think he likes pushing me, just to deny me an orgasm.

“Yeah, well, don’t worry, there’s more where that came from.” His long arms reach up to caress my face. “You’re going to ruin me, Ashton Brooks.”

“I think you may ruin me, Noah James.”

He pushes my legs up, leaning down. He’s not rimming me. No, as I listen to him, and feel his mouth on me, he’s kissing where his cock is about to enter.

“I want this to be good for you, Ash.”

“And it will, Noah, because it’s you.”

He slides on the condom. His cock sits at my hole, and he presses forward slightly, the lube in his hands. He’s generous with it on both his cock and where he’s kissed me.

“If I hurt you...”

“You won’t hurt me,” I assure him.

He’s gentle, breaching my tightness, working up to fully filling me up. I moan at his delicious intrusion.

“Good fucking holy heavens, you’re so tight, in the best way,” he hisses. With his other hand, he dances his fingers down my thigh then back up to my balls with each thrust.

We look into each other’s eyes, never breaking contact. I’m hypnotized by his touch, removing any doubt that Noah isn’t special. Because he is.

His movements are urgent, but intentional, and my prostate has never been happier.

“I want to stay in you all night, baby.”

I would never be opposed to it. I burn his face into my memory, and the way it tenses with pleasure every time he moves in and out. His fingers dance up my stomach, stopping at my chest. They flick the studs in my nipples and it only serves to revive my pleasure with each push. His speed increases, and I grip his arms. I’m not ready for this to be over.

“Slow down. I want you in me longer.”

“Bossy bottom,” he replies, but he does as I ask. “Don’t worry, I’m not ready for this to be over anytime soon.”

I reach for his chest, but set my hand over his heart. It’s strumming, each beat faster and faster.

“My heart beats for you, Ash,” he whispers, kissing a trail down my jaw.

Oh, my fucking heart can’t handle any more sweetness. I’m not used to it. But, I’m finding it’s just one way he’s capturing my heart.

“I feel so close to you now.” He brushes the back of his knuckles over my cheek.

I can’t speak. I’m lost in the moment, and every bit of resolve I’ve built up over the years, when it comes to giving a guy my heart, crumbles.

My body won't last, and as my balls begin to tighten, I realize I can't hold it in.

“Fuck, I lied. Ash, oh, Ash! I'm about to come, baby.”

I can't open my mouth to tell him the same, but when my release splatters his stomach and mine, he begins to come, his face tightening in pleasure and turning a light shade of pink.

But his smile never falters.



Noah

MY FINGERS WRAP around his short hair, so thick that it immediately stands on its ends. He's on his back, and I'm propped up on my side, my elbow giving me elevation to watch him as he breathes.

"I can feel you staring at me, and it's a bit freaky," he utters, sleepiness making his voice gruff.

"Just a little freaky?" I question.

His smile, with his eyes closed, is peaceful, and I want to re-explore what we experienced last night.

"Maybe it's a little sweet, too, you watching me when you could be sleeping."

I nuzzle my nose down toward his. "I don't want to sleep, Ash. Believe me, I have better ways to spend our time."

He rolls over before he opens his eyes to examine my face. "Really? Well, I have nowhere to be today, so..."

My hand moves under the sheets, coming to rest on his muscular abs. "How do you stay in such great shape?"

He slowly opens his eyes. "I'm about to show you how I'm going to stay in good shape after today, that's for sure."

I roll him over, and he's on his back again, as I rest on top of him. "Yeah, this may be my favorite form of exercise, too,

Ash. By the way, I could give two shits about morning breath. I want every part of you.”

He flashes me a smile, and I see so much of me in him. Opposites attract, they say, but I don’t think it’s the case with us.

“Kate may hate us. I should be working, but all I can think about is your ass, your tongue, your mouth, and everything that we can do to one another,” I mutter before my mouth crashes to his and I’m lost in us, but he quickly pulls away.

“Did you hear that?” he asks, and his eyes flash with fear.

“What?” But before the word actually clears my mouth, I do hear it.

“Sure, Dad. And yes, I’ve tried to call Noah. He’s not picking up. I assume he’s busy, *very busy*.”

“Fuck,” I swear under my breath. “It’s my brother.” What the fuck is he doing down at the marina on a Thursday morning? He never takes a day off, not when his goal is to become a partner by the time he’s twenty-eight.

“Shit, grab me my pants, babe,” Ash whispers, scanning the room frantically.

“Noah Alexander, you have two minutes to make yourself decent and about ten minutes before Mom and Dad arrive. So, I’d certainly hurry the hell up.”

Fuck. If it isn’t already bad enough, my brother cockblocking me this morning, my parents are on their way! No—they can’t meet Ash yet. Mom will come across as the mom she’s always been, and Ash will run for the fucking hills.

I’m up and off the bed, and I throw Ash’s track pants at him as I pull up my own sweats I’d tossed in a corner last night.

“Sorry,” I offer, and poor Ash looks like a deer in the headlights.

I pitch my voice louder. “Hey, little brother, can you please do something to delay Mom and Dad?”

I tug at Ash's hands, wrapping my fingers in his, moving him into my space.

"Yeah, let me see what I can do," he replies easily.

I lean in close and speak lowly. "Ash, baby. You'd meet Liam soon anyway. He's my other half, after all. He'll love you." I know this because I'm falling for Ashton every second I'm around him.

Liam begins to yell again from the other side of the door. "I told Mom there was no wine or pop, and I blamed it on you, but that should give you at least twenty minutes."

I tip Ash's head to mine. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I guess I have to be."

I wrap my hands around his body, pulling him against me. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. You gave me a beautiful night."

I walk us both over to the door, opening it slightly, staring at my brother. "Be nice, William," I warn with my best glare. He opens it wider and steps through.

"Fuck, it smells like sex in here." He fans his hands in front of his face then takes a look at me, then at Ash, who is still wrapped in my embrace, then back at me. "Way to go, big brother."

I smack his head with the tip of my fingers.

"Hey, I'm being nice! And I'll even clean up the semen coated sheets, asshole, so you can avoid Helicopter Evelyn."

Ashton pulls out of my embrace. "Hey, I'm Ashton Brooks."

He extends his hand, and Liam stares at it. "If that was wrapped around my brother's willy, I'd rather shake your hand another time."

Ashton jerks his hand back, and it takes less than a second for the three of us to break out into hysterical laughter. I push my brother, but tug Ash back into my space.

“Sorry, babe, he’s an asshole, but you’ll find out he’s at least a lovable asshole.”

Ash’s face is as red as Liam’s hair. “I’m sorry, Ashton,” my brother begins. “I couldn’t resist. But fuck, you must be someone special. What was this, date three?” He looks at me. “That’s pretty incredible, Noah.”

“And you’re cut off from talking, William Andrew James. We’re going. And you have to promise to behave next time you meet Ash.”

My brother’s laugh is a cackle. “And where is the fun in that?” He directs his attention back to Ash. “So, Ashton, Noah tells me you’re an artist, too? Do you draw crazy scary shit like him?”

“Nah, we have different gifts, but he’s fucking talented.”

“Yeah, my entire apartment is decorated in his art, along with my body.”

He pulls up his shirt to show Ash his stomach and perfect abs. “Okay, that’s enough. So, you have this?” I point to the bed.

“Yeah, but you fucking owe me, got it?”

I flip him off and drop my arm over Ashton’s body, taking our picnic basket with us.

“And, Ashton, it was nice meeting you. Be sure to keep Sunday free. You two are having dinner with me.”

My brother can be a lot at times, just like our mom. “Oh, is that right?”

“Yep. Six p.m. Now go before Helicopter Evelyn lands.”

I don’t have to be told twice, and we leave the boat. Holding his hand, I tug him quickly on the dock and up the boardwalk leading to the parking lot. I toss the basket in the back, hurrying before my mother can swoop in and scare Ashton away.

We’re out of the marina before I speak. Or have the ability to speak.

“So, that just happened.”

Ashton, who is staring out the front window, turns his attention to me, but before I can calm him, he begins giggling.

“I was about to ask you if *that just happened*. But, fuck. Your brother is...”

“Certifiably insane, to tell you the truth. And the last thing I wanted was you meeting my mother.”

“Helicopter Evelyn?” he asks.

“Yeah, a helicopter has nothing on our mom. There’s a reason we would escape to Parson’s Park. Don’t get me wrong—my mother is the best. We were her everything. We still are. She’s overbearing, but no one loves us like our mom.”

“By the way, I don’t know if your brother was serious, but...”

“About dinner? He was.” I look in my rearview mirror, turning from the main road of the marina, as I see my parents’ car turn from a different road. Mom and Dad were quicker than we thought. We cut that close. “But, don’t worry, babe, I’ll get out of dinner on Sunday.”

He reaches his hand over the console, and it rests on my knee. Dancing his fingers up my thigh, resting right under my balls, his laugh reaches deep in his chest. It affects me more than his touch near my cock, and that’s a lot, considering he’s about to make me explode. “I don’t want to forget about it. He’s important to you, so...unless you’re not in this like me...”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Ash. I want to share every part of my life with you, baby. My parents will be a while, just because Mom is so much. But my brother, absolutely—and I hope that includes your family, too.”

He’s rubbing his fingers over my cock, and I’m three seconds from pulling over and hauling him into my back seat.

“Yeah. My mom is crazy, but not invasive, or should I say, not *that* invasive.”

“No one can be as invasive as my mother. But please don’t get the wrong impression of the one and only Evelyn James. She’s loving and has always put us first.”

He moves his fingers from my attention-starved dick. “I’m not scared of your mom, Noah. And I’ll go on your time table, but your brother? I’d love to have dinner with him this Sunday.”

I groan. “You know he’s going to share every little embarrassing moment in my life with you, right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. But, don’t worry. Tia will do the same.”

I’m driving without a destination. “I’m not really sure where we’re going. Have any idea?”

“I need a shower. As your brother said, we smell of sex. Good thing we didn’t meet your parents,” he teases.

“Yeah, I’m with you on that. So, I’m about to suggest something, but it doesn’t have to mean anything. We’re closer to my place than yours. Do you want to go back to my loft? Are you game? And I think my clothes will fit you if you want to get out of your dirty ones.”

We’re at a stoplight. I bring my gaze around to him, and I catch him staring at my profile.

“You just want to get me out of my clothes, don’t you?” His lips part in mock surprise, and the smile on his face and in his eyes carries a sensuous spark.

I let out an amused grin. The easy flirting, the funny banter, and our desperate need for one another...it’s more than I could have ever imagined. I want nothing more than continued time with him, as I memorize his body. There’s more to learn about Ashton Brooks— his laugh, his smiles, the way he takes his coffee, and about a million other things I find I must know when it comes to him.

“Yeah, you got me, Ash. So, my place, or—?”

“Your place, Noah,” he answers. “I want to spend the day at your place, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s exactly the question I’m asking and the answer I want, Ash.” But I want so much more when it comes to him.

THE OLD WAREHOUSE has underground parking. Every level has four lofts on each floor. I wanted the best view of Seattle, and so I snagged the top floor, facing southwest. On a clear day, I can see the ocean.

“Fuck, Noah. This is amazing.” He hasn’t been to my place yet. He’s only seen the garage, the elevator, and the hallway, so far. And he thinks those are amazing?

Ash is embarrassed by his living situation. I don’t need a degree in psychology to understand that. But I don’t want my place to further his insecurities.

I back him into the corner of my door. “I have worked hard for what I have. I can admit that, but I realize my road has been easier than other artists. Meaning, I never want you to think money and status matter to me. You. I want you.”

He hides his face against my shoulder but says nothing.

“You may be a power bottom in bed, but I’m telling you right now, I’ll smack that pretty ass of yours if you ever act ashamed of who you are. Because I love what I see.”

He peeks up over his long eyelashes. It’s so fucking cute. In this moment, he’s not simply two inches shorter than me but he’s my sweet man, who looks at me with puppy dog eyes.

“How do you get me so well after such a short amount of time?”

“I don’t know. But fuck, you’ve never looked cuter. Puppy dog eyes get me every single time.”

His smile is boyishly loving. It reinforces the gentle nature in him and the insecurities that he lives with. “I’ll take every fucking negative thought of yours, Ash, and turn it around.”

I want to make him the best version of himself, as I strive to make myself the best version of me for him, and him alone.

“Come on. Before I fuck you against the wall.”

His boyish grin turns to out-and-out mischief. “Can we do that one day? I’m all about people watching.”

The protective nature that surfaces is out of character for me, making me growl. “Never, I’ll never share you.”

“Ah, my guy is the big, bad, burly caveman type. It’s like you’re saying ‘Me, Tarzan; You, John.’”

I place my key in the door and shove it open. “Tarzan and John?” I ask.

We cross over into my loft and he points to his apparent erection. “I’m clearly not Jane, as you can see.”

I back him against one of my leather couches. “That you aren’t, big guy.” It’s cheesy, but it makes us both laugh as I whirl him around and shed him of his bottoms in one theatrical yank.

“Okay, so I’m down for this.” He laughs, and I drop to my knees.

“You mean, *I’m* down for this,” I retort, and the both of us continue to laugh over the childish nature of it all.

But I have more on my mind and reach around his body and grab for his cock, and there’s absolutely nothing child-like about Ashton.

“How is it that I want you again already?” he questions.

“It’s been at least twelve hours. Let’s help each other out,” I add, my mouth watering for a taste. Parting my lips, I barely touch the tip of his cock, leaking pre-cum but fuck, he’s beautiful. Staring up at him through hooded eyes, his hands begin to massage my head, and I moan with his touch.

My mouth takes him deep, with his groans mixing with mine.

“Shit, Noah, I won’t last long. I *can’t* last long, not with your perfect tongue and your perfect mouth.”

I hold onto his hips, which are driving his cock further into my mouth, as I take him deeper and deeper. But I want more

than just to make him come by my lips alone.

I push to my feet, and his whimpers are replaced by a long sigh.

I drop a kiss on his nose. “Stay put, and I’ll be back in a second, hon.”

Digging around in the junk drawer in the kitchen, I’m back in moments with a condom and lube. Dropping back to my knees, I squirt a large dab of lube onto my fingers. My lips wrap around his cock again and I pull his hips away from the couch. My finger breaches the cleft of his ass and slips inside easily, so I add another, while increasing my speed.

“Oh, fuck. You’re going to make me come. And your fingers! They feel so good. Make me come, babe.”

My eyes turn upward, connecting with eyes so similar to mine.

“Holy baby Jesus....” Ash whispers.

His orgasm comes on quick and strong, and I swallow every part of him. But we’re not done.

I twirl him around, and with the help of my fingers, I push inside of him, having already slipped a condom on in the kitchen. I hate condoms, but I don’t go against my rule of safe sex. “Sorry, this will be quick. Embarrassingly quick.”

“No, babe, do what you need to do. I’m here for the ride.”

My hips move in rhythm with his, and I bite his ear, his neck, and his shoulders, enough to leave marks for him to admire later.

“Yeah, just like that. Baby, I love every part of this.”

I rut against him, somehow inching deeper with each push.

“Fuck me harder, Noah! I can take it faster, and rougher.”

“Fucking bossy bottom,” I retort, giving his ass a light swat.

His ass clenches in response and I see stars. “I like spankings, too,” he returns quickly.

“I can tell. What about being tied up, blindfolded, toys?” I ask, pounding against his gorgeous, curved ass.

“Yeah, to all of that. I want it all. Now fuck me hard and rough and make me remember your dick in me all day. Fuck, why don’t you just make it all week long?”

And I do as he asks, pushing farther and faster, until I come. But fuck I hate these condoms.

“OKAY, so after that, I *really* need a shower,” Ashton quips as we lie naked on a blanket that I spread out on the hardwood floors.

“Yeah, you and me both. And maybe afterward, I can give you a tour of this place, or at least show you where the bed is, so maybe next time we can make it that far, yeah?” I offer.

“Oh?” He rolls over onto me. “Are you saying there’s going to be a next time? I mean, you’re quite full of yourself if you think I’ll put out like that again.”

Cupping his face with my hands, I kiss him, our tongues thrashing against each other. I pull back, a smile on both our faces. “Yeah, I’m that confident, my good sir, that I’m going to fuck that ass again, and most likely today.”

“Oh, we’ll see how that confidence plays out, my good sir,” he mocks, throwing my words back at me.

“You are my good sir, and a good piece of ass, and a bossy but sexy bottom, and you do this thing with your tongue that I’m rather fond of.”

“And you, my fine sir, are a lippy top, who knows how to suck my balls, my cock, and my nipples. You also can ride out an orgasm, and more so, you’re starting to win over my heart,” he proclaims, and the last part is so cute my heart actually flutters in my chest.

“No fair! Yours was sweeter than mine,” I tease.

“Are you saying that sucking balls, a cock, and nipples is considered sweet? Then what the fuck do you consider dirty?” he questions.

I push back and straddle his waist. “Oh, I’ll make it my mission to do as many dirty things to you as I can.”

After five minutes of lazy kisses, with our hands roaming each other’s bodies, I pull him off the floor, making our way to the bathroom. But as soon as we get inside, the need arises once more between us, and we spend a long time “cleaning” the other up.



A shton

NOAH PUSHES me up against the large shower stall the second the water is on. “You ever top?”

I pause at his question. “I need you, again, and you’re too sore to take me. I don’t bottom often, but I want you inside of me.”

“Why don’t you let me decide if I’m too sore?” I sass, but he’s not wrong.

He quiets me with a kiss, enough for my jolly rod to come out and play, growing against him. “If you don’t top, that’s okay. We can do other stuff. But, I won’t ever hurt you.”

Something in my heart changes in an instant. He’s not out for his next release. If he was, he wouldn’t care about my ass, or hurting it. His need for intimacy is real, and I get it, because I want to be just as close to him.

I’m about to ask the obvious question when he produces a little foil packet in his fingers. “Really? That confident?” I arch an eyebrow higher in question.

“Not until I saw the heat in your eyes, baby. But seriously...”

I stop him with a quick kiss. “I don’t top often, but if there’s ever a reason to top, it’s for you. It’s not sex, or not

completely about sex, but being as close to you as I can in this moment.”

His hands cup my face. “I kind of love it when you’re sappy. Let’s be sappy together, because I fucking feel the same way.”

His hands are rough with years of sculpting, but in it, there’s a sense of protection with his touch. Like he’d hurt himself before hurting me, to keep me safe. The muscles rippling under his washboard abs accelerate my desire for him. My eyes stay transfixed on his powerful body, and I find I want nothing more than to be buried in him.

My hand cups his cheek, as light reflects over his ruggedly handsome face like rays of sunshine. “Only you, Noah. I want things with you I’ve never wanted with another. Please tell me you feel the same.”

I hate how needy I am for his reassurance.

“Yeah, Ash. I feel the same way, honey.”

He calls me a bossy bottom, but he’s seen nothing compared with how bossy I am as a top.

I circle his body around, pushing him up against the metal of the industrial shower stall. “You want my cock?”

“Fuck yeah, I do.”

“Then beg for it. Tell me how much you want my cock,” I whisper against his ear, peppering bite marks up and down his earlobe.

“I need the hardness of your cock to split me open. I need your fingers to dig into my skin. When I look into the mirror later, I want to see the imprint of your teeth and fingertips on my body. I have to know, when we’re apart, that you’re thinking of doing this over and over again to me. Maybe even getting off on the idea. And you can show me how much it makes you come when we’re not together.”

“You have a way with words, sweetheart. Ever thought of being a poet, or a writer?” My bites continue down his neck.

Lube is on the same shelf as his shampoo and body wash. I reach for it and squeeze it on my finger. As I pull him tighter against me, I push one finger into his tightness.

His whimpers tell me everything I need to hear. “Oh, fuck. Yeah. More. Give me more. I need more of you.”

He only has to ask and two fingers slide into his now-slippery hole. “You’re so fucking tight. Just think what you’ll feel like when it’s my cock.”

My lips trail kisses up and down his back, and every couple of kisses, I leave a love bite that he can admire later, when I have to go home. The idea of leaving him is already filling me with dread.

“I’m addicted to you, Ash.”

“How?” My question is a breathy whisper against the skin of his back.

“You’re my drug, Ash—already addicted to you, babe.”

His words are everything. His movements, moans, and groans are fucking everything.

“You’re my drug, too, Noah,” I say, placing another finger inside of him. I’m pushing into him, faster, and deeper.

“I need you, Ash. Please, I need your cock inside of me.”

Removing my fingers, I have to pause to hassle with the fucking condom. I should have put it on first; now everything is taking longer because I want him so fucking bad my hands are shaking.

“You tell me to stop and I stop. You got it, Noah?”

“Yes, I won’t need you to, though,” he assures me.

I get it. I wouldn’t have had him stop when he was pushing inside of me the first time, either.

“I’ll make this good for you, baby,” I vow, as I breach the tight ring of muscle and slip into his hot, velvety hole.

“Oh, shit! Yes,” he groans. “Fill me up, fill me the fuck up. Come on, I can take more.”

I stop, almost fully in him, leaning around to see his face. “I’m a bossy bottom, not you. You’ll get what you need from me, baby, I promise.”

I’m slow in my movements, and I work my cock inside of him, pull it back, almost out, only to slowly push it back in. Every moan he makes I burn to my memory, only to repeat the movement again.

“Oh, fuck, you feel amazing, Ash. Yes! Fuck me. Fuck me harder!”

I give into his demand and speed up my motions. With each push and thrust, I’m letting go of my doubt and fear from my past. Nothing is further from the truth when it comes to Noah. Need and desire spark inside of me, and I can’t contain my longing for him.

I buck in and out of his tight hole, his screams of *fuck me harder* playing out in a loop in my mind. He slams his ass back into my hips with each thrust inside of him. My hands hold onto his hips as we find a rhythm with one another. The degree to which he’s responding to me only speeds my own arousal. My body still craves the sensation of his skin against mine. I can’t slow down, but I can’t give in. No, this will ride out as long as my orgasm builds. And I hope it builds for a long fucking time.

“Fuck me, Ashton. Stay inside of me. Don’t pull out. Make me cum.”

His words are labored, but he can speak, whereas I have no words at all. All my strength is consumed by holding onto him and thrusting as far inside as I can get. My own breathing is labored, too. I stop, holding onto him as he holds onto the wall.

I can only delay the inevitable for a few more seconds, and when my desire builds inside of me, and I begin pushing in and out, never leaving him, an ache of need and release flickers inside like a switch, and I don’t hold back. The orgasm comes on long and strong, and my hips slam into his, faltering in rhythm but increasing in intensity.

“Fuck! That—Oh, fuck. I’m coming.” His praises are what I need to stay on my feet a few moments longer. When our orgasms ride through us, we both melt to the floor, still holding onto one another. And we stay this way until the hot water turns cold.

ONCE WE FIND the strength to leave the shower, we lazily towel each other off. He disappears for barely a heartbeat, returning with clothes for the both of us. “Here, I thought gym shorts would work.” He hands me a pair of boxers and a black T-shirt, too.

“Did a fairy appear with clothes for us?” I tease.

He opens the door he disappeared through, and my jaw drops. “This is my walk-in closet. I can access it from the hall or the bathroom.”

This closet would make any woman drool, and it’s as big as my bedroom.

“So, your closet is basically a genie, then, granting your wishes,” I tease. “Fuck, I’ve got to see the rest of this place.”

He tugs me close to his body, with us both dressed. “Let me fix us breakfast. You can snoop around, and afterward, I need a fucking nap. That was not only the best fucking sex of my life, but you drained everything from me. I’m not sure I have enough fluid left in me to make spit.”

Walking toward the door, I wink at him. “Ditto.” He tries to grab me, but I’m too fast.

I’ve only seen a small sitting room off the sliding front door, and a hallway of sorts that sits behind several levels of his loft. Exiting the bathroom, there are rounded steps with a steel banister leading to other parts of his home. There’s an open space tucked behind the first and second level that’s open and empty. It has to be at least another eight hundred square feet. I wonder what he’ll do with that?

I ascend the stairs, and my jaw drops. The first thing that catches my attention are the large industrial windows on the far wall across from where his front sliding door sits. Another level is in front of me, where it's obviously his workspace. On the other side of his art studio is his bedroom—and it's on the second level. There's no privacy from the rest of the space, no walls that make it a room, but a king-size bed sits to the side, with a dresser, and two nightstands. The same railings that are used on the steps line the edge of the platform, preventing anyone from falling the five to six feet to the main floor.

The studio is a circular space in front of the windows. There's easily a thousand square feet on this level. He's neat and tidy, but the drops of dried paint on the floor let you know an artist lives here. Unfinished pieces sit on easels, providing a way to showcase his talents, even if the pieces aren't done. There are two sets of steps that lead to and from his studio, and I take the other set. It's only five steps, but his studio is definitely its own space. There's a desk on the second level, and a small loveseat to the side, making it his home office.

Everything is adorned in rich browns and airy beiges, a neutral palette that brings in the brightness from the outdoors. The railings continue through the entire second floor, and I see two more sets of steps leading to the front of the apartment. A kitchen separates the living room, where Noah took me over his couch, and the gaming room with a pool table nearest the windows.

“Hey, you,” Noah calls for me, while I sneak a peek into the kitchen from the second level.

“Yeah, you're right. The video tour didn't do your place justice. This is fucking awesome. But tell me, what are you going to do with all that open space behind your studio?”

“The loft is so big, almost five thousand square feet. It was empty when I bought it. I designed everything you see, and had a contractor come in and make my dream a reality. I didn't know what to do with that space. It was his idea to keep it open. Because there are windows on the side, I can eventually make it into bedrooms, if it so happens I need them.”

“Like a family?” I ask.

“Yeah, exactly like a family,” he answers. “Now that you’ve seen everything, get your cute little ass down here and watch me cook you breakfast.”

I’m closest to the steps leading to his game room, and round the space to a shirtless Noah, his shorts slung low on his hips. “What are we eating? Because I see something on the menu I like.”

Anything that can hinder the line of sight in the kitchen is pushed against the wall, the only real things in this place enclosing the loft completely. Bacon, eggs, and biscuits are in his arms, bringing them to the large island.

He drops everything on the white quartz countertop and stalks toward me. “Where I could fuck you all the time, my body is about to rebel on me.”

“And here I thought I was the older one in the bunch,” I quip.

He exhales a long and deep sigh. If I’m reading him right, his body language, and the way his lips quirk into a slight smile, I’d say he’s content with me in his space. And I’m more than content in his space.

“You’re going to be my undoing, Ash. And I look forward to every fucking minute. However, after breakfast, we’re going to pick out a show to start binge watching and take a nap to get our energy back. Maybe go for a walk, or drive down to the Seattle Center and people watch. I can fuck you, but more so, I want to get to know you, all of you.”

Sweet baby Jesus, he knows what to say to make every part of me giddy with anticipation.

“Yes! To all of that, as long as you promise me one thing, Noah James.” I caress his stubble on his beautiful face with the back of my knuckles, relishing the sandpapery scrape.

“Yeah. And what is that?”

“As long as we don’t forget how good our bodies feel when you push inside of me.”

His arousal grows between us. “It’s obvious I won’t.” He leans down and kisses me, then retreats to start breakfast. And I stare at his perfect ass the entire time.

“OKAY, to make it fair, let’s write down five shows you haven’t watched, and we’ll pick blindly. If the other person has seen more than a couple of episodes, we’ll pick again.”

I push my plate away from me, because I’m stuffed. Not only is he a beautiful soul, but the man and all his hotness can cook.

“Oh, I like this plan,” I reply, pulling out my phone to look at a list of shows I’ve been meaning to start. I write down five on the sticky notes Noah has given me, and he places them in a bowl, moving the papers around.

“Okay, first one is…” He unfolds it, and I can’t tell which one of us wrote it, since the notes are all the same color. “*Schitts Creek*.” Yes. It’s been a show I’ve planned to watch but haven’t gotten around to. “Sorry, honey, I’ve watched all of the episodes, but I’ll gladly watch it again.”

I wave him off. “The idea is finding something we can start together brand new. So, let’s draw another one.”

He pulls for another piece of paper. “Oh, this is mine. How about *Arrow*? I mean, Oliver Queen is cute.” My face gives it away. “You’ve watched it?” I give him a nod of my head, and he picks again. “Oh, mine again. How about *Outlander*?” I let out a small giggle.

“Fuck, you watched that one, too?” He grabs for another piece of paper. “Okay, this is yours. And I’ve not seen any of the seasons.” I wait to find out what it’ll be, but he tosses all the pieces in the trash, leaving me to guess.

“You’re kind of mean, Noah James.”

“Yeah, well, live with it. The first one in bed is a rotten egg.”

My brows knit together as I watch him hustle to the closest set of steps leading to his bed. “How will we watch TV?”

“Oh, just wait and see. I’m about to blow your mind.”

He runs up the steps, and before I know it, he’s under the covers and pressing buttons on a remote control. A television raises from the back of his dresser drawers in front of the bed, and with another click of the remote, shades cover all the windows.

“What kind of witchcraft is this?”

I’m still standing at the side of the bed, but not for long as he yanks me in next to him. “The best kind of witchcraft, made for hiding away from the world today.”

I can’t argue with his plan. And when he turns on Amazon Prime, I’m happy to see that *Jack Ryan* is starting up. But, I don’t get past the first scene before I peacefully fall asleep in his arms.



Noah

HE'S IN MY CAR, and we're driving south toward his apartment. I wanted him to stay the night. Hell, at this point, I'd keep him forever. Four days. It's been only four days since he appeared in my life, and yet, everything before him seems unimportant. He was made for me.

I never believed in that sort of nonsense in the past. It's the type of sappiness that consumes my brother, not me. I'm the sensible one, but then again, I've never met a person quite like Ash.

"Are you sure I can't twist your arm?" I ask for about the tenth time. Talk about looking desperate.

"I wish I *could*," he answers with a sigh. "I have an early shift at work in the morning, then I've got to spend some time on *The Bride*."

It's his piece he's been stuck on for a while. "You're changing the name, right?" I've not forgotten about the beauty of his strokes, and the expression on her face, as though she was almost haunted.

"Yeah, I'm giving her a story. It's making it easier to see what I've missed. I don't typically plan my pieces in this way. I have the start of an idea, and begin sketching it. But from there, my creativity takes over. But, this piece needs a new approach. So, thanks for the idea."

I want to see where he creates his art. I have to know where he lies his head at night. With Ashton, I want to see it all. But, at least I'm able to drop him off at his apartment complex this time. Baby steps.

"I can't wait to see the finished product." I'm quiet as we hit the 99 and I have him with me for the next thirty minutes.

"I thought I'd be all nervous or embarrassed to show you, *THE Noah James*, my own pieces, but I'm not."

"Really?" I ask. I understand the intimidation. Kate's previous featured artist was a pretentious dick. He hated that she was premiering my work. And I never thought my art stood a chance against his. I never needed anyone's approval, but it's different with Ashton.

"I hope you know you can be yourself around me," I say.

"I think it's when I knew you were something special. I don't have to pretend. And as you get to know more of me, you'll see some of the ugly surface. But, I won't hide it from you."

"And I won't hide my ugly from you either, Ash."

He slides his hand over to my leg, resting it at my knee. Never thought I'd need a person's touch as I do with Ash.

Nearing his apartment, I start thinking. "Hey, so what do you have planned this weekend?" Meaning tomorrow. I want to have the whole weekend with him, until I have to share him with my brother for dinner Sunday night.

"I think I'm going to stick close to home tomorrow night, but Saturday, I'm all yours, if it's what you want?"

"How is that even a question?" I retort, a snort leaving my lips without permission.

I pull over and come to a stop in front of his building. He leans across the console, and gives me a kiss.

"I'll see you Saturday sometime?" I ask.

"Yeah, let's make plans tomorrow night, is that okay?" he questions and slips out of the passenger's seat, rounding the

front of my Mercedes. I roll down the window, and he drops a kiss onto my forehead.

“If I were to kiss you the way I want to, we’d be here forever.”

“And what the hell is wrong with that?” I deadpan.

“See you on Saturday?” Ash asks, ignoring my pout as I push out my lower lip. “You’re adorable when you pout, you know. Anyway, what do they say? Distance makes the heart grow fonder?”

“Yeah, I never liked that fucking saying.” I’m teasing. Well, mostly teasing.

“Okay, get some good work done, and if you want to have FaceTime sex, call me.”

I perk up, staring at his nose. It’s pointy, similar to mine. His shoulders are strong and broad, but on them, he carries the weight of the world. I can see it in his dark eyes, and I want to ease his burden, taking on some of it, if not all of it, as my own. I want to say something serious, to let him know I care more than I should at this point. But my reply comes out as a silly retort.

“Well, I guess I have something to look forward to then, right?”

His forehead drops to mine, again. “What are you doing to me, Noah? I don’t want to leave you.”

I want to say then don’t. But he has to. We have responsibilities and jobs. I want to rush in with all I have, but then again, it never has worked with Liam and his long list of girls. But Ash—he’s shaping up to be everything.

It’s my turn to drop a kiss on his forehead. “You better go before I pull you back in this car,” I warn. I can only be good for so long.

“Okay.” He pulls himself out of my space, moving his hands to his jacket, as the cold night air is downright chilly. “Drive safely, babe.”

I watch him enter a second-story apartment building, and I stare at the complex for five more minutes. I right my heart which already has fallen for Ashton Brooks.

INSPIRATION HAS STRUCK me in the forty-five minutes it's taken me to return from Ash's place. Kate's words have stuck with me about my charcoal sketch. I may not be able to share the sketch of Ash, his face giving away too much detail, but something begins to stew in my brain. At first, like most of my better ideas, I dismiss it right away, then the more my mind races back to it, I realize I don't have to give Ash completely away to share the inspiration his spirit and soul gives to me.

I bypass every area of my apartment, taking the steps that lead to the second level of my loft and climbing the stairs to my art studio. I keep a mini fridge in this space because once I'm hit with an idea, I'm here. In the past, I've been known to get sick from dehydration because I lose track of time completely when I'm creating.

My art table is where I typically draw, unless I want a cozy place, and move to my living room. But tonight, I have a serious need to create something lasting. In my mind is the picture I'll transfer onto paper. With my best quality sketching paper, that's only used for the final product, I begin with the backdrop. I can see it clear as day, as though I'm still at the marina. It's Ash, but not his face—he's looking out at the water from the bow of the boat. He has one knee planted on the seating area and the other on the deck. His hands grip the edges at the top. His body is relaxed. It's as though I'm reciting the alphabet, the image is coming so easily to me. Each stroke of my memory brings me closer to him. The street lights reflect from the outside of my loft and remind me of the shadows that play out in my memory, creating a clearer and sharper image.

When I'm done, I take a step back, setting it on my easel. This is how the public will look upon my drawing. I can't get

over the likeness of his body features which after just four days together, I have memorized.

Without thinking, I snap a quick picture, sending it straight to Kate. My eyes stay fixed on it. Already I'm coming up with another image my brain has locked away.

The phone begins to ring, and my eyes avert from the picture. No surprise, it's Kate. Not even a text, but an actual phone call.

"Please tell me you want to sell that one. If you sent me another amazing piece that you're hogging for yourself, I'm firing you."

This sketch is more than a paycheck. This picture, or the set of them I will paint, is deeply personal, and I don't want them to end up with someone who doesn't appreciate them as anything more than an investment.

"I'm thinking if the price is right, I'll part with it. As a matter of fact, I may have more. But, I'm selling a part of me with these sketches, and for that reason, they won't be cheap."

She lets out a squeal, then a sigh. I don't need the money. I can hold onto the pictures. And she knows it.

"You're a pain in my ass, Noah. Let me send this to a friend of mine. He can give me a starting cost, and from there, I'll let you know."

I end the phone call before she can ruin my mood and my creative process with it. Pulling out another heavy piece of paper, I begin with the strokes of my pencil, creating the railing that encloses my open bedroom, and the end table next to my bed. The sleeping silhouette of Ashton is turned away from me, the sheet covers everything below his waist. This picture is more intimate in nature, showcasing the muscles in his back. And the way his almost-black hair sticks up on its ends when he sleeps. The rumpled mess of blankets and sheets next to him suggests someone else was in bed with him at one point. Maybe the public will understand it's me. I'm the lucky one that gets to wake up with Ashton.

Again, I shadow in the sections I remember, due to the shades of the windows being drawn, but some light had snuck its way into the loft. I finish with the finer touches, an artist's version of an edit, and set it next to the last picture. I have no idea how much time has passed, and I decide to show this particular one to Ash before Kate, due to the intimate nature of it.

I look at the time on my phone. It's five in the morning. I've been in my studio for eight hours straight. I missed a call from Ash at two a.m.

This is my process. I forget about the world, and when I turn to the sketches I created, I know it was well worth it. I don't change, or wash the charcoal from my hands. I simply fall on my bed, uncertain what time I'll wake. But with the images of Ash burned in my mind, I fall asleep with a smile on my face.



Ashton

“I WAS THINKING we’d need to put out a missing person’s report on you,” Greg jokes when I open the door, having just said goodbye to Noah. “I take it you and the guy you’ve snuck off with the last couple of days are getting along?” he asks.

I’m a private person. I share with Tia and typically, that’s it. “Yeah, it’s going good, you could say.” I give him a little morsel of information as I beeline for my room.

“Yo! Ash! That’s all I get?” Greg shouts through the apartment.

“Yep,” I answer.

“At least come and play a game with me. Kicking your ass is better than playing the computer and kicking their ass. This way, I can see misery on your face.”

I don’t hate my roommates. I’ve just never let myself get invested. Maybe a product of my childhood. Even though we moved to a better area, the damage had been done, and I never gave any of myself again to people who could hurt me. Is Noah showing me that I can trust again?

I backtrack into the living room. “Yeah, I’d be as good as you if that’s all I ever did.” My retort earns me a slight smile and the middle finger.

“So, are you in?” he asks.

I have work to do. I wasn't lying, but an hour bonding with my roommate isn't a bad way to kill a little time. "Sure, but first, please tell me we have beer. If I have to hang out with your ugly ass for an hour, I'll need to consume copious amounts of alcohol."

"First off, I have a glorious ass." Greg's response is quick. "*And second, I'll need to consume copious amounts of alcohol,*" he mocks. "Who the hell talks like that?"

"I do, for one. And you're an asshole, you know that?" I tease, walking into the kitchen to get to the fridge. "You want a beer too?" I ask.

"Yeah," he hollers from the living room.

When I return with only one beer, I extend my hand to give it to him, and when he reaches for it, I take it out of his grasp, open it, and take a couple of deep swallows. "Assholes can get their own beer," I say as I drop onto the couch.

"Well, who is the asshole now?" He pushes up, coming back with his own beer and starts the game, proceeding to kick my ass for the next three hours.

"Shit. You're a bad influence on me." I hand him back the controller.

"Hey, Brooks, you're not so bad after all. Maybe you can come and hang out with Dave and me more?"

How is it that Noah is changing me, almost making me into the person I've always wanted to be?

"Yeah, I'd like that."

Crossing through the door of my bedroom, I stop at the picture of *The Bride* on my desk. I have an idea, one that came to me a couple days ago. But, with Noah, I have more inspiration.

Bypassing the rest of my space, I take a seat, shining as much light my way as possible since it's well past daytime. The piece is large, having lots of open space within the water color paper I had to special order. I start behind the bride, creating the background: the beach, rocks, sand, and waves.

Everything that depicts where she is and what she's doing. I add seats, which are a little more abstract, casting them far from her, as she's running from the scene. In the horizon, a boat is tied to a dock, and an abstract figure, though clearly a man, is waiting for her. I'm exact with my strokes in every part of the painting except for the edges, where the speculative objects are easy to discern, but then again, it's in the eye of the beholder to make up their own story. But for me, this story is about a woman who never realized what she was missing until the right person showed up in her life.

I step back, taking in the completeness of it. Am I missing anything? No. It's perfect. Not only is Noah changing my outlook on life, he's an influence in my art.

I find I want to share this with him. I finished a piece I hated, only for it to be one of my favorite paintings I've ever created. I hit his number, but when no one answers, I fall asleep with the new piece I've renamed *The One*, as the backdrop for my dreams. That and Noah. I think Noah will forever be on my mind. Now that I have him, I can never let go.

FOUR HOURS of sleep last night will have to get me through today. I'm too giddy to sit on this picture, and take the nine a.m. bus into Seattle to Kate's studio. She comes in at ten on the dot, every single day, and I make it to her storefront a few minutes early, pacing to keep myself warm. I can rough it out ten more minutes, but when I see her signature platinum-blond pixie cut, and hear her four-inch heels clicking on the pavement beneath a long trench coat, both me and my dick are happy we don't have to wait in the cold a second longer.

"Holy shit! Tell me that's the picture, and you're done."

I nod my head as she unlocks the door. "If you would have called me, I would have been here sooner, you idiot. If you get pneumonia, Noah will kill me," she teases. "Anyway, it looks like you both are a good influence on the other."

I'm caught off guard by her words. "What do you mean?" She rids herself of her coat, but I'm not ready to shed the warm cocoon of mine.

"Oh, nothing. Never mind. Okay. Pins and needles, Ashton. Show me what you got, baby."

My heart always drops a little at people's excitement. Art is in the eye of the beholder, so just because she may not like it, doesn't mean others won't. Or vice versa. I pull out the heavy paper and place it on the easel.

She gasps, stepping backward. "Holy butterfingers in a pecan pie," she says, a little of her Southern accent coming through in her excitement.

"Um, so you like it? Like you think it may sell?"

"Oh, shut the front door, of course it will sell. I know what I'm doing. It will appeal to a different buyer, but fuck me with an eggplant! Between the size, and the strokes, holy shit and popcorn. This thing will sell. I don't think it will make it through the weekend."

"Do me a favor. If you see Noah, can you put this up? I want to show him this tomorrow, if we can get into the studio. He gave me the inspiration, and..."

"You don't have to say any more, and please, I beg you to spare me the details. I never thought you two could be muses for the other."

"What? I don't inspire him. He has enough talent in one of his pinkies. He doesn't need me."

She pops her eyebrows high above her reading glasses. "If you say so. Now, let me do my thing and make you some more money." I'm five steps from the door when she stops. "By the way, Ash, something to think about. I'd like to have an open house. I have two new artists I'm representing. With newer names, I usually have three at one premiere. I need at least ten pieces, and the date is June 28th. Give it some thought. I'll need your answer in a month."

She wants me as a featured artist at one of her shows? I'm speechless, standing at the door but not moving. "Have I

broken you, Ashton?” she asks, a giggle punctuating her question.

“Um, no. I just—Fuck. Wow. Yeah. Let me look at what I have planned, and I’ll get back to you.”

I already know my answer. This may be the break I’ve been praying for.

GREG TEXTED ME AT WORK, asking if I was getting laid or coming home so he could kick my ass tonight. I’d rather get laid, but this thing between Noah and me is coming out of nowhere. I don’t want to stop seeing him, but I also realize I’m incredibly vulnerable to his charm. What if I care more than him? And I’m back to being that scared kid.

The coffee smell on my clothes is rancid tonight. Opening the door, I hear the commotion of Dave and Greg gaming together. And the smell of pizza. “Ah, maybe you’ll find a worthy opponent with Ashton,” Greg teases.

“Someone needs to be knocked down a peg or two, asshole,” I call back to him before I’m in the living room. They have beat me to this little party of ours, having finished a twelve pack by themselves.

“The pizza just got here, and we have two more twelve-packs to make our way through tonight.”

Dave and Greg are playing a different game from last night. I point to the screen, with Greg killing everything in sight. “Shit. That’s not fair, I’ve not played that one before.”

“Oh, the puppy is playing the *no fair* card tonight,” Dave coos, tossing me a beer I barely manage to catch.

“Fuck, man, I hope you didn’t play baseball. That was a flimsy throw.” He flips me off, and with an amused smile, I return the gesture, all while rooting through the pizza boxes for a slice of cheese only.

The phone rings in mid bite. “Hey, Greg, be sure to kill Dave some more on that game. I got to take this. Then a quick shower. I’ll be out in a half an hour.”

“Yeah, you smell pretty rank. But only a half an hour?” I hear Dave question.

There’s a snort, followed by, “Whaddya bet they’re having phone sex?”

The idiots. They’re actually quite likable after all. Shutting the door behind me, I answer Noah’s call.

“Hey,” I say, taking another bite of the pizza.

“Hey to you. You seem out of breath.”

“Just escaping the living room, where my roommates are drinking and gaming. Dave wants to play against me, because he may stand a chance of winning. No one can win against Greg. I swear, he should be a professional gamer.”

I finish the last bite of the pizza and wish I’d grabbed another piece.

“I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow.”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“What would you say about meeting at Kate’s studio in the morning? I have something I want to show you.”

I have something I want to show him too, but I keep it to myself.

“And I’ll come get you—”

“It’s no problem. Let me just meet you there.”

He doesn’t argue with me.

“Okay, but you have to pack a bag. Please stay with me tomorrow night?” he asks. There’s a vulnerability in his tone, and my weak, stupid heart swells at his words.

“Of course, I’ll stay with you tomorrow night,” I answer. He lets out a long gust of air through the phone and it makes me smile. “You know, I thought of you all day. Every time I

had a second to myself, it was you. Your laugh, the way you caress my cheek, oh, and that thing you do with your tongue.”

His chuckle radiates through the phone. “I kind of like that thing I do with my tongue, too.” His sensual flirt has my cock standing at half-mast already.

“Fuck, I have to go out and try to beat Dave at Call of Duty in thirty minutes, and I can’t when my cock is ready to stand at attention.” One more visual is all it’ll take.

“Okay, I’ll be good,” he promises, but I’m not sure he can keep his promise.

“So, what are you doing tonight?” I ask.

“Liam is coming over to play pool. He’s bringing his work husband with him. I swear, those two bicker like a married couple.”

“Oh, fuck, I have so many questions.” I pause remembering yesterday. “Hey, where were you last night? I tried to call you around two a.m.”

“Oh, you’ll find that I’m a night owl. I have this bad habit. I’ll work in my studio, and lose all perception of time. I’ve been known to work over twenty-four hours nonstop. When I’m in the zone, it’s all I know. I got started on a new project yesterday and didn’t stop until five in the morning.”

I could warn him it’s not healthy, and that he should find some sort of balance. But telling a creative person when they should draw from energy, inspiration, and emotion falls on deaf ears. I know this firsthand. Pushing a piece, when something isn’t coming to you, leaves you empty. So, we strike when inspiration strikes.

“I’ve been there,” I admit. “Sometimes I get physically sick, forgetting to eat or drink.”

“Same. Oh, fuck, I’m glad you understand. I was with a guy—not serious, not anything like I feel with you—but he’s one of the few I was with more than once. His mindset was more like my brother’s. Structured, disciplined, and shrewd. He gave me a hard time. I’d wake at two, which is something I’ve done from an early age. The asshole would lay in bed,

tossing and turning. It was dramatic, his way of telling me I was interrupting his sleep. I finally told the fucker to pack up. I get it, he needed his sleep, but my mind doesn't work like his."

"You're so right. And because we're the oddity, we're the ones in the wrong. Never mind the fact he was in your house." Righteous anger courses through me for Noah. I want to find this jackass and hurt him.

"Glad to know someone finally understands me. My own twin doesn't. It was the one thing we fought about growing up. And it's why we decided sharing a room wasn't good for our relationship."

There's a loud commotion outside of my door, followed by several knocks. "If you're sexting, wrap it up and get out here. I'm ready to win, for once." Dave's voice echoes through our thin-ass doors and walls.

I cover the phone slightly, yelling through the door. "Hold your fucking horses, asshole. I still need to wash this coffee smell off of me. Give me twenty more minutes."

"It seems as if you're needed, if only to boost your roommate's ego. Call me later, Ash?"

"Yeah, I will, but if you don't answer, don't ever apologize for it. If anyone gets it, it's me."

There's a lull on the line, like we don't want to hang up. "Ash, I really like you."

My heart. He's doing something to it. We say this a lot but it never loses its effect on me.

"I really like you too, Noah. Have a good night with your brother and his work hubby."

"And you, try to at least beat *someone* in Call of Duty tonight," he encourages, with a snicker at the end of the sentence.

We both say goodbye, but I wait until he ends the call before I walk to the shower.



Noah

ASH GAVE me the address of the bus stop. No reason to make him walk the couple blocks to Kate’s studio in this incessantly cold weather.

My car is parked across the street, and the collar of his coat is turned up, protecting his neck, with a hat on his head.

I let loose a slight honk, getting his attention, and he jogs to my car, his hands in his pockets. He slides into my heated leather seats and sighs in pleasure. “I’m going to break that fucking horn one day.”

“Good luck with that, honey,” I say with a grin, crashing my lips to his. He’s as eager for me as I am for him. He lets me take control, my hand reaching around his neck, holding him in place, bringing him closer to me.

The kiss continues for a couple minutes. It’s the kind of kiss that leads to more things. Dirty things, naughty things. And because I can’t do any of those right now, I pull back, resting my hand on his.

“I fucking missed you, Ash.”

“Ditto,” he replies. We pull back until we can see each other fully, my hand still on his neck. “So, are we still going to the studio?” he asks.

“Yeah. And then I thought I’d take you back to my place and cook you a late breakfast.”

“Is *late breakfast* code for sex?”

“Nah, if I want to fuck you, I don’t need a euphemism. I’ll just tell you that’s what we’re doing,” I announce, as if it’s the newest law that was just passed.

“I love your idea, babe. So, the sooner we get back to your place, then...”

“Yes. But, all good things come to those who wait,” I insist.

“Oh, so many mixed signals,” he jests, play-punching me in the arm.

“Okay, studio, my place, late breakfast, and then fucking like rabbits. Are you all right with this agenda?”

“Fuck yeah, I am.”

I place the car in drive, and we take the three-minute ride to the studio. He has no idea what I have asked Kate to do. I can’t wait to see his face. Today may be my favorite day ever.

KATE GAVE me the code to the studio, framing my sketch and placing it under a blanket on an easel.

“This is so ominous.” Ashton’s tone carries a hint of sarcasm. But his hands quake in mine, clearing his throat and raking his fingers through his hair. Why is he nervous?

“I don’t have a secret room in there where I’ll murder you, Ash.” I’m the one who is nervous. I don’t typically worry if the public likes my work. I never take it to heart, because art is subjective. But, I want Ashton to like the piece I’ve made, because it was inspired by him. Sweat pools at the base of my neck, and my heart is about to beat out of my chest.

We approach the door, but then we stop and he tugs me into his space. “What the hell do you have planned for me.

Something naughty?” he teases suggestively, lifting his brows with a smile containing a sensual flare.

“You know, you look innocent; however, you’re anything but.”

He lifts his eyes up, full of tenderness, and his voice cracks with emotion. “I can be just as sweet.” His words don’t carry a flirt but rather a promise.

This guy has me so twisted up. “Come on, sweetness. I have something to show you.”

Opening the door to her studio, the lights are off, except two wall sconces on opposite ends of the wall. But, I’m confused, because there are *two* pictures covered. One is larger than mine.

“Shit, did I just get set up?” I ask, thinking I was the only one who had a surprise up my sleeve.

“Sort of, but I have no idea what you have in store for me, handsome.”

I walk away from him, over to his apparent painting. This man is so heartbreakingly sweet it just radiates from him.

The painting is large, horizontal in orientation and around forty inches wide by thirty inches high. “This is you, I assume?” My eyes scour the shrouded piece, wondering what it can be. I’d seen what he’d been currently working on. Is he done?

“So, do I get to see it?” I ask, rolling my shoulders to avoid a stiff neck. Now, I’m really nervous.

“I think you should go first, babe.” His arms wrap around my waist, behind me, resting his chin on my shoulders, looking at the covered picture, like me. Unlike me, he knows what’s under the sheet.

“You’re mean.” I joke pout.

“Wait. There are so many mixed signals here. First, I’m sweet, then I’m what—mean?”

Twisting my body around, we're face to face. "I have a confession, Ash."

"Oh, yeah?" His brows arch in question.

"I don't care what people think of my pieces. I read my negative reviews and laugh at them. They're ridiculous. The constructive reviews I consider, and sometimes, they have merit, but the ones that say my three-year-old can paint better than Noah James, I can only laugh at." I take a breather, clearing my throat. "Anyway, I don't get nervous. But I'm nervous for you to see this. I drew it in one night. And I don't typically draw or sketch, except when I'm working on something like a painting or sculpture, throwing away the rough drafts."

His fingers glide up my arm, and I watch his every move. His free hand clenches my chin. "Noah, baby, I can't wait—you're sharing this important part of yourself with me, and if it's from you, it's going to mean the world to me."

One sentence. In one fucking sentence, he calms my churning stomach. "Just know, that you make me want to do better. And this is just one example."

I walk him over to my piece, the sixteen by twenty-four vertical charcoal sketch. My fingers are wet with sweat, and I carefully remove the covering. I look upon the picture as if it's my first time but turn toward Ashton. His mouth drops open and he steps forward, reaching his hand out toward the sketch. He won't touch, this much I know, but his finger traces the outline of his body, an inch above the paper.

"Holy fucking heaven on earth. What is this? It's a masterpiece! And I'm not just saying that because you drew me. Wait—that is me, right?"

This elicits a bubble of laughter from me. "Yes, babe, that's you."

"Well, regardless of who it is, it's fucking amazing."

I wrap my arms around his waist, looking at the picture as he does. "It *would* matter if that was another person, because no one has ever pushed me to be the best version of myself."

It's his turn to twist around. "You sure know what to say to make me feel special." He pauses. "I imagine you'll get top dollar for it?"

"I won't sell unless I do, because I don't share much of myself with the public. Hell, I've only come to one premiere. My paintings are personal enough, but this right here, you in my bed"—I point to the sketch—"is as personal as they come. I'd not sell it, or the others in my collection, without your permission."

"Wait, there are others. More than this?"

"Yeah, there are, but there will be more too."

Ashton drums his fingers against where he's resting them on my arm. "Funny you mention your dad's boat. Something clicked with me the other day with *The Bride*. I came home and had it done in six hours. And now it's my turn to admit, I drew this with you in mind. You gave me the inspiration to tell her story. And I think I have. The new name of this painting is *The One*."

He pulls me to the other side of the reception area. "You're the reason I completed this. You should do the honors." He straightens his shoulders next to me. There's a confidence in him. Do I instill that? He waves a hand at me. "Come on. I want you to reveal it."

I'm the one with shaky hands, but I carefully draw the sheet back. Once I see the horizon, I drop the entire cover, completely floored. If awe can chemically change my response to art, this is the example. I'll never look upon the colors of yellows, blues, golds, pinks and burnt oranges without thinking of Ashton's painting. If an experience can be life altering, this is the moment. The boat, the way it's painted, in abstract form but still looks like my father's, reflects my own influence in his art, as Ash has done for me. This is bold. Sure, the colors aren't, but it's his depiction of a bride fleeing her wedding, running toward the person she has a deep connection with. I see the story in his picture.

I can't articulate words of how this painting inspires me. It's like describing a shooting star.

“Holy shit. This is nothing like what you shared with me a couple days ago. Ashton, honey, this is...” A tear falls down my cheek. I’ve never had as much of a reaction to another person’s art as I am with his right now. “Thank you for sharing this with me, Ash. I’m so fucking proud of you. And the abstract art on the outside, it’s so fucking perfect. So beautiful.”

I can’t wait. I grab him, and not gently either. He comes willingly, but still, I push him against the nearest wall, my hand moving up his torso and resting near his face. My body blocks his escape. But there’s a smoldering look in his eyes and his body squirms closer to my touch. I know he doesn’t want to get away from me.

“Noah, babe, is this a good idea?”

I clutch his chin with my fingers, moving my hands from the wall to his neck. Not too rough, but not gentle, my touch on him is every bit as possessive as I feel.

“We can and we fucking will.” Even if it’s just for him, because in his painting, he’s given me *everything*.

“Kate...”

“Kate most likely expects us to fuck, after what you just showed me. I’ve never felt closer to another as I do with you in the moment.”

I had every intention of blowing him, and waiting until we were back in my loft to fuck. It’s the intimacy I crave with Ash, more than just pure sex. I twist him around, pushing him into the wall, tugging down his track pants. “Love that fucking easy access,” I whisper into his ear.

I rip his T-shirt from his body; I’ll need it as to not ruin Kate’s walls. I don’t want a quick fuck with him. This is about closeness, and how we both find inspiration in the other. Sharing my art with him is an act of intimacy in and of itself. After all, anyone can see my body. But no one sees inside my soul, except for him.

My cock presses into his crack, the friction a preview of what’s to come. “I want to know every fucking thing about

you, Ash.”

He doesn't speak, even when I start to stroke his cock from his balls to his tip. “If I was given a chance to create the perfect partner, I could never make someone as perfect as you.”

I roll my hips, my cock pressing against his hole. Sadly, I came with no lube. Thank fuck I have a condom.

I'm in no hurry, though I should be. The thrill of Kate walking in on us, that fear, used to be a kink. Right now, though, it's about our seclusion, togetherness, and tenderness.

His hands reach behind me, tugging my hips closer to him. “You want me as much as I want you.”

“I. Never. Denied. It,” he forces out, pushing his ass closer to me.

“I need lube, babe. I won't hurt you.”

The thought of Ashton physically hurting causes me pain. I'd hurt myself before I let pain touch his life. But I don't question us, the quickness or the closeness. It's more relief that there's someone in this world who was made specifically for me.

My lips explore the muscular beauty of his back, stroking his cock and peppering kisses down his skin.

His hand finds my dick, and his fingers work magically over the smoothness of my shaft.

“Tell me,” I command, my tongue running down his ear.

“Tell you what?” he asks, his breathing coming hard, his hand sliding up and down my cock.

“What this is between us.”

He tips his head, watching me from the corner of his eye. “This is us. Ash and Noah. How we were always meant to be. This is a future. This is...fuck! Oh, babe, I'm about to come.”

I place his shirt in front of his cock just in time, catching his seed in the soft fabric instead of ruining Kate's wall. We would literally never hear the end of it.

“You can paint my wall another day, baby,” I rasp in his ear, and my sensual pitch causes him to visibly shudder.

“I need you, Noah. Please.”

I pull back slightly to fish my wallet out of my jeans. “Don’t worry, hon. I’ll always give you what you need, want, and desire.”

My touch returns to his body, moving an arm around to his stomach. He laces his fingers with mine, bringing them up to his lips, feathering kisses on my hand.

With the condom protecting us, I shower him with love bites up and down his earlobe, whispering filthy, filthy thoughts in his ear.

“No more condoms, once we get tested, baby.”

“Yeah, fuck yeah. But fuck me. Please. I need you. I need you so much.”

I never thought I needed another person, not in this way. My brother was my ride and die, but now there’s Ashton. I don’t want to live without him.

“I’ll make it good for you, Ash.” My cock knows his home, and with Ash’s cum used as lubrication, I push, breaching his tightness. “Oh, fuck, but you make it good for me, too, Ash.”

He presses back into me, leaving every nerve ending crying for more.

“Deeper, Noah. Harder. All of that.”

I toss my head, letting out a ring of laughter. “Bossy bottom.”

“Yeah I am, so fucking obey me.”

So, I do. My hands instinctively move to his hips. I pull him closer to me with each thrust, all the time nibbling his ear. “You’re so good, Ashton. You’re my good boy, my bossy good boy.”

“Show me how good I am,” he demands.

Game fucking on. Pushing him against the wall, my arm up by his face, his strong back on display for me, I shove harder inside of him, my orgasm building with each further power push.

“I’m going to come, Ash baby,” I groan.

“Come, Noah. Show me how much I affect you.”

I don’t know if I can ever fully show him how much he affects me, but I’ll make it my life’s mission to try.

My orgasm comes on strong and hard, and I cling to him, arms wrapped around his waist, my chin resting on his shoulder, both of us staring against the wall.

“Fucking Heaven. Noah, you’re ruining me,” he says with a happy sigh.

I kiss his neck and back. “Yeah, but only in the best way.”

NOT SO KEEN on being caught now that the moment has passed, we dress quickly, and I make fast work of cleaning up. Though no bodily fluids are on any part of the studio, I still sanitized the area. The smell of sex is distinct, especially when two large men fuck as intensely as we had.

Ashton slides down the wall, catching his breath. “I don’t think I can walk, babe.” He drops his head back and closes his eyes. “Does Kate have security cameras?”

I flash a mischievous smile at him.

“Seriously, Noah?” His reply is somewhere between humor and irritation.

“Don’t worry, I have it covered.” I circle around the large receptionist’s area, pulling up the security tapes. “I can erase it.”

“I’m so fucking worn out, I can’t even ask how or why.” He closes his eyes, but rewards me with the beginning of a smile starting at the corners of his mouth.

“Don’t worry. I have her passcode. She gave it to me, when I became the featured artist in case I needed to be in here by myself.” I’m not a computer hacker, but I know my way around one. “I may have changed test scores, back in the day.”

His eyes stay closed. “I’m learning more about you every day.” His voice sounds funny and a little dazed.

“You doing okay?” I ask, looking over the tall desk at him.

“Just tired.”

I’m in the system, and find the footage, watching just the beginning then fast forwarding through the twenty minutes of foreplay, and the main event, until now. “From this moment, it’ll start recording again,” I warn.

He doesn’t acknowledge me. I glance over, and his eyes are closed, his body slumping slightly against the wall. Oh, fuck. Our sex wasn’t vanilla, nor am I. It was intense. Is he experiencing a drop?

“Ash? Hey! Stay with me, baby.”

The kitchen is off the reception area. The refrigerator is nicely stocked, and I snatch up a bottle of grape juice and a chocolate bar and jog back out to the reception area.

He hasn’t moved a bit, and still has a smile on his face. Sliding down the wall next to him, I touch his thigh, and his eyes flutter. I open the Hershey Bar, breaking off a couple of blocks. “Ash, baby, can you take a bite of this?”

“Bite? Oh. I’m a little tired. And—” I push the chocolate block into his mouth and he instinctively chews. A couple more pieces, and he’s looking much better. He takes the juice without prodding.

“Did I just go through a drop?” I’d not call us subs or doms, but a drop is exactly what he’s experienced.

“Think so, baby. Let me just hold you for a while, K?”

“Yeah. But that was something.” It was more than physical. *We were physical*, but more—it was the emotional exchange we shared with one another.

“Have you ever done charcoal renderings before?” He points to the picture of him, in my bed.

“I find I use the technique to build on other projects. I use charcoal to give me a map of my sculptures. It’s not everyone’s method, but I’m not everyone.”

His eyes open a little wider, color returning to his cheeks. “Did you know that Michelangelo had a collection of charcoal paintings?”

His mouth curls into an unconscious grin. He’s back. I can see him, but he can’t see me. I tip his face to mine. “No, I didn’t. I may have skipped a lot of my art history classes. B-O-R-I-N-G. Boring.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised. However, it was one of my favorite subjects, and with my degree in education, I took several.”

“How is it that I’ve always pegged you as the goody-two-shoes?” I ask.

“And I peg you as the trouble maker,” he quips. “Anyway, the reason I ask, you stuck to your roots. Sure, this picture isn’t as abstract as your other works, but you use the thickness and thinness of lines, different stresses within the drawing. So many times, charcoals can be monotonous, but fuck, this is a talent. Does this mean this may be your collection at your next premiere?”

I’ve not had a showing in over six months. Kate wants to put something on the books for the summertime, but my pieces sell now, without shows, and I hate the pressure.

“I don’t know. I hate premieres. I always get reamed for never showing up. But it’s something I can’t stand—everyone falling over me and my talent. I don’t want to make nice. This is just what I know. I’m happy to make a living from it, but I don’t want peopled treating me different.”

He’s quiet and turns his line of sight from me. “Hey, did I say something to upset you?” He’s quick to discount my question with a shake of his head.

“What is it? Seriously, Ash. Talk to me.” I forcefully shift his head toward mine.

“Is it bad that I want it—the attention?”

My big fucking mouth. “No. You’re a different person than me. I want what you want for yourself, baby. And I’ll be beside you, if it’s what you want.”

I’ll hate every fucking second of it, but then again, it’s what you do when you love someone. I freeze at the thought. I can’t love him. Not yet. It’s too fucking soon. Isn’t it?

“Hey, don’t ever compare yourself to me. We have different skill sets. Sure, we’re a lot alike, but fuck, even the man I shared a uterus with, as he reminds me often, is as different from me as he can get.”

I watch his face intently, and the confident part of Ash is gone. It’s replaced by someone scared. It breaks my heart. “Thanks, Noah. I don’t know why I get so insecure.”

I have a feeling he knows exactly what causes his insecurities, but we’ve delved so deep in the last hour that I won’t push him.

“When you want to talk about it, I’m here. Please know that.”

He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to. I see him perk up a bit.

“Oh, speaking of shows. Kate asked me to debut with two other artists, this summer. I don’t have much inventory, but I’m excited about a few things.”

“And you know what? I’ll hold your hand the entire time. I’ll push you when you want to quit, and I’ll tuck you in bed in the morning after you worked all night.”

“You’d do that all for me?” he asks.

“Oh, baby, you haven’t seen even one percent of what I want to do for you.”

We sit in quiet companionship, staring at each other’s artwork. No words are needed when hearts can communicate.



A shton

HIS ARM IS DRAPED over my body. Once we stepped into his loft, he led me straight to bed. I didn't argue, as I could barely keep my eyes open as I ate a piece of toast. I couldn't do breakfast. I've never experienced such an emotionally intense sexual connection with another person. Between his beautiful strokes with his sketch, and the way he melted at my reveal, and the sex, I've never been more satisfied. I fall asleep in peace.

What time is it, I wonder? It feels like hours later. His slight snores are calling me back to sleep, and I'm tired, but once I'm awake, it's nearly impossible for me to fall back asleep. At least I haven't woken up starving.

"Honey?" he calls, his voice still asleep even if he's not.

"Yeah?"

"Your breathing is different when you're awake."

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Nah. I just woke a couple minutes ago." He pushes his body against my back, bringing me closer to him. "You okay?"

"What do you mean, okay?"

"I mean, that was rather intense. I didn't push you too far, did I?"

I roll over, still in his space. “You can push me to the brink, and I’ll still come back for more.”

His hands brush the back of my neck, landing on my cheek. “If you run, I’ll come find you.”

“Is it possible?” I ask, my eyes tearing up.

“What, this?”

“I can’t tell you why or how, but my feelings for you have come on hard and strong. Is this possible?” I clarify, worried we’re taking this so fast we’ll burn out before we really begin.

“When Liam breaks up with a girlfriend, it’s because he tries to force his feelings. They fall, he never does. And, I can’t speak for you, but I’m not faking my intense feelings.”

Dipping my head to his, I whisper, “I’m not either.”

“So.” He rolls me over and I’m on top of him, straddling his body. “With that settled, let me start some breakfast, though it’s four in the afternoon. You take a shower, and we’ll watch some Jack Ryan. Is that a plan?”

I grin. “Yeah, if you took a shower with me, you’d just dick me up anyway.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll dick you up later.”

“Now that’s a plan I can get behind,” I tease, sliding my naked ass out of bed.

“Or that’s a plan *I can get behind.*” I toss a pillow at him, but he only waggles his brows and laughs. Fuck, I’m in trouble.

“WHO THOUGHT John Krasinske was so fucking hot?” he asks with my head in his lap. His TV room has only two big leather recliners. We wanted skin to skin, body to body, and ended up moving one of his leather sofas across the loft.

“Yeah, he was adorable as Jim, but I won’t lie. In this way, in character, I would say he’s one of my five.” I’m teasing, of

course, seeing how jealous Noah can be.

“Is that so? Hmm, let me think. It’s not the actors, for me, but the characters they play. Thor, Captain America, Bruce Wayne played by George Clooney. People eat up that taboo age gap shit. Captain Kirk played by Chris Pine and Kylo Ren.”

I can’t control my cackle. “Kylo Ren? Really?”

I don’t admit that I think Adam Driver is fucking adorable, too.

“Yeah, what can I say, I like a bad boy villain.”

My hands skirt up his T-shirt, resting my fingers on his washboard abs. “I’ll show you a villain, if that’s what you’re into, but then I’ll miss out on watching Jack Ryan some more.”

“Watch your boo. I want to rest your ass for the night, or at least a little bit longer.”

I swoon a little at his tender treatment of me. “You want to take care of me, don’t you?”

“Fuck yeah, I do. You’re a bossy bottom, making it challenging at times, but I have this overwhelming need to take care of you. It’s different than the way I care for my brother. He’s the only other person on this earth who is as important to me. You’re the other person, Ashton Brooks. So, let me take care of you.”

“You’re my safety net.”

He relaxes his posture, his wandering gaze staring out into the Seattle sky. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“And I have no desire to be anywhere else, or with anyone else.”

His fingers begin to massage my scalp, and he turns on the next episode. I roll over on my side, and his fingers dance down to my thigh, resting his hand there. Another episode passes, and he turns off the television, but we don’t talk, or feel the need to fill the silence between us. His hands remain on my hip.

When he speaks, it's nothing I expected.

“When I was six years old, I hated my brother. One day, I woke up, and I wanted nothing to do with him. I tried to move to the guest room, but he followed me. I'd wake up, and he'd be asleep on the floor next to the bed. I didn't feel a connection with him. For six years, we played together, and he was always there. But at the age of six, I realized that the world pushed us together. It wasn't my choice. Removing myself from him *was* my choice. I would say heartless things. Told him I wished he died at birth, and he almost did. But he never gave up on me. That's love. His love for me. How could I walk away from it? How could I ever say those horrible words?”

I push myself to a standing position, turning around, sitting on my knees next to him on the couch.

“You were six. Only six. You can't blame yourself. What's important is you accepted him, and he loved you through the rough parts so you could know what love truly is. He's your person, baby. All that matters is what you've been to him since then.”

Swinging one knee over his lap, I straddle him.

“You're the first person I've ever shared that with. I've never had the courage to admit it out loud, but I've carried the guilt for years.”

Pain is visible in his eyes, and I hurt for him. “I will carry anything you can't.” I press my lips to his forehead. “And that's my promise to you, baby.”

“You sure know what to say and when to say it.”

I pull back to study his face, his captivating gaze staying on me a beat longer. He's trusted me. It's time to trust him.

“After losing dad—I was six—Mom had to move. We got evicted from the house we lived in with Dad, because without his salary, she couldn't pay the rent. We moved to a rough area. She worked at our school, as a substitute teacher. Teachers make a fucking pittance to begin with, so you can imagine subs are paid even worse. When I say we had nothing,

I'm not kidding. I had one Hot Wheels car, and a teddy bear my dad gave me. Tia had two dolls, both from dad, too. Anyway, mom worked at night. She had some teenager, barely thirteen, sit with us so she could pick up shifts at her friend's bar. The girl was completely untrustworthy and would leave the house, letting some of the older boys inside our apartment. They were after Tia.

"She'd be asleep, and I'd sit in front of the door with a baseball bat. Sick bastards wanted to hurt a seven-year-old. They never got past me, but they sure as hell tried. I never told Mom because I knew she needed the money and was out of options. I'd hear her cry at night over the bills, worrying about how she'd take care of us.

"One day she got a letter in the mail stating she was eligible to apply for a grant that would help us with housing and getting her a better job. She thought it was bullshit, but a social worker came out and interviewed her, and she was accepted. The program even paid for my and Tia's college. It put mom through school and gave her a way to provide for us. But the damage those boys did, and the fear I'd fail to keep Tia safe, is hard to shake off at times. And when you see me retreat into my shell, like a fucking turtle, this is why."

It's his time to pull me toward him, and he drops a kiss on my forehead. "Holy fuck. No child should ever have to take on that. Did you ever tell your mom?"

"No, and please don't think badly of her. She would have quit if I'd told her, but she was sad all the time and I just couldn't bear to tell her one more terrible thing. It was my responsibility to be the man of the house. I know, at that age, it sounds ridiculous, but it's the only way I could help my mom. Those filthy pigs never touched my sister, but..."

I slide my sleeve up my arm, rolling my elbow over. Underneath the bend of the elbow sits a two-inch scar. It's faded, but the scars, both visible and invisible, still have a place on my body.

"This is me, telling you something I've never told another soul. This is me letting you carry me, as I carry you."

He tugs his shirt over his head, grabbing my hand, placing it over his heart. “And this is me falling in love with you second by second.”

I drop my head to his, and it’s become our signature move. “Make love to me, Noah. And let me show you how I’m falling in love with you, too.”

I don’t crash my mouth to his. I’m deliberate in my actions, tracing his soft and plump lips. His mouth is warm, and a shiver runs through my spine at the sensation of entering his body in this way. My tongue explores the recesses of his mouth, as he moans into mine. Our kiss is gentle, loving and intoxicating, making my head dizzy with desire. I’m drinking in his masculine nature as if he’s the drug and I’m the addict. I’m an addict for Noah James.

“Ash. This. Is. Everything,” he says between kisses, never pulling away from me.

“Yes,” I singsong, drawing out the one syllable word.

I devour every part of our long kiss, a prologue to the beginning of our story. We share every part of intimacy in our long, drug-induced kiss, but it’s as tender as can be. My hold on him tightens, and his own power is displayed, matching mine.

“I could kiss you all night,” he states, his lips never leaving mine.

“I have nowhere to be but here, babe.”

Arching his brows, he replies, “Well, look at that. Neither do I.”

Our lips are still connected as he’s running his fingers through my hair.

“I’m weak when it comes to telling you no,” I whisper into his lips.

“Ditto,” he returns.

His tongue slips past the seam of my lips, but this time, his need comes with more urgency. It’s not rushed, and soon, we

both deepen the kiss. It's as if we can't do simple and gentle for long.

I yield to his more forceful power, allowing him to smother my mouth. Rubbing my back, his hands move up my neck, holding my head in place. He knows I'm not going anywhere, but he loves to have authority, just as much as I love to be a bratty bottom. I give in to everything right now, but more so, I give into him. I want to give him everything.

He may short circuit my brain, but I trust him to make this good. Between our emotions, the shared intimacy, and the obvious chemistry, the best fuck ever will never compare to the worst day I'll ever have with Noah. I want to share it all, the good, the bad and the ugly. Even in the ugly of life, I'll have Noah to paint the blue, pinks, oranges, and yellows of our horizon in our own story.

His hardness grows beneath me, and he lightly tugs away. "I need you under me. And because I don't have the patience to take you to my bed..." He stands up, and in turn, I stand. He opens a blanket up and spreads it on the floor. "I need you here."

"Take off your shirt," he commands, falling to his knees. I obey, but he begins crawling in between my legs. "We have too many clothes on, but for now, I have to taste you some more." I open my mouth to receive him, but he diverts his attention, his mouth at my nipples.

"I've not done enough to these beauties here." Pushing himself up, he straddles my waist. "Barbells. I love them." I removed my screwball rings last night, replacing them with the barbells.

"I read once that nipple stimulation is as productive as playing with the penis and balls."

He pitches a brow higher. Maybe he's astonished or wants to prove my point. He leans over, sucking on the metal bar, drawing my nipple into his mouth.

"Oh, fuck. Yeah, that. But, there's another," I say, enjoying what his lips are doing to me.

His finger circles my other nipple, flicking it, taking it between his thumb and index finger, rubbing it, all while the other one is still in his mouth. “Too bad I’m scared to death of needles, or I’d do this. I love my nipples played with, but with these I bet the sensation is even better.”

I’m breathing heavier with each twist and touch of his tongue and finger.

“Says the guy with the most painful piercing,” I tease, arching my back to push my sensitive nipples closer to him.

His eyes shift to me. “Yeah, and you reap the benefits of my pain,” he quips, and I can’t argue with him.

A witty reply is on the tip of my tongue, but his mouth returns to my nips, and I forget everything that had just been on my mind.

“Your mouth makes me stupid. I can’t think when your lips are doing their thing.”

A light chuckle reverberates deep within his chest, and I feel it as he continues to pull my nipple in his mouth.

My fingers dig into his back. “Yeah, Ash. Fuck. Use your fingers on me.”

It’s my turn to laugh.

“Oh, I know how to use my fingers, baby.” His head pops up, and there’s a sensual flame between us. “Yeah you do, stud.”

He pushes up my body, his eyes burning with overt desire, and I’m lost in them. “I want to watch when I make love to you, babe,” he says clearly—sharing a connection, eye to eye, skin to skin, and body to body.

His hand strokes my arm, an up-and-down movement, so sensual, yet he barely touches my skin. Every little hint of his hands on my body reverberates through me.

“Fuck,” he curses. “I need to grab a condom and some lube.”

“My bag has it all. It’s at the end of the couch.” I’m breathless, as he is, too.

He grabs for it quickly and he dumps the contents on the floor. “Sorry, not sorry. Not patient. Not at all.” The condoms are neon, it’s all I had, and he howls at it when he rolls it on his cock. “Look at me. Now my dick glows in the dark.” His tone turns from silly to serious in a split second. “Fuck, Ash. You’re it. I know it may be early to love you but I’m falling and falling fucking hard and fast. Please catch me because there’s no going back.”

“Ditto,” I say in response and I couldn’t have said it better myself. His finger outlines the muscles of my stomach, moving to the V in my waist, and he follows his mouth down the happy trail leading to my cock. His face moves to mine, looking over my torso. Our eyes connect, the chemistry is as evident as it had been from our first touch.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Ash. And I want you. I don’t think I’ll tire of wanting you.” His lips part, licking each side, a flush on his face. He raises on his knees. “I want no one else. Tell me you feel the same.”

“No one else, no one else,” I swear. His cock enters me, slowly, deliciously, and the entire time his eyes are gentle, as are his movements. He rocks back and forth, slowly, easy, softly inside of me.

We’re both falling in love.

“I’m close, Ash. So close.”

He’s hitting all the right spots. “Yeah, me too.”

He never rushes. His thrusts may quicken, but our bodies are becoming one with each other.

He closes his eyes, for a second, and with each grunt, he’s coming. A few more thrusts and I follow suit. He doesn’t fall down. He hovers over me, barely putting any weight on me. “And that is why I’ll never let you go.”

“Ditto,” I reply. My life is with Noah James.



Noah

“I’D RATHER SPEND another night with you.” I’m whining. I know I’m whining. And acting like a ten-year-old who’s not getting his way. I place the car in park, looking straight ahead. I won’t look at him. I don’t like what he’s said.

“Okay, first off, you big fat baby,” he both teases and scolds at the same time. “I don’t think I’m being unreasonable. And anyway, you promised your brother.”

We had pulled up to his apartment complex twenty minutes early. I still don’t like Ashton’s suggestion.

“And what is second?” I ask, but I know.

“You know, but if I have to say it—” He lets out a long deep sigh. “What we shared last night was special. Seeing each other every night isn’t an option, especially with you in the north and me in the south; it’s too much a commute. Add the fact that I don’t own a car, and my work schedule is all over the place, seeing each other once a week and then on the weekends isn’t a bad thing.”

He playfully slugs me, and I finally turn my face to him. “But you’re afraid if we see each other too often, or go too quick, then it might affect us?” We both had been just shy of declaring our love for each other last night, so maybe his point is a little bit more valid than I’m admitting.

“There’s that too. And maybe it won’t, but we also have our art. Kate wants a new show with you, and a premiere for me.”

Okay, I can admit when I’m ridiculous. Although I dislike doing so. “I hate when someone is right, and that someone isn’t me!” I fist his T-shirt in my hand, almost pulling Ash over the center console.

He chuckles against my lips. “Thanks for not being mad.” He opens his mouth as I do, and the kiss is sweet. No reason to go into my brother’s house with a boner.

“I don’t think I could be mad at you, Ash. But, I’ll miss you, and I do have a lot of inspiration for drawings, after this weekend.”

He drops my head to his. “You can’t just draw me after sex, you know.”

“I can’t. Really? It just means I have more reason to make love to you, if I can call it work related too.”

I bat my long eyelashes at him. But, his eye lashes are as long and thick as mine. “I guess I never met someone with as thick and long lashes as me.”

He leans back in the passenger’s seat, just to laugh more. “My sister says the world is unfair. That a man having eyelashes like mine should be illegal. She’ll have a fit when she sees you.”

“By the way, do I get to meet your sister soon?” I expect pushback, but his lips curve up into a smile.

“Tia’s big mouth let it slip to my mom that I met someone. She has asked us to come over for dinner, but...”

“Okay, just because I’m not ready for you to meet my mom, doesn’t mean I don’t want to meet yours. My mom is *so* overbearing. We’re getting to know each other, and I want a little bit more time before she comes in like a bull in a china cabinet and does her Evelyn James smothering.”

“I can’t believe your mom is that bad, but I’m not pushing you to meet your mom. And I told my mother to give us a

couple weeks, and we'd come for her world-famous chicken fried chicken."

I moan at the idea. "Chicken fried chicken is almost as good as an orgasm. It's not something you see often here in the Pacific Northwest."

"Mom grew up in the south, so she cooks comfort foods more often than is probably healthy. But I won't say no to her home cooking."

I'm lost in him, the way his face smiles differently when he speaks of his mother and sister.

"Now I want chicken fried steak, and I know my brother isn't making anything that good. Fuck, I hope he's not cooking."

A beep interrupts my complaints concerning my brother and my phone lights up with his picture.

"Speak of the devil."

Ugly Twin: *Are you two sitting down in your car all night making out or will you come upstairs? Dinner is getting cold. And you know I'm hypoglycemic. So, get your ass up here.*

"Fuck, I think he cooked. Don't worry, we'll stop by a fast food restaurant when I take you back to your place." I type out a reply quickly.

Me: *Please tell me you're not going to kill my boyfriend with food poisoning.*

Ugly Twin: *Food poisoning is almost never fatal. Anyway, you can relax, I ordered Korean.*

"Oh, good news. You won't get killed by my brother's cooking. He ordered Korean."

He tugs at my hand, feathering kisses over each knuckle individually. "Thanks for sharing your brother with me. I know he's the most important person in the world to you."

But, as I grab for him, after exiting the car, I hold the hand of the man who is becoming the most important person to me.

“YOU’RE KIDDING ME. Please tell me you’re kidding me.” He turns to Liam, and then back at me.

“Nope. That was all him!” Liam has no problem selling me out.

“You were going to create your own fish tank? Hell, I’m imagining this in my mind.”

“Mom told me no, and to use my own imagination,” I protest.

“What she meant is to draw a picture, not to create one in our bathtub,” Liam emphasizes.

“She wasn’t specific. How was I to know we had old pipes?”

“And how long did you keep the fish in the bathtub?” Ash questions.

“They died every day. I’d walk down the block to the pet store to get more about every three or four days. Mr. Mines never questioned me. Just took my money. As I think back on that, it should have been a red flag for the man.”

“But how long did you keep the water in the tub?”

Liam opens his mouth to answer, but I beat him. “Two months. But we didn’t know there was a small leak, rotting away at our ceiling. And fuck, one day the tub fell right through it, in the hallway, when mom had her hoity-toity bridge group over. It was a whole thing.”

Ash covers his mouth, trying to hold back his cackles. “Hell, someone could have been hurt, or killed. But how the fuck did your mom not know your bathtub was your fish tank?”

“Liam and I shared a Jack and Jill bath, and after we were about eight, Mom refused to come in our rooms because we were stinky boys. We showered in the guest bath, after mom was in bed.” Liam continues to overshare. “It was one reason

Mom agreed to move to Queen Anne. I mean, Noah single-handedly destroyed our house.”

“You were a willing participant in the whole thing, need I remind you?” I add, kicking my brother’s leg under the table.

“Yeah, but I skirted out of the punishment. Because you were the one buying fish every three days. Let’s just say, after that fiasco, Mom was a lot more specific with Noah when she told him to do something.”

I don’t mind my brother selling me out. Lord knows there’s worse things he could be tattling to Ash about.

“Did it get fixed before you moved?” He’s really enjoying this story.

“Oh, yeah, to the tune of ten thousand dollars, and granted, that was seventeen years ago. It was Mom and Dad’s portion after insurance.”

He lets loose a whistle, slapping his thigh.

“I’m glad you find this so funny, honey, but paybacks are a bitch. Wait until I ask your sister about some of your adolescent wrongdoings.”

He opens his mouth to speak but my brother cuts him off. “You have a sister?” His brows raise with curiosity, but I know my brother.

Both Ashton and I reply at the same time. “No, absolutely no.”

I sigh, because with Liam, you tell him no and it just ramps up his interest more. “I’m serious, William Andrew. Tia is off limits.” I’m stern with my brother, more than I typically am.

With two fingers, he salutes me. “Aye, aye, captain.”

I don’t believe Liam for one moment.

“So, her name is Tia,” he muses out loud. “That’s a pretty name. Is she cute? What color hair does she have?”

He’s teasing me, but Ash’s jaw is tight. “You’re pissing off my boyfriend, little brother. Can we not do that?”

His lips curl into a broad grin, letting out a peal of laughter. “Ah, you’re growing up. A boyfriend and everything.”

“You’re fucking ridiculous, you know that, right?”

“Absolutely, but you two are so fucking cute together. Don’t worry, Ash, I won’t hit on your sister.” He pauses for a slight moment. “Most likely not, anyway.”

We get through the night, and Ashton doesn’t hit my brother. I call it a success.

The drive south is quiet, my hand on his knee the whole time.

“Your brother is a fucking mess, but hilarious. Thank you for sharing a part of yourself with me. All weekend long, I’ve learned more and more about you.”

His eyes turn to the landscape outside, and I have my next piece for my charcoal sketches. Will I ever run out of ways to draw Ash? I hope not. As long as he’s in my life, I should have an endless supply of moments to share with the world.



A shton

“YOU DON’T HAVE to be nervous, babe.” My hand reaches over the console, but I’m the one driving tonight. He holds flowers in his lap, and dessert. His leg is shaking, and his hands are sweaty.

“I’ve never met anyone’s family before,” he admits.

I turn onto the street that I’ve called home since I was ten. It’s a modest neighborhood in Bothell. The homes have doubled in price, because it’s the Seattle area, but the one-story ranch is less than twelve-hundred square feet and holds the best memories.

I pull into the driveway, behind my mother’s car, and before I can get out of it, Tia comes bouncing down the walkway.

“You got a car?” Her question is the first thing out of her mouth.

“Well, hello to you too, T. And no, it’s Noah’s car, but since I know the way, he asked me to drive.”

She takes a long look at Noah’s sleek Mercedes. “Hell, you must really like my brother to let him drive this beauty.”

“Oh, here we go.” Tia has a slight filter, but stuff still passes through without any thought on her part.

“Oh, by the way, I’m Tiana, but most everyone calls me Tia.”

“Or brat,” I offer.

Her fuck-you glare reaches my eyes, but her attention turns back to Noah. “It’s nice to meet you.” She’s polite, I’ll give her that.

“Noah James. Nice to meet you too, Tia.” He extends his hand, but she pulls him in for a hug.

“Hell, if my brother brought you home, you’re someone special.” Noah relaxes into my sister’s embrace, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. He’s not a deer in the headlights, like I assumed he’d be.

“Come on. Mom is in the kitchen. She’s been cooking all day.” She loops her arm with Noah’s, escorting him inside, and I grab his dessert and flowers.

“Mom? Guess who I found outside.” My mom turns from the kitchen, a straight shot from the foyer, her oven mitts on both hands.

“Ashton!” she calls behind Tia and Noah, flinging off her mitts and bee-lining her way to my boyfriend.

“Noah, it’s so good to meet you.” Caitlyn Brooks is affectionate, always has been, and pulls him into an embrace.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Brooks.”

Mom will not like that. “Oh, none of that Mrs. nonsense. Call me Caitlyn, please.”

He turns around, taking the flowers out of my hands. “These are for you Mrs.—I mean, Caitlyn.”

She takes the bouquet, and stares at the dish in my hands. “You made a dessert too?”

“My mom would be appalled if I didn’t bring anything,” Noah explains, while my mom ushers him into the living room.

“I think I’d like your mom. Tia, baby, can you pour us some wine?” She looks to Noah. “Dinner will be another thirty

minutes. Would you like merlot or riesling? I have beer, too.”

Tia sets the wine glasses on the coffee table, taking mom’s and filling it generously with riesling then grabs mine for the merlot.

“Merlot, please,” he answers, and Tia pours another glass, returning to the riesling and filling her glass to the top.

I relax into the sofa, tugging Noah close to me.

“Tell me more about yourself. Ashton has been tight lipped about you.” Mom’s stare stays on Noah, as she sips on her wine.

Noah and I exchange looks with each other. “You didn’t tell her?”

“Oh, this will be good. Are you an FBI agent, a spy, a male gigolo?” Tia asks.

“Tiana Frances,” my mom only half admonishes. I’m surprised my mother didn’t ask it herself.

“Well, I don’t think I’ve ever been asked that before. I guess I’m a little boring now. But, I’m an artist, like Ash.”

I lean forward taking both our merlots, handing him his glass. “Don’t let him fool you, he’s a very accomplished artist. Kate, at the gallery, set me up with him, remember?”

“So, that was you. What do you paint?” The Brooks Inquisition continues for the next thirty minutes, until we sit down at the table.

Noah is two glasses of wine in, directing his attention to Tia, after all our plates are full.

“So, Tia, tell me all the dirt on your brother. My own brother spilled some on me, so I need payback.”

“Hell, there’s so much. Where to begin?” We sit around the table the rest of the night as not only Tia but my mom tells him of the time I skipped school to go to the zoo but ended up getting a bee sting so bad that it landed me in the ER. The stories continue all night long.

I stopped drinking hours ago. We get ready to leave, but Noah wants me to show him my childhood room. Mom has left it the same since I moved out seven years ago.

“It’s not much, babe,” I offer, moving into the room with a twin-sized bed covered with a navy blue and red quilt. There’s still art all over the walls, though most of the decent stuff is at my apartment.

“Is this where you would have visions of cute boys and jack off at their images?” he whispers.

“I’m pleading the fifth on that, Mr. James,” I reply. On my desk next to my bed sits some trophies I’ve won throughout the years. He brings each one up to his line of sight and reads them all out loud.

“The Seattle Arts Association. *From Lake Washington to the Ocean.*” He keeps a hold of it, and continues to stare at it.

“Oh, yeah. I won a contest I entered my first year in college. It was a sit-down dinner, and my mom made me buy a suit,” I explain, remembering the day vividly.

“Yeah, my mom made me get a new suit too.”

“What?” I ask, moving my attention to him.

“I was there that night. I remember. I had the first award, and then Liam came down with an appendicitis. We had to rush him to the hospital.”

“Wait. You were there? My award was second. Oh, fuck, we were in the same room at the same time. Isn’t that crazy?” I ask.

He sets down the trophy, turning around in my arms.

“Or, it’s fate.”

NOAH SAYS good-bye to my two favorite people in my life, and my mom gives me a thumbs-up when he turns his back to

leave. I'm glad to have her approval. But I never had any doubt that they would fall in love with Noah like I have.

"Wanna get away next weekend?" he asks on our drive home from my mom's. He drank tonight to calm his nerves, but he's not drunk.

"What? Where?"

"Liam and I own a place near Bellingham. It's secluded and..." His hand runs up my thigh, suggestively.

"What?" How did I not know this? But again, we've only been dating four weeks.

"I didn't tell you? When our grandpa died, we inherited his cabin. He'd take us up there as often as he could. Although, Mom made him promise not to feed us fast food or take out." He rolls his eyes.

I'm still dumbfounded by this one rule of his mother's. And every time he brings her up, I'm a little more scared to meet her.

"Mom hated it up there. It was too long of a drive, she didn't like the cabin, there were bugs and about ten million other reasons she never came. He took us fishing and hiking. Grandpa was active into his early eighties and died peacefully in his sleep. It's what he would have wanted. Anyway, now that it's spring, and getting a little warmer..."

"Fuck yeah, I want to go. I want you to share every part of yourself with me."

His hand stays on my knee, and it's quiet for a beat, the traffic heavy for a Saturday evening on the I-5.

"Ash, honey?"

I love when he calls me honey. It's sweeter than baby, and it just fits.

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Thanks for sharing your family with me. They're both kind and funny and love you so much."

“They fell in love with you, too, Noah. They don’t take to strangers often.”

“I sure fell in love with them, also. Your sister is certainly spirited.” I huff a laugh. Spirited is a great way to describe Tia.

“Hey, honey, I have a question for you?” He pauses briefly. “Do you mind if I work when we get home? When the inspiration hits me, I find I’m more productive than trying to force it into a more convenient time.”

“You want to work with me around? I mean, you’d share that part of you?”

What we do as artists is so private, so personal sometimes, that I can’t create with others. But I think I could with Noah.

“I don’t know if it’s the fact that you’re an artist too, or that you’re just you, but yeah, and if you want to, I have that same paper you use on your water colors, and...”

“You bought the same paper? How did you know?”

I turn to his profile, a smile peeking out from his supple lips. “I asked Kate. She was able to figure it out with her voodoo magic.”

“You bought stuff for me to paint, in your space.” I’ve never felt closer to a man than I do now.

“Yeah, I want you to think of it as your space, too, Ash.”

And right then, I have a need to paint, just as he does. He’s sparked something inside of me, I can’t hold back.

OUR ART IS as intimate as us making love. I stare at him in his studio, with charcoal in his hand.

Not only did Noah have my paper, he had every ingredient to make my own watercolors. He found out early on that my paints were my own creation, writing each color down like it’s a recipe for baking.

I start mixing colors together as an idea forms in my mind. I've set aside two pieces for my premiere, giving Kate a picture to sell today when we stopped by the studio.

The One earned me two thousand dollars. I placed the money in the bank. It's the first time I've had more than fifty dollars in savings. Noah pushes me. He may use me as his muse, but he'll always be mine.

After four colors are mixed, I take one of his extra sketch books he told me I could use, walking around his apartment, finding the best view, lighting, and illumination for the scene in my head. Do I include the natural light of the windows, or paint his brick wall in this piece? I move from the sitting area, looking over his studio, then back to where we made love under the windows almost four weeks ago.

Noah doesn't ask me what I'm doing. He may look up from his sketch once in a while, but he's lost in his own world, as I'm lost in mine. Plus, even if we don't have the same process, he understands *I have a process*.

I find comfort on the couch we never moved back to his sitting room and begin a simple sketch, including the curves of the banisters that follow the second and third levels of his loft. And with the vantage point, I start with simple strokes to give my mind more of an idea of what I want, and how to make it happen.

"Honey?" he calls from his art desk on the third level. "It's four a.m., and I'm wiped. Ready to come to bed? If you're not, it's okay."

"I'll crawl into bed in a little while. Want me to wake you? And yes, that's code for sex."

His voice is groggy, and I look behind me. There's charcoal all over his hands, and the bags under his eyes tell me the man has worked himself to exhaustion.

"No, just cuddle up next to me. I just want your body next to mine."

I don't hear another peep out of him, until his snores fill the silence. After creating my original sketch, which I'll base

everything off of, I crawl into bed next to him, draping my arm over his body, and it's the last thing I remember.

ANYTIME I'M in my classroom at the boys and girls club, gratification is what I feel. All these young kids have a place in my heart, and more than just as their art teacher. Many open up to me. I try to arrive an hour before class. It's time I find is just as important as the lesson, if not more important.

Mrs. Bronte, the director of the center, pops her head into the classroom. "Hey, Ashton."

Mrs. Bronte has a heart for these kids. She single-handedly built this facility from the ground up, raising money, finding a place where children would feel safe. "Mr. James's background check is in. I look forward to seeing you two teach together. I can't believe that such an accomplished artist wants to teach here."

"He's a good guy with a big heart," I say in explanation. She's aware that we're a couple and wasn't bothered in the least by our relationship. Mrs. Bronte doesn't tolerate hate and developed this place as a safe haven for the LGBTQ community.

I'm taking inventory of our supplies. We're running low, but I'm creative and have a lesson plan for each class, in spite of our supply issue.

"Ashton?" The male voice belongs to one of my students.

I look over my shoulder to Devin. His talent at the age of sixteen amazes me. Behind him are his brother and sister. There's something about these kids. I see so much of myself in Devin, with his protective nature for Lainey and Collin, like I had for Tia at that age. But, his parents are neglectful, and I know their struggle is much harder than mine ever was. I had my mom, but they have no one but each other.

"Hey guys. Come in." Lainey bounces into the classroom. And she's so full of life, always ready to be my helper. I

typically bring extra snacks and find a way to offer it to them, without any of them feeling like they are a charity case.

“What can I do to help, Ash?” Lainey asks. All three kids show a lot of talent, and I allow Lainey and Collin to participate in the intermediate class after this one. Sometimes the two younger kids do both.

I hand her paint brushes and paint, and she begins setting them in front of each individual person’s workspace.

“Dev, you okay?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah. We’re good.”

I don’t believe him. “Did it get turned off again?” I ask of the heat.

“No, this time it’s the water.”

I place my hand out in front of me. “Hand it over.” He digs for a piece of paper out of his pocket. It’s a bill. I have very little left over at the end of the month, but I’ll be damned if I let these kids go without the basics in life.

“This shouldn’t be your problem, Ash,” he protests.

“You’re never a problem. And it should never be your problem, either. And thanks so much for coming to me.” I know it’s a lot on him to ask for help.

Before stepping out of the room to pay this bill so they’ll have water this evening, I point to a bag of snacks. “Greg bought a whole bunch of junk food then decided he’d go on a diet. Be sure to help yourself,” I offer. These kids are so special. I only wish their parents saw it.

FOR THE PAST FOUR WEEKS, we’ve been intentional with our time together. As quick as we’ve fallen for each other, I tried to show him that spending too much time together could cause us problems. Noah agreed, reluctantly. But, I’ve gotten some pushback. After five weeks of seeing each other once mid-

week, then Saturday and Sunday, he's mentioned spending more time together.

This week, he's staying the night with me after we volunteer at the boys and girls club. It took a while for his background check to come back. He's so excited to help me work with these kids. He's also bringing better supplies, some donated by Kate and the rest on his dime.

My phone beeps, and every time I read his name, a huge smile appears on my face. "Is that him?" Greg asks, playing a game against the computer. "That's what I'm talking about," he yells at the screen. The asshole scored another record.

"Yeah, it's Noah. I thought you were going out tonight. Weren't you and Dave going to give us the place for a couple hours."

"Sure, but don't be having sex on my fucking couch or chair."

"Let me win next time and I won't," I joke, loving to fuck with the man.

"Whatever. But yeah. Dave and I are meeting up with friends from high school."

"Um, what? You went to high school together. You barely talk."

He lets out a long and high pitched chuckle. "You know, we're not a bunch of girls that have to talk every day. We talk when we need to."

"Wonder what else I'll find out about you two?"

"You'll never know," he quips. My phone beeps, and it's Noah, again.

"See you later. Thanks for giving me the apartment for a couple hours..."

I'm out the door before Noah texts me again. I've not seen him in three days, and honestly, he may not need to convince me. Maybe I'm ready to spend more time together.

IT TOOK us three trips to bring in all the supplies he and Kate have donated to the kids.

He's unpacking all of them for the first class. "Tell me what I need to know."

"This class is beginners. There are some with God-given talent, but most of the kids want or need a way to escape their lives. And it's what I give them. The second class are kids who could go far with their art. Most are older, ten and up. I have a sixteen-year-old who brings his nine-year-old brother and seven-year-old little sister in the class. He can't come if they can't come. So, just be yourself."

Kids start arriving, and every single one of them comes up to give me a fist bump or a high five, and a couple have been with me long enough that we have secret handshakes. I'd given Noah broad latitude for the project, and with every colorful thin slice of paper he sets at the work station and rounded wood pieces he put at each person's table, I know he's as excited as the kids.

The kids' wide-eyed innocence turns to joy and hushed whispers of anticipation when they see the colorful art supplies on their workstations.

"I told you we'd have a guest instructor, and guess what? He brought us new supplies! Everyone say hi to Noah."

"Hi Noah," they all call out, and he relaxes with their welcome.

"I would like each one of you to stand, tell him your name, your favorite food, and favorite color."

I want to hold his hand as I watch him interact with the children; they have his full attention. And fuck, he's a natural with kids.

"I'm excited to be with you all today. Ashton has told me all about you, and I can't wait to show you what we're doing for the next several weeks. First, art is about color, and

honestly, you get to choose what is pleasing to your own eyes. What colors I might choose for a painting isn't what Annie or Corbin might pick." He points to both kids. "Or even Ashton. So today we're making a sun catcher. And this isn't just *any* sort of suncatcher."

Each kid thumbs through their supplies. "Who here knows what it means to build onto something you learned. Can I get anyone to give me an example?"

Corbin is the first to raise his hand. "We have to learn addition and subtraction before we can learn division and multiplication."

Noah and I share a pleased look with one another. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Good job, Corbin. It's what we're doing today. We're going to work on stuff that will help us make something even bigger later on in the year. But today is all about learning what colors you like together. Each one of you have special glue and a rounded piece of wood. I'll call a table at a time to come up and pick up different strips of colors. As you see, each one is a different shape and length. We have a lot of colors to pick from. You decide how many colors you want, then we add the items that will help catch the sun." He holds up tinsel, marbles, and even glitter glue.

He begins to show the class, with his own piece of rounded wood, how he'd choose to decorate it. "This is how I'll decorate mine." He's exact in his technique, making it symmetrical. "This is the fun thing about art, it's in the eye of the beholder. You don't have to copy others to create your own masterpiece."

We call each table up to grab supplies, and they begin creating their own pieces of art.

"You sure went out of the box with this suncatcher. Never seen it before."

He shrugs his shoulders, and smiles that sexy grin of his. "What can I say, I'm original." He leans in and gives me a kiss, and the kids ooohhhh and giggle and make kissy noises.

I ignore them. “I love your idea. Where is it leading?” I ask.

“It’s something that has stayed with me all these years, and I got the idea for it at a science center, of all places.”

The mention of the science center makes me smile, remembering it was where my mother took me for my ninth birthday. A memory I’ll always hold on to.

LAINY, Collin, and Devin are the first in the classroom, after dismissing the beginner’s class. I’d shared a little about their situation with Noah. I didn’t want to break the trust I’ve built with Devin for the past year. He knows they’re neglected at home and are good kids.

Lainey bounces over to me, giving me a high-five and a hug, then stares at the easels and acrylic paints Noah had set out at every workstation.

“What? Have I died and gone to art heaven?”

She’s animated and dramatic, but so damn sweet.

“Wow, what did you do Ash, go out and rob a bank?” Dev asks, looking around the classroom, a glimmer of excitement plastered on his face.

“Are you Noah James?” Devin asks, stepping back, taking in the sight in front of him. “I’m a huge fan!”

Noah is certainly a name in the art community, but as far as the world goes, he’s not reached the status of Ansel Adams. If Devin knows of him, he must have been looking.

“I follow the local art scene in Seattle. Your work is so inspiring.”

Noah isn’t one to take compliments. He comes across cocky, but not in this way. He’s confident in himself, and he doesn’t rely on other’s praise. But he’s always gracious when one is given. “Thanks so much. And you must be Devin?”

“I am. And these are my siblings, Lainey and Collin.” He turns around to find his siblings in the room, pointing to them.

“What’s your medium?” Noah asks.

Devin grins, and I can tell in the way his leg shakes that he’s both nervous and pleased that Noah is interested in him.

“Oil paints are my go-to. I love acrylic paints and dabble in watercolors, mainly because of this guy pushing me out of my comfort zone.” Devin points to me.

“Being pushed out of your comfort zone isn’t a bad thing, you know.” It’s meant to be an encouragement, and Devin takes it that way with the easy-going smile on his face.

“So, are we going to paint or are you all going to gab all day long?” Lainey says, finding an easel in the back part of the room.

“You have to watch that girl,” Collin says out of nowhere. “She’s the one I’d call the wild factor.”

Collin is quiet, but when he has something to say, he says it.

Noah stares at each kid, as if he already knows how special they are.

“FUCK, I’m tired. That was so much fun, but man, kids can wear you out.” He’s holding my hand, taking the steps to the second floor to my apartment. The intermediate class was great. Each kid was in awe of Noah, as he introduced them to acrylic painting.

He’s holding our Chinese food, and I fish through my backpack for my keys. I’ve tried to work on my own insecurities about my living conditions. It clearly doesn’t bother him, having asked to stay at my place a handful of times.

“Thank you for sharing this part of you with me. I can’t wait to see where my man lays his head down each night.”

“You may not be thinking that when we’re both jammed into a full-sized bed.”

“You know how much I love to spoon you, so, don’t worry about me. I’m not hungry yet. Can you show me your room?”

My eyes squint toward his, a questioning look on my face. “Is that code for something? Because...” I take the food from his arms and place it in the small galley kitchen, wrapping my hands around him.

“No, and don’t worry. I’ve not fucked you in three days, but, right now, I want to see more of you, so lead the way,” he demands.

“It’s the door at the end of the hall.” With a wave of my hand, he follows me. My room isn’t much. Four walls, with a bed, but most of the space holds my art desk, an easel, and a bookshelf with a thousand supplies.

“I pay seventy-five dollars more a month to have my own bathroom. Comes in handy with paint and such.”

One wall is completely covered with old paintings of mine. Nothing that is worth much sold, but worth a million dollars because they all hold so many memories. There’s a large cork board with some of my favorite mementos on display. It’s the first thing that catches his eyes. He steps toward it, touching the tassel of my graduation caps, one from high school and the other from college. There’s a small 3-D Kermit the Frog, the last thing my dad gave me.

“We were in the entryway of a small pizza joint, and I begged my dad to get me something from one of those silly machines, where you put in a quarter, you twist it, and whatever you just won comes out in a rounded dome you open. It was that small Kermit the Frog. Three days later, my dad died. I may not remember a lot about him, but I remember that day, and how happy I was with my Dad.” Noah’s hand squeezes my shoulder, dropping a kiss onto my nose.

“Is this a speeding ticket?” he asks. moving from left to right.

“Oh, yeah. A reminder to me never to speed because my insurance went up by a hundred dollars a month. Believe me, it was a painful lesson.”

There’s a postcard my sister sent me from her trip in California when her softball team made it to nationals. Next to it is a picture of my mom when she was twenty-two.

“Is this Tia with blonde hair?”

“No, it’s my mom. Uncanny, isn’t it? Tia has always had red hair, though.”

He nods his head, stopping on one of my favorite memories. “You went to see Pearl Jam this year?” He points to the date on the ticket stub.

“Yeah, I worked so hard for that ticket. I remember it because it was the day after my birthday.”

Noah turns around, a tear in his eye. What did I say?

“My brother and I went too. I remember it because it was our birthday.”

I guess it would be, since we’re just a day apart. “It was so cold. Tia was bundled up in the biggest, ugliest blue puffer jacket, and all I wore was a flannel. I was so fucking cold. But, I mean, we were in Seattle with the best grunge band ever.”

“I can’t argue with you. So funny we were both there at the same time. It’s like we were meant to be.” My heart warms with Noah’s comment. He’s right. I think we were *always meant to be*.

He asks me questions about my mementos on the board, and I tell him everything. I won’t keep anything back, and I find that I don’t want to.



Noah

SIX WEEKS. I've been with Ashton for six weeks. I look over at Ash, his eyes on the road leading to Maple Falls. I prefer to take Highway 9, then the I-5; that way we can pass through cozy towns.

"It may still be a little cold to do a lot outside, but my favorite place is called Artist's Trail. We should be able to go on a small hike, depending how much of it is opened."

"I have three days in the wilderness with my man. I don't need to be entertained." He never takes his eyes off the outdoors.

"Did I tell you there's a hot tub?" He shoots his attention to me, and I waggle my eyes.

"I didn't bring my swim trunks."

"Babe, you don't need your trunks," I reassure him, his smile growing at the idea.

"I guess you're right. So, tell me about this place. What's the name of the town again?"

"It's called Maple Falls. You blink, you miss it. It's small, but the cabin is about ten miles from it. Grandpa made it our own little retreat. We're not far from a waterfall and a creek. There's a freestanding covered picnic area, with an outdoor kitchen. Throughout the years he added things, like a

treehouse for Liam and I, but I'd not trust the structural integrity at this point. There's a zip line. However, I'd say the same thing about that too. It's all stuff we want to fix before we have families of our own. The house is open, like my loft, and has a room over the main living area. We want to build another structure, where I can have you and Liam can have whoever the fuck he's dating up here at the same time."

"Liam won the bet, about not dating anyone, didn't he?" Ash asks.

"Thanks for reminding me. I gave him six weeks. And he made it. Fucker. Now I'm out a hundred dollars." Ash starts to laugh at me. I love how easy going we are together.

"What's your best memory with your grandpa here?" he asks, moving his hand to my knee.

"Wow, there are so many wonderful memories. He started bringing us up here when we were seven. We lived in Issaquah at the time. Grandma, who was our mom's mom, had died the year before. Grandma and Grandpa loved this area and wanted to retire here. They saved to build their dream retirement home. One day Grandma was fine, and the next, she was diagnosed with cancer. She was gone in five weeks. It may be one reason our mom never wanted to be a part of this place. It reminded her too much of her mother. Anyway, his needs changed when Grandma died, and because Olympia was the last place he lived with Grandma, he couldn't sell the house. He had the A-frame cabin built, adding to the property each year."

"Fuck, Noah. I'm so sorry. That's a horribly sad story."

"I don't remember much about my grandma because I was barely seven, if that. I'd say the best memories with our Gramps was sitting out over the open fire at night. We'd cook hotdogs and s'mores—as long as we didn't tell Mom. And Grandpa was the best storyteller. He gave us the gift of knowing our grandma through stories, and understanding mom a little bit better. She's an only kid, so when he died, it was the last of her first family, as she called her parents. So, those stories were the best memories. And guess what? The fire pit

has improved over the years, and tonight we're having hotdogs, baked beans, and s'mores for dinner. Hope that's okay?"

He has been hanging on every word I've said. "That is the sweetest thing. And I never thought hotdogs and baked beans could be romantic, until now. I want no other meal."

Ash's radiant smile stays on me, his fingers massaging my neck. "What?" I ask.

"I'm just watching you. You're my favorite view in this world."

"Ditto, honey. Always you."

We park in the back, nearest the door leading to the kitchen. It's easier to unload the groceries and our suitcases.

Because we enter from the back door, the first thing we see is the large A-frame windows that look out into the wilderness. "Holy fuck. If I were you, I'd lock myself in this place and paint for months."

"I've been known to disappear a time or two and do that, but now, my studio in my loft, looking out over Seattle, gives me all the feels."

But it doesn't stop me from wrapping my arms around his waist, his body looking out, and my chin on his shoulder, watching what he's currently watching.

"What is the first thing we should do?" he asks.

I have an idea. "It's a little chilly still, but I want to take you down to the creek. Don't worry," I say working kisses up and down his neck. "I won't toss you in."

We make quick work of our jackets, gloves, and hats. It may be the middle of April but we're not far from the Canadian border.

"You sure you're not going to toss me in, babe?" Ash asks, nuzzling into my neck.

I peek through the trees that open up to the creek, and it's still here. I didn't know if it still was. I point to a metal park

bench, big enough to seat the both of us.

“My grandfather installed this the first year we came up here.” I point to the cement that holds the bench. On it is a plaque.

For my Bonnie. This is the place I'll always meet you.

“We never came here—not to this part of the creek—when Grandpa was alive, because it was his place for him and Grandma. But now, I know he'd want me to share it with the person I love.”

His head whips to mine. I take his hand to pull him onto the bench, next to me. “I love you, Ash. I love you so fucking much that my body aches for your touch. I worry about you, but I also have great big dreams for our future, honey. All of it includes you by my side.”

His hands grab onto mine, but they're shaking. “Noah James, I love you so fucking much. My declaration may not be as poetic as yours, but I want you more and more each day. I love when we're together and hate it when we're apart.”

I cup his face with my gloved hands, kissing his forehead, then his nose, and lastly landing on his lips. I lick the seam of his mouth, and when he opens up for me, I drink in all his sweetness, mixed with his throaty laugh. I won't forget this day, the beginning of us. I might have known he was mine on the first date, but he's more than I could have ever imagined.

“I love you,” he whispers into my mouth. “I fucking *love you*, Noah.”

I want him, I need him, and I break our kiss to tug him by the hands, almost running toward the cabin. I had the foresight to turn on the hot tub before I brought him out here. We bypass it because it's still too cold to have any part of my torso out of the water, and for what I want, it won't work. Afterward is a whole other story.

“Will you make love to me, Ash? Please, I need to feel every part of you.” He's only topped me one other time, early on, but we both got off on it.

I have him against the large open window. If someone drove up the driveway, they'd see our cocks at full attention.

“All you ever have to do is ask, Noah.”

He turns around, making quick work of my jeans, and because the only thing the guy ever wears is track pants, he pushes them down.

“I want you completely naked,” he orders, and of course he orders. He's bossy bottoming, but unbelievably domineering topping. “We may have to take Windex to these windows when we're done.”

He nibbles the bottom of my lips, rutting his hips and cock into mine. “You've been different from the day I met you. This chemistry...you were made for me, Ash.”

Holding my body tight to his, he moves me to the glass, turning me around as I look out the window. He's behind me. “So happy we don't have to use condoms anymore,” he whispers in my ear.

His hand reaches around me, jerking me off slowly. “I fucking love you so much, Noah. And right now, I'm going to show you just how much.”

“Yeah, you do that baby. Fuck me sweet, hard, and naughty. I want it all with you.”

He drops to his knees, his hand still caressing my cock. His finger sits at my hole. “Fuck, this hole is so sexy and I can't wait...”

He doesn't finish his sentence when his tongue begins to rim me. I drop my head back, imagining his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, bringing me so much pleasure as he strokes my cock and worships me with his tongue.

“Fuck, I'm going to come.”

His touch is instantly gone. “We can't have that,” he whispers, working his way up my body, his mouth landing on my shoulder, his teeth digging slightly into my skin.

“You're mean, Ash, so fucking mean.”

“I’m just prolonging your pleasure. Anyway, you’re cute when you pout.”

His words do so much to me, and I squirm with need. “Please, Ash. Please. I need you too much.”

“Where’s the lube?” he asks.

“My jeans pocket.”

He leans down and returns with the bottle. “You were ready. That’s my good boy.”

It’s not a kink I’m used to, but being his good boy as he’s about to top me is fucking hot. So fucking hot.

“Push into your good boy. Show me what a good boy I’ve been.”

“Shit, you’re gonna make me cream before I even get inside of you.”

“Ah, we can’t have that, now can we,” I mock, using his words against him.

He’s not gentle, pushing into me, and I don’t want gentle. I want him frenzied for our closeness, our intimacy and future.

“You want me to top you more? Fuck your ass, lick your hole, finger your prostate, stroke your cock, make you come all over the glass? I’m your man, any fucking time you want it.”

“Shit, Ash! Yes, all of it. More now. More later. I’ll never tire of you.”

He rubs his nipples against the back of my skin, and the friction of his piercing has him whimpering. “Does that feel good against the barbells in your nipples?”

“Fuck yeah, that too. What about when I do this?”

He feathers his finger over my Prince Albert, and it takes everything I have not to jizz all over the windows.

“Are you close?” he asks.

“So fucking close.” I drop my head behind me, and he licks a trail around my Adam’s apple. “Fuck! I’m coming!” As

soon as the words leave my mouth, my cum is painting the windows. And it's a work of art, if I don't say so myself. Anything Ash and I create together is a work of art.

HE'S in the hot tub already, when I appear with a cheese and fruit tray and two glasses of Shiraz.

I climb in after setting it on the side of the hot tub. "That was something, baby."

He pushes his body into me, and I wrap my arms around him.

"How're your pieces coming along for your premiere?" Kate moved it up to June seventh and it's been stressful as fuck. "Are you still mad about the new date?"

"No, I'm ahead of schedule. Have you looked at my painting at your place?"

"No. You asked me not to, and I respect your wishes. I promise."

It's been so fucking hard for me, but I won't admit it to him.

"That's my last piece. Sorry, but not sorry. Since you won't share the original charcoal sketch of mine."

He's not wrong. I have a plan for it.

"Are you going to be there this time?" He's speaking of my show, not his.

"I hate going. But I may, because it's been a couple years, but I'll come to yours for sure. Though I worry about taking the attention off of you."

"I want you there." It's how I know I love him. It sets me out of my comfort zone.

"And I'll be there. So, tell me what do you have in store for the great art community of Seattle?" I lean in and kiss his lips.

“It’s all watercolors, with a bright vibrant palette, larger pieces. My supplier has been out of the large paper I use. I have four of the same size as *The One*. Then six ranging from 8 by 10 to 20 by 30.”

He’s shown me just one—the space needle from the view we shared when I took him to the marina our first night together.

“Oh, by the way, Liam told my mom I’m seeing you, and Helicopter Evelyn is up my ass about having you over for supper.” I’m still not ready, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be.

Our eyes meet like he’s staring straight into my soul. It’s as though he can read my mind. “But, you’re not quite sure,” he questions.

“Fuck, I sound like the worst son. My mom is great, she really is. I don’t know if I’m ready to share you with her. It has nothing to do with you, I swear.”

“Noah, I don’t take offense to it. Whenever you’re ready, *I’m ready, baby.*” He pulls my arms tighter around him.

“Well, mom has this picnic on Memorial Day. I know it’s still a month away but, I was thinking, she won’t be up your butt if she’s hosting. And then maybe after my show, we can go out for dinner. It will be Mom, Dad, and Liam. It’s a rare occasion she’ll eat out.”

“Just tell me when to be there, and I will. And most likely, since you’re my ride, you’ll have to come get me.”

We talk for two hours, eating all the grapes and finishing two bottles of wine between us.

“You are my favorite, I hope you know that,” I whisper into his ear.

“And you’re my favorite too.” He feathers kisses over each knuckle, and I’ve never been happier.



Noah

“YOU’RE FUCKING sexy in my space.”

Ash jumps and whips around in my closet, clean clothes in hand.

“Do you make it your life’s mission to scare the fuck out of me every chance you get?”

He’s in a towel after showering, something we both thought we should do separately. We’re already running late thanks to our morning delight, which wasn’t food.

“Sorry. I love seeing you pull clothes out of my closet, and your toothbrush next to mine is lonely on days you’re not here. I smell your body wash you use when you stay the night. I legit take a long whiff of it in the morning, and miss you.”

He drops the towel, pulling up a pair of light orange dress shorts, something he felt he needed to wear to meet my mom and dad.

“Must I go on?” I’ve hinted around to moving in together. I know his hang ups. We see each other four to five nights a week. On the days I volunteer at the boys and girls clubs, I stay with him. He’d joked the first night that it would be tight with us in his full-sized bed, *and it hadn’t been a joke*. He has a job that helps supplement the money he’s pulling in from his sales, and when he’s got an early shift he doesn’t think it

makes sense to spend the night together. He also fears we'll get tired of one another.

"What did I say?" Ash asks, grabbing a beige T-shirt from a section of hanging clothes. His own section I cleared out for him.

"Okay, but you'll see what a success your show is going to be, and then you won't have an excuse."

He pulls the shirt over his head, and I take a step back, admiring him. The shorts are trendy, sitting mid-thigh. I love his thighs. The outfit makes him look hot. "Maybe we should spend some time in my childhood room later, Ash."

"We're not going to gloss over what you just said, that I won't have an excuse. I don't have the money to move, without a steady job. It's not an excuse. Sure, I could get a barista job near you, but when I quit, I want to quit for good, and contribute to our life we're building together."

He pulls me by my hips, my black jeans hugging me tight, a simple white T-shirt and a beige jean jacket and black shoes to complete the look. "Won't you be hot?" he asks.

"Oh, *I am* hot."

"You're ridiculous, you know that? Give me five minutes to find my lonely toothbrush and make my teeth pearly white. And then we can go."

"Hey Ash?" I call as he heads to the door leading from the closet to the bathroom.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"I like when you talk about the life we're building together."

"You should, because it's the truth."

I hear the electric tooth brush, and before I know it he has his bright white Nikes on, and a dessert in his hands. Fuck, I love this man.

THE STREETS ARE full of cars, everyone coming to my mom's annual celebration of summer.

"How many people come? I mean..." He's nervous but this was all part of the plan, in order to meet my mother where she's not overbearing, with others in the house.

"Believe me, this is the best way to meet my mom. She'll be too busy to bug the shit out of you."

"Okay, you know your mom the best. Let's go. I can't wait to see what your childhood room looks like."

I shake my head, and we cross the street leading to my parent's large house. By Seattle standards, it's a good size, over three thousand square feet.

"Wow. This is nice." The two-story craftsman is older than my parents, but they've maintained it well over the sixteen years they've lived here.

I see familiar faces through the foyer, leading to the outside deck. He stops in the entrance, all modern, something my mom loves—modern minimalistic. I think it's why I love my loft.

His eyes turn to a wall full of pictures. Almost all of them are me and Liam. "Wow, look at baby Noah. You were cute, even then."

"Noah, buddy!" The loud, booming voice startles Ashton, but I know that voice anywhere.

"Hey, Dad."

Ashton leans into me. "I guess you come by scaring people naturally."

My dad doesn't hear him, but barrels toward me, his large arms ready for a hug. "Come here, son. Oh, it's so good to see you. I guess we have this one to blame for keeping you busy."

My dad extends his hand. “Carl James. It’s nice to meet the first guy my son has ever brought home. Welcome to our house.”

My father and I have the same build. Over the years, he has shrunk a little, but he’s well over six feet tall and still has his whole head of hair. Whereas my looks favor my mom, my stature is all from Dad.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. James.”

“Oh, hogwash. Mr. James is my father. Please call me Carl.”

My parents are a good fifteen years older than Caitlyn Brooks, having Liam and me at thirty-four years old.

“It’s nice to meet you, Carl. And thanks for having me.”

“You’re welcome.” He looks over my shoulder. “Do you know where your brother is? You’re already late, and your mother is having an absolute fit, so...”

I wave him off. He doesn’t have to say anything else. “No, I don’t. Last I heard he’d be here by one to help you guys out.”

“Go find your mom. I’ll call your twin before she can send out a search party.”

My eyes reach Ash’s, silently saying, *I told you she was a lot.*

I hold his hand, swinging through the kitchen to grab us both beers before we head outside, and to my mother.

We’re one step on the porch, when my mom’s eyes catch sight of me. “Noah James! I’ve been worried.” Ashton stands behind me and she rushes toward us. I tug Ashton from behind where he stands, and my mother stops in her tracks, mid hug, and stares at Ash like he’s grown two heads.

“Um, Mom, you okay?” I ask, but Ash extends his hand to my mother.

“I’m Ashton Brooks, Mrs. James. It’s wonderful to meet you. Noah has told me so much about you.

My mother stands just shy of five feet eleven inches, with the same olive complexion as mine. But her face drains of color, and she looks from me, back to Ash, not extending her hand.

“Mom, you okay?” I ask again. She stays like this, as everyone in the back yard, at least twenty people, watch her. “Mom, hey. What’s up? You okay?” She still doesn’t answer me. This is not like Evelyn James, and the top of my head breaks out in sweat with concern.

She blinks her eyes, focusing her attention on me. “Oh, I’m so sorry, son. I just got a little dizzy. You know how I get sometimes. Let me just splash some water on my face, and I’ll be right back.” She starts to go, but stops in front of Ash.

“Ashton, I’m so very sorry. Excuse me for just a second. It was nice to meet you.”

She walks around us, and I’m dumbfounded by her reaction. Mom could host picnics, barbecues, and dinner parties in her sleep.

“Should I be concerned that she doesn’t like me?” Ash only half teases.

“No, baby. That’s just my mom being a little extra.” I don’t know how to explain it to Ash, so I leave it at that.

“IT’S WEIRD, RIGHT?” I whisper to Liam, trying to keep my voice down when Ash uses the bathroom thirty minutes later. Mom is still MIA, and I’m attempting to explain her weird reaction to him.

“You two look a lot alike. I mean, it was the first thing I noticed when I met Ash. Maybe she just was taken aback. I’ve heard of sons dating women—or in your case men—like their moms, but never someone who looks more like you than me, your twin.”

“I don’t know. I wish you would have witnessed it. Everyone around the backyard saw it. Maybe ask Casey or

Jessie.” They’re cousins of ours on our dad’s side.

“I wouldn’t read too much into it. It’s just mom being mom.”

That normally explains almost anything of Evelyn James, but I can’t put my finger on it.

Ash looks like he’s a deer in the headlights as some of my parent’s neighbors have cornered him. “Let me go rescue Ash. He’s rattled by mom’s weird reaction, like she already hates him.”

“I’ll catch up with you later, then. I better start the grill, since Mom and Dad aren’t down here.”

I move toward Ash and tactfully rescue him out of the snake pit. I never saw it going down this way. “Hey, come with me,” I offer, extending my hand, and he takes it as we climb the steps to the second floor.

I open up my room, still decorated like it was when I left for college at the age of eighteen.

“I thought you could use a break. Fuck, Ash. I’m sorry about my mom.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “It’s fine. I can’t imagine it has anything to do with me. She saw me for all of ten seconds.”

I tug him onto my twin-sized bed, pulling him against the wall, his head leaning against my shoulder.

“Hey, I have a question for you. There was a man with a purple T-shirt, glasses, and a straw hat, under the large tree near the back fence—who is that?”

“Ah, if I’m thinking right, that would be my Uncle Jim. He’s not really my uncle. Mom was an only kid, and Jim is her cousin. They’ve always been close, like siblings, because they’re all they had growing up. Why do you ask?”

“He looks familiar, but I can’t place him. I’m usually great with faces. Horrible at names. Maybe he just has one of those faces.”

We're quiet for a couple minutes. I'm wondering if he fell asleep when he pops out of the bed like a fucking jack rabbit. "What is that?"

He steps slowly toward a piece I made when I was nine years old.

"Oh, yeah. That was what I was telling you about the other day, the art project I'm working the kids up to. I saw something similar at the science center on my ninth birthday."

I continue to explain how I was enamored by it, and came home that night and tried to replicate it. But he's lost in his own world, staring as though he's seen it before.



A shton

NOAH IS SPEAKING. I hear his voice, but the words aren't permeating my mind. I'm tuning him out—everything after ninth birthday, science museum, and art project. My mind is transported back to the day I stood next to a boy close to my age, and we talked about how this very item could be made at home. I exchanged words with this kid for less than two minutes while he mostly explained what to do, counting all the colors. He encouraged me, telling me that it would be easy.

“Ash, you okay?” he questions.

“You said you saw this at a science center. On your birthday?” I ask.

“Yeah, not just a science center but the one near what used to be Key Arena, where the Pearl Jam concert took place. Why?”

I can't begin to say what triggers random memories. But something this bright and vivid has prompted me to remember it now, so distinctly.

“My mom worked on my birthday, when I turned nine, and she promised to take me to the Seattle Center the next day. I'd never been in the Space Needle before. But first, she surprised us with tickets to the science center. And I remember seeing something similar, and this boy, close to my age, was counting the colors, telling me how to make it.”

I'm staring at almost the mirror image of what I remembered sixteen years ago. "Was that you?" I ask, my finger touching each color of the open sunlight piñata I remember from so long ago

I can feel Noah's stare on me, and he begins to speak. "I vaguely remember a kid saying he couldn't do it and I said..."

"It's a pattern, see. You just have to count the number of colors, and repeat."

We say the words at the same time. My mouth opens, and my entire body begins to prickle with goose bumps. "Is that even fucking possible? What are the odds, Noah?" I'm in awe, as I am with most things when it comes to my growing relationship with him. "And hell, Noah, this is amazing, and you've had it for sixteen years?" I ask.

"Well, this was my fourth attempt. I had to figure out how to hollow out the middle to make it 3-D. It's what I'm trying to teach the kids."

"You know what this means, right, honey?" His chin rests on my shoulder as we both look at the first piece of art that connected us.

"What?"

"Our destiny was written well before we met."

I can't argue with him, and I don't. He holds me as we continue to stare at a part of history, our history, which we didn't know of until just now.

WE'VE MADE it to his bed, as I rifle through older paintings he'd saved in a large filing cabinet. They range anywhere from ten years old to eighteen. And though his craft has improved, it's obvious he had so much talent as a younger Noah James.

He tugs his phone out of his pocket, and Noah's forehead fills with wrinkles the way it does when he's upset. "Shit, it's a text from Liam. Mom still isn't downstairs. Not that it's

stopping people from eating. Do you mind if I go check on her?”

Noah pulls me with him, as he pushes to his feet, and I follow him out of the room. “I’ll go find your brother. Go check on your mom, baby.”

I push up onto my tip toes, kissing his forehead. “I love you, Ash,” he calls back as I walk away, our fingers barely still touching.

“Ditto.”

His smile is broad. It’s a smile he only gets for me, though I can’t tell you why it’s different. Maybe it’s his eyes, because they brighten when I’m near. Or the little dimple on his chin that is on display for me and me alone. Or maybe it’s something I bring out in him. I understand how much he loves me, and I view him differently than the world does. Whatever it is, I never tire of it.

Liam is manning the grill. I help myself to a beer from the cooler, digging one out from the bottom. Liam is chatting with the man who looks familiar but I can’t place him. “Ashton, over here,” he calls to me, setting the lid over the hamburgers and hotdogs. “Where’s my brother?” Liam takes his own beer and downs half of it.

“Checking on your mom. He was showing me his childhood room.”

Liam lets out a long cackle, and I roll my eyes. “And other things too, I’d guess. Good thing his willy has grown since he was ten.”

I never know what will come out of Noah’s twin’s mouth. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“Or so I’ve been told by my brother a million times. Hey, by the way, let me introduce you to my Uncle Jim.”

Jim extends his arm and I swear I’ve seen him before. “You must be Noah’s boyfriend? We’re all excited to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too. I’m Ashton Brooks.”

His hand goes limp in mine, and his face drains of color. Liam's attention is back on the hot dogs and hamburgers. "Sorry, son, I didn't hear your name."

"It's Ashton Brooks," I repeat, a little bit louder than before.

"Oh, Ashton. Well, yes," he stammers. "It's so good to meet you. I'm sorry, I just saw my wife wave for me. I'll talk to you later."

He steps away like I'm patient zero of the plague, retreating from me as quick as he can.

This family is so weird. At least Noah's dad and Liam are treating me like an actual person.

"Where did Uncle Jim go?" Liam asks, looking over the top of the grill, trying to track his movements.

"He mentioned finding his wife. He too seemed spooked by me." What is it with this family today? Once is odd, twice seems like more than a coincidence.

Liam points to the side of us, a picnic table set up in the backyard. "Hmm, that's weird, because there's Lois, his wife, over there."

This has been the weirdest day, with abnormal behavior. "Do you know what could have spooked your mom? She took one look at me, and I thought she might faint."

I'd be offended, but from all Noah has explained about her, I'm not. It seems like drama follows the woman everywhere she goes.

He shuts the lid again, turning down the heat. "Listen, Ash. I love my mom. *She's my mom* and has always put us first in life. But it doesn't mean I understand the woman."

"Fair enough," I add, staring at the doors to the house, to see if I can spot Noah in the crowd of people, but there's nothing. Liam and I find a seat by ourselves, eating hamburgers, potato salad, and something he calls ambrosia salad. After an hour, I leave Liam's company and take a seat on the front porch.

Annoyance is what I feel right now. What did I do to his mother in the thirty seconds she was around me? It's as if she saw through me, the kid that came from poverty. Is she so quick to judgment? And what the fuck was up with this Uncle Jim who isn't really Noah's uncle. Noah has built up my confidence, by accepting me for who I am. In the past two hours, it's been stripped to the bare minimum. I find I don't want to be here anymore and send him a text.

Me: *Babe. What's going on? I think I may take an Uber back to your place.*

He'd given me a key a couple weeks ago, hopeful it would lead to me moving in. Noah and I fit well together. If his mother doesn't like me, tough shit. His reply comes through immediately.

Noah: *No, wait for me. Sorry. I'm on my way down.*

I stand to meet him in the foyer on the other side of the door, with a clear view to the upstairs.

Noah walks out of a bedroom I assume is his mother's, but his Uncle Jim is standing next to him and disappears inside after they speak.

Noah trots down the steps, and he gives me a roll of his eyes, but wraps his arms around me, bringing me close into his embrace. "Did you eat?" he asks.

"Yeah, I did. Why don't you go get a bite? Your brother is cooking more."

He shakes his head. "Nah, let's get out of here." It's as if he senses how uncomfortable I've become in his house. He wraps his arm around my shoulder, crossing the street to get to his car.

"This has been the weirdest day. I mean..."

I cut him off when we slide into his leather seats. "I don't care if your mom doesn't like me. It was obvious. But, please don't lie to me, and tell me *she does like me*. I can't handle it."

He closes his eyes, dropping his head against the head rest. "I don't know what happened with my mom. It wasn't you,

but something bothered her. She took a sleeping pill and was out, with a house full of people. My dad was sharing some stuff my mom's been dealing with, lack of sleep, along with other things. He'd pleaded with her to postpone this year's barbeque. And I stayed longer because my dad needed a listening ear."

I don't mention that she seemed fine until she saw me. It bothers me. It shouldn't because she won't drive a wedge between Noah and me. We're too strong for her to break us up.

"So, what's the story with Devin, Lainey, and Collin?" he asks in between the two classes. We've been teaching together for a couple weeks. Each time the kids hang out with us before or after class and Noah's become as fond of them as I am. As always, I pawn off food to Devin, this week claiming a nut allergy for one of my roommates. Lainey loves peanut-butter-stuffed pretzels, and Collin can't get enough of the grape Uncrustable sandwiches.

"They have had a bad lot in life because they have shitty parents. He has strict orders to come to me if their heat or water get turned off."

I begin to walk past him, and Noah gently tugs me back into his space. "What? You're paying their utilities?"

"I have a couple times."

"But money is tight for you," he counters.

He sits down, moving my body in between his open legs, and I drop my forehead to his. "I love you that you're concerned for me, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make, for those kids."

"Fuck, I love you, Ashton Michael Brooks." There's a pause, and I wait for it. I know it's coming. "But, next time, will you come to me, let me help too?"

"And," I begin, "that is why I love you. And yes, I'll come to you." At the end of the day, my priority is these kids getting

the help they need.

Lainey comes running into class, the breath of fresh air she is. “Are you ready to get your paint on today?” she asks.

Devin and Collin are never too far from her. “She’s so full of energy, and honestly exhausting from day to day.” Collin’s dry humor makes us all laugh, and Lainey breaks into her pretzels while Collin eats two PB&J sandwiches. Noah’s affection for these kids is growing each time we’re near them, and it’s beautiful to watch.



A shton

I'M STAYING the entire week leading up to my premiere with Noah. It's a trial run, as he calls it. He's giving me a picture of what living together will look like. Tonight, I love the picture very much.

He has me tied to the bed. He's not using handcuffs but rope, and from years on his dad's boat, he knows how to tie knots very well.

We've played a little here and there, but his kinks are being further revealed to me each time we're together, and I'm all in.

He doesn't have my legs tied. He likes them in the air, along with my ass, for when he's ready to push inside of me.

But the sadistic bastard loves edging, too. He's stroking my cock, and playing with my prostate at the same time, and whenever I jerk or let his touch take me overboard, he pulls back.

I've called him a bastard a few too many times, and he reaches for something in his top drawer. "Bad boys can't talk."

I watch intently to see what he's doing, and fuck, he has a ball gag in his hands. "You know what to say, right?" he asks.

"Yes." When we play like this he makes it clear he wants answers to his questions unless I have a fucking ball gag in my mouth. Then I'm allowed to answer with a nod of my head.

“Maybe you can be my good boy after all, honey.” He stalks toward me on his knees, straddling my waist, securing the gag to my mouth and around my head. He pushes off the bed. “You look beautiful like this, naked, legs spread, arms tied to my bed, and now you can’t speak. Fuck, I tell you what. Maybe I’ll paint you like this one day.”

My eyes widen, because he certainly would do just that. Of course, he’d never share this moment with another person.

“I love you so much, always giving into my desires.”

He says it as though him worshiping my body is a hardship for me. He’s making me realize the desires I’ve had living deep down in me this entire time.

“Yeah, I know you most likely have something to say, but you can’t.” He crawls back up my body and starts at my tip. He’s about to kill my cock; it’s overstimulated. He licks down the bottom side of my shaft, stopping at my balls.

“These balls are mine.” He pushes my legs up, Licking from my balls to my rim. “And this hole is mine.” He pushes a finger inside of me. “And this prostate. Every orgasm I give you is mine.”

Not that I can argue with him, but I wouldn’t, because they are all his.

“You live in my soul, Ash. Every bit of you is now a part of me. Our fate has always been written in the stars.”

There’s not a person in this world that compares to Noah. There won’t be. I’ve never believed in destiny before him, but from the beginning of time, we’ve been meant to grow old together, even before we breathed our first breath.

“Just think of how I can worship your body every day, if you agree to move in with me.”

It’s a reminder he uses on me all the time, and my heart soars to know he wants me in his space, to share everything he typically holds private.

My life has never made more sense as it does with Noah over my naked and bound body.

He pulls his finger out of me with another impending orgasm ready to rake through me. I can't say anything, but a pouting noise escapes through the gag in my mouth.

“Don't worry baby. Everything comes to those who wait.”

I may just top tomorrow so I can do this to him.

He begins to deep throat me again, his speed increasing, and I fear he won't allow me to have an orgasm. He doesn't remove his mouth, and I suddenly release in the back of his throat.

“Fuck, I'm a whore for your cum, baby,” he says after he swallows every drop from my cock.

I'm sated, but we're not done. He's about to dick me up, and fuck, I love his cock inside of me. Our sex is out of this world amazing, but our closeness to one another increases each time we make love.

He places his cock at the entrance of my hole. “This is more beautiful each time I make love to you, honey. It's amazing, and you”—he pushes inside of me—“take me like the fucking king you are.”

My body always aches for him, and now we're one. But with Noah and me, we're always one with one another. *We are one. One person, one being*, never to lose what we share. I'm stronger every day that he's in my life. My passion for my art increases, and my heart has never been fuller than it is with the man I see as my future.

Electric waves race through my body. He's deliberate but quick. His eyes never leave mine, and in silence we speak. I take in the way his eyes heat with want, yet he's showing how much he loves me. I don't have to hear the words to know it, but he never makes me go long either. No, this is him and me.

“I'm about to come, Ash. I'm going to fill you up and watch it leak out of you, then lick it all up.”

He leans over and removes the ball gag from my mouth. “Speak, baby. Tell me what to do to you.”

“Fuck me, eat me. I don’t care as long as we’re forever together.”

His smile broadens. “Ditto,” he answers.

He’s wearing me down on this whole living together idea of his. And as he comes inside of me, I can’t think of a reason to say no.

MY HANDS SHAKE. Friday night has come upon us. Noah bought me a new suit. I wanted to tell him no, but when I tried it on, I couldn’t get over how fucking hot I look in it. I would have even fucked me.

It’s a silver gray, tailored to my body, with a black button-up shirt, a silver diamond tie, and a matching jacket.

“Oh, shit, hon, you look fucking amazing. Like I want to fuck you against the closet door, right now.” His calm shatters and he pushes me against the door as promised, palming my erection.

His eyes are full of hunger. “If you’re hungry, go eat. I’m not on the menu right now,” I deadpan.

“Holy shit, baby. I knew I had good taste in suits, but you make this look like a million dollars.”

I’m positive the suit was several thousand dollars, and it had made Noah so happy to buy it for me.

“I *do* look rather hot, if I do say so myself.” I drop my head to his, taking in his aroma. And with all things Noah James, I burn it to memory. “Babe, you didn’t have to do this, but thanks, so much. I’ll even give you a few extra blow jobs tonight.”

“Like I’ll say no, Ash.”

My mom visited us last night, stating she had a present for me. In a small jewelry box were two cuff links with my initials on them. They were my fathers, who had the same initials as me. Aaron Michael Brooks was the love of Mom’s life and she

cried happy tears when I opened them. My grandparents had given him the cuff links on the day he married my mom. They died a month before I was born. Knowing they were my dad's, and a gift from my grandparents I never met, my mother's sweet gesture made me tear up. And I'm still rather emotional about it.

"Need help with these, honey?" he asks, taking the cuff links out of the drawer I stored them in last night.

"Yeah. Please. By the way, did you have anything to do with this?"

"I knew she was coming over to give them to you. She was concerned you may not have a shirt to wear them on, and I assured her I was taking care of it."

"You have my mom's number?"

"Of course, I do. It's *your* mom. I plan to be her son-in-law one day, so there's that."

He talks about moving in, and a forever, but has never mentioned marriage.

"Oh, don't look so shell-shocked. I'm not asking you tonight or even tomorrow."

But the idea doesn't scare me. He's right. He's my future, and of course it would mean marriage.

"I'm not scared, baby. Not in the least. But that reminds me, have you talked to your mom since the debacle last Monday?"

He has been tight-lipped about Evelyn's reaction to me. I think he's embarrassed. I once told him I couldn't imagine his mother was all that bad, but he wasn't lying.

"Mom called yesterday, to pass on her apologies about the barbeque. A fast-acting migraine came on her quickly. It was bad timing, baby, that's all. Nothing to worry about. And she's excited to have dinner with us next Friday."

I internally groan but I wear a smile for his sake. His mother is important and has always been his number one fan. I

can stomach one dinner, and anyway, I didn't get to speak with his father much, who I really connected to.

We skirt past the subject of his mom as he stands next to me in his own immaculate suit, a dark charcoal, with a light gray pinstripe button-up shirt and a silver tie. He fiddles with his own cuff links, but I take them from his hands.

"These are beautiful." I look at the iconic painting shrunk into a tiny version. *Starry Night Over the Rhône* by Van Gogh stares at me from his cuff links.

"Liam bought them for me for my first premiere. And I love them. As you know, Van Gogh is a favorite of mine."

He has several prints of his work around the loft. But more so, Noah understands I draw inspiration from him for my own paintings.

"I may not paint with oils as much as I used to, but his works still inspire me." I secure them to the cuffs of his shirt. "I knew you'd like these. I had planned to buy you cuff links of *Valley with Ploughman Seen from Above*. But your mother reached out to me about these, which honestly are perfect, but since I love to spoil you, and this is just one of many art shows in your future, you never know, they might appear in our closet."

Valley with Ploughman Seen from Above is my favorite Van Gogh painting, a little less popular than his other pieces. I can't pinpoint why, but maybe it's because my paintings have a similar feel even if we use a different medium. Not every artist feels this way, but I do.

"I love you. And although you don't ever have to spoil me, I secretly love it. You're making tonight my favorite night ever."

"And you are making this my favorite moment ever."

He pulls me into his body, and we stare at our reflection in the mirror, and I have to admit, we look incredible together.

KATE'S GALLERY is high end. She has curated relationships with art collectors not just in Washington state but around the world. To get a show as a first-time artist is hard enough, but to rub elbows with some of her elite clients has me loosening the tie I feel is currently choking me.

"I could say *don't be nervous*, but I know it won't work." He caresses my back, walking across the street to the gallery. Kate had asked us to come an hour after the show opened in order to talk candidly with her clients before my arrival.

My arm is laced with Noah's when we cross the lobby of the gallery. Shane, Kate's assistant, is at the doorway to greet us.

"Congratulations on your first show, Mr. Brooks." He's always so formal.

The place is busy, and far more patrons are in the main gallery than I'd expected.

"Thank you so much."

Shane turns around and grabs two flutes of champagne, handing it to us without question, as though he's telling us this is necessary.

"It's good to see you again, Shane." Noah extends his hand to his.

"And you too, Mr. James."

Kate has a series of movable walls she uses for events at her gallery. The line of sight is incredible, and in the middle sits all my paintings, with the two other artists on each side of my exhibits. It's the first time Noah is seeing any of my pieces, except for the space needle. He walks up to each one, like he's studying them.

My collection is called *Landscapes in Love*. Every single one has pushed me back to my roots of my early love for Post Impressionism.

But more than the style, my paintings are places I visited with Noah, our road map to falling in love.

He'd already seen the space needle. But, in the middle, one of the highlights of my collection, is the painting I've worked on for several months. It's a rendering of his workspace, with the curves of the banisters, the large windows with bright light flooding the shadows in the picture. It consists mainly of his studio with the outskirts of the painting containing the second level, along with his open bedroom.

I want my art to inspire Noah, and by the looks of his expression, he is as inspired by my art as I am by his.



Noah

HOLY SHIT. I'm overcome with emotion. I can't breathe, and there's no way in hell I can look away from his masterpieces. This entire collection is the story of us.

My attention stays on the piece of my studio, which he has painted with such precision that I'm blown away. Hanging next to that is my grandfather's A-framed cabin. In it, he uses the same technique he did in his piece *The One*.

The nature encompassing the edges of the painting is more abstract, but the light from the inside of the house is captured perfectly in the still of the night.

A smaller picture hangs next to the cabin. It's my parent's house. This had to have been a last-minute addition, but the strokes aren't as precise as he typically paints. I sense the emotion of the house in the strokes. It speaks of the uncertainty, the doubt, and the erratic behavior of my mother. His paintings are always full of emotion, but this is different, and I can feel his pain of that day.

Painting by painting, I search each one intently, giving it the attention each one deserves. My dad's boat, Parson's Park, the inside of the gallery with our sheets over our two paintings. Key Arena, when it was still called Key Arena on the cold day of the Pearl Jam concert, and the sea of bodies walking toward it. My grandmother's bench, near the creek,

with trees surrounding it. The small town of Maple Falls. A suncatcher, like the one I made in the first class I taught at the boys and girls center. The outlook from where we first kissed, across from the restaurant. Fuck, I love the story of us.

The last picture is to the side, but it's the show stopper. It's more than gorgeous and yet again, the way I'm in awe of my boyfriend's beautiful mind is impossible to articulate. It's a picture of the sun-shaped piñata on display and two young boys standing in front of it.

I've been moved by art before, and I never thought Ash's pieces could affect me like *The One*, but fuck, this whole collection does just that.

My eyes water, and a few tears fall from my face. I turn to find he's watching me the entire time. We're not alone, and I can't show him how much this collection means to me. I want to pull out my check book and beat every price anyone is willing to pay.

"I don't have the words, Ash." I tug him into my body, my face buried in his neck. "Fuck, baby. These are amazing."

They're a part of him. And in them, he's included me in his world.

"I never doubted you would astonish everyone around us, but these are so fucking incredible." I take in his flavor, his cologne and the way he stands, with pride in his art. "Hey, can you give me a second, though?" I ask, disappearing in the crowd, looking for Kate.

I'm quickly back at his side, but a few clients of Kate's already have him surrounded. I search the door, looking for Tia, Caitlyn, or Liam. Even Dave and Greg are coming tonight.

My brother waltzes in, and stops for a flute of champagne. He has a very pleased expression on his face. He sees me and walks over, but stops about ten feet from Ash's paintings.

"These are Ashton's?" He points to the entire collection, stopping on the pictures of Grandpa's cabin and Grandma's bench. I nod my head, and his reaction is what I would think

anyone's would be, especially someone who is emotionally attached to items in the pictures.

He points to another painting. "Is that...?"

"Yeah, it's mom and dad's house," I answer.

"Fuck, I'm not even an artist, and don't know all the fancy words you use, but even I can feel the emotion in it."

"Yeah, I know. Just to be clear, if you want any of them, you need to speak with Kate, right away." I lean in to whisper in his ear. "By the way what's up with your smug look?"

"Oh, nothing. I had a woman yell at me because I stole her spot, or so she said. I did no such thing. She was the one in the wrong. Anyway, you know how I get around spirited women."

Oh, fuck. I've never understood it, but for some reason Liam gets turned on by what he calls *spirited women*. I call them *pissed the fuck off*, but he seems to always turn it around.

The gentlemen finally give Ash some breathing room, and Liam takes his turn to speak with him. My eyes peer at the front of the gallery, and in walks Tia. She happily grabs a flute too on her way to me. With the way my brother and Ash are standing, she can't see the full display.

"Hey Noah." She empties her drink in one long swig. "This place is very swanky."

"It's a great gallery." I turn to Ash, who is in deep conversation with my brother over his art. And he's using words my brother doesn't understand. "Honey, your sister is here." All I see is Liam's back, and I can't imagine he appreciates the complicity of my boyfriend's paintings, as Ash continues to speak to my brother as if he's an artist too.

He stops in mid-sentence, rounding my brother, bringing Tia into his arms. "I'm so glad you're here, little sis."

My brother turns around and utters, "Oh, fuck."

"Tia, let me introduce you to Liam, Noah's brother."

Liam is slow, moving his face to hers, and she gasps, staring at him. "You. You're the asshole who stole my parking

spot.” Tia’s at least quiet in her name calling. Of all the women in the world my brother had to be an ass to, it had to be Tia. “You know, I won’t waste another moment on you.” She turns to Ash, whipping her long hair in Liam’s face.

“Oh, fuck, Ash!” She slaps her hand over her mouth. “Baby Jesus in a manger, this is beautiful.”

She walks from one end to the other, as Ash explains each painting to her.

I turn my attention back to my brother, his shit-eating grin watching every move Tia makes. “Holy shit,” Liam whispers. “I think I’m in love.”

Of course, he is. Fucking bastard.

THE SHOWING IS ALMOST OVER, and my brother left an hour ago. I think all of Tia’s glares and dirty looks just turned him on more. I don’t want to imagine what he’s doing with that kind of ammunition.

Dave, Greg, Tia, Ash, and I sit around a table, finishing up the wine. Kate’s back in her office with interested clients, working out deals and such.

Tia looks at her phone one last time. “Mom is five minutes out.”

There was a pile-up on I-5, and Caitlyn had been asked to stay later. She would never say no when people’s lives were in jeopardy, but she was in tears on the phone with Tia, thinking she’d miss Ash’s premiere. Kate would stay open all night if it meant Ashton’s mom could be a part of his first show.

“I had no idea, Ash. You’re so fucking talented. Soon he’s going to be leaving us, Dave.” Greg jokes, but the way Ash and I exchange knowing looks, it’s obvious of our intentions.

“Fuck, tell me he’s off the mark,” Greg says, watching me cover Ash’s hand with mine.

“It’s not fully worked out. But Noah wants me to move in with him. I’m not going to leave you guys responsible for my portion of the rent, I promise.”

“It’s not that. Honestly, our lease is almost up. But, we’re going to miss you, that’s all. You’ve become a funny asshole to hang around,” Dave quips. “But, I think we all know where you belong.”

Okay, now Dave has become my favorite person, after Ash.

“Funny asshole. That sounds about right,” Tia jokes, slugging Ash.

The doors open and in flies Caitlyn Brooks, still in her scrubs. Her eyes are puffed over with tears, and she dashes straight to the display, still set up.

Just like Tia, she slaps her hand over her mouth. We all stay back except for Ash, who joins his mom as she looks at every little detail in his paintings.

His mom and he talk quietly for the next twenty minutes, until Kate appears like a ninja from her office.

He introduces his mother to Kate.

“So, how did he do, Kate?” I ask, walking up to them. I know she won’t give him the bottom line, with us around, but she’ll tell us what paintings are left.

“I sold every single painting.”

Ashton’s mouth drops, and I yank him toward me. “I am so fucking proud of you!”

He lets me hold him. After all, this is his dream come true.



A shton

ALL THIRTEEN WATERCOLORS SOLD. Every single one of them. In one night, after Kate's commission, she handed me a check for eleven thousand, three hundred and seventeen dollars.

My commission doesn't include another transaction I hadn't realized was possible. A gentleman from New York wants to have right of first refusal for each art piece, paying ten thousand dollars for a year for this privilege alone.

After a week, it hasn't sunk in. People want to display my art, my watercolors, on their walls.

But, tonight, we find our way back to the gallery. This week, I'm in a navy-blue suit, one I bought this time with my commission. Noah is in a muted royal blue suit, and the same cuff links Liam bought him for his first premiere. With this show, the clientele is more influential, and a few journalists for the arts and culture scene in Seattle are in attendance.

But tonight, I'm nervous, in a different way. And it has everything to do with Evelyn James.

"You have nothing to worry about. My mom was under the weather, but she's fine now. Let's make an appearance. But, we won't stay long."

His parents, along with Liam, are meeting us here, but Noah was firm. We won't be here longer than an hour.

His charcoal sketches are hung through the gallery. He must have thirty pieces on display, and Kate was clear with the press release, this collection is different than the others he's displayed in the past.

We walk through the door of the gallery, and Shane stands with champagne flutes again.

Noah won't drink tonight, and it's the reason I'm abstaining from alcohol during this part of the night. The reporter for the newspaper wastes no time getting a statement from Noah. Everyone knows this is a once in a blue moon opportunity to get Noah James on record.

Letting go of his hand, I walk the gallery, taking in every picture of me, from my back, to my head, and even a slight profile. The largest picture is one of Tia, Mom, and I around my childhood dining room table with a bottle of wine in front of us. Others range of me at Parson's Park, near the creek at his grandfather's cabin, and hiking the trail, me looking out the car window, reading at night, me painting. Every single one is me in some sort of way, in a moment shared between us. There may be others in the pictures, but it's private fragments of me he's allowing others to see. I turn around when someone taps me on the shoulder. It's not Noah, it's not his touch.

When I twist my body, I'm face to face with Evelyn James.

"These are beautiful, Ashton. And I can see how much my son loves you. You're quite the muse for him."

Her voice is tender and soft. But soon, her attention moves to me, and she has tears falling from her eyes. "It's very nice to meet you, officially this time."

She opens her arms like she may embrace me but then she closes herself off and extends her arm to shake my hand.

"Thanks, Mrs. James. I hope you're well after your migraine last week."

Her face flushes, and when I look upon her, I can't believe how much Noah resembles his mother. Like my own mother, Mrs. James has aged gracefully. At fifty-nine, she's fifteen

years older than my mom, but I'd never guess Evelyn James is a day over fifty.

“Oh, please, call me Evelyn. And I hope I haven't run you off yet, dear.” She squeezes my shoulder, but her smile is a little tight. Maybe she doesn't connect with people easily.

“No ma'am. Not at all.” I look over Evelyn's head, watching Noah speaking with another person from the press. She turns around and looks at him. She watches her son, she is full of so much pride.

“I'm surprised he's still talking to them.” She turns her head around, her attention fully on me.

Just then, Kate takes a look at Noah and she stops talking to a client. She wants Noah here, and their agreement is as little press as possible.

“Kate's on it,” I add when she says something to the press and Noah is able to pull away from them. His eyes roam the room and land on me.

“I can tell he loves you very much, Ash,” she adds, turning back to me.

“And I love him. I really do.”

“It's come on quick, right? Please know, I'm not judging.”

I have just enough time to answer before Noah reaches us.

“Sometimes when it's meant to be, it's meant to be.”

“We'll talk later, yeah?” she asks, and how can I say no? Even though I so desperately want to.

“Yes, ma'am.”

Noah steps into my space, reaching for his mother, placing a kiss on her cheek.

“Hey Mom.” She pulls him into a hug.

“I love these, Noah. Your sketches are a depiction of true love.”

She brushes a tear from her eyes. Liam approaches his mom from behind, where we can see him, but Evelyn can't.

“Mom, you emotional already?” he asks.

She turns and playfully smacks him. “Of course, I am. Look at what your brother created. Same thing when you beat the record in yards received in college. A mother’s love can never be contained.”

The last sentence she says more to me than anyone. It’s weird, but then again, everything about Evelyn is weird.

“Ashton, son, how are you doing?” Carl James appears out of nowhere, and with his words, Evelyn visibly blanches. “Noah, I’ve always been proud of you, but this is a whole new level, son. It’s all so amazing.”

I take a quick look at all the people; the press is taking pictures of Noah interacting with us.

Noah seems to notice as well. “Hey guys, I’m about done here. You know me, but can you give me a second with Ash, and then we can leave.”

“We’ll meet you at the restaurant. I’ll send you the address, sweetheart,” his mother imparts.

His hand lands on the small of my back, and he escorts me through the many pictures. “All of these are for sale tonight, baby, but if you want any of them, and I mean *any* of them, I need to know.”

“I’m not taking money from you, Noah.”

His fingers dance up my neck, and to my chin. “You *can* and you *will*. Anyway, you can pay me back in a different way, honey.”

I want to keep a few. I’d be lying if I claimed any different. “Could I have the one of my mom, Tia, and me around the table. I’d like it to be a gift for her, honestly.”

“And what else?” I search the walls, and each time I find one, there’s another I love just as much.

“Honestly, I love them all, and you will not be keeping all thirty.” My eyes fall on me teaching at the boys and girls club. I point it out. “That one. That’s the one I want.”

He kisses my lips, moving to my forehead. “Then it’s yours. Let me swing by and tell Kate, and we’ll be on our way.”

He doesn’t have to ask me again, as he has for the past couple weeks. I’m ready to move in with this man I love with my last breath.

EVELYN IS a little guarded during dinner, and I find her staring at me often. Between Liam and Carl, they drive the conversation, talking mostly of football. Noah was quite the football player. I’d known this before, but as Carl talks about both his boys, Noah had more yards receiving than Liam, and Liam played in college.

“So, you were both wide receivers?” I ask, and Liam looks back at me.

“You like football?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?” I ask, but I understand the stereotype. I’m both artsy and gay. It comes out as a tease, and Liam flips me off. He understands I’m a shit stirrer. “I didn’t know you were better than your brother, baby,” I whisper loudly as I stare at Liam.

“Oh, he has your number, William,” his Dad returns. “And I love that you don’t put up with his shit, Ash. Liam is our resident smartass.”

Carl is so personable, just like both his kids.

After two beers, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. When I exit the restroom, Evelyn is waiting for me in the hallway. And I can’t lie, it’s a hella creepy.

“Could I have five minutes of your time?” She points to the door. It’s a warm night, in the middle of June in Seattle.

“Sure,” but I’d rather be anywhere else.

There’s a bench next to the entrance to the restaurant. She sits down, and I follow suit.

“You make my Noah happy.” Her tone has changed. She’s matter of fact and almost cold.

“He makes me very happy, too.”

She lets out a small sigh. “I see that. But, you’ve only dated what? Three months?”

“Hmm, it’s almost four months,” I reply.

“I like you, Ash. You seem like a fine man, but I know Noah, and being with another artist isn’t healthy for either of you. I’ve always imagined him with a man who is more structured, keeping him balanced. And by what I hear, you and Noah have the same weird hours. He’s established. You’re not, and now you two are talking of moving in together. I know what my son makes, and what he’s worth.”

“He’s worth everything, Mrs. James, and it has nothing to do with money.” I won’t call her Evelyn, not when she’s trying to come between us.

“My parents left him a lot of money, and Carl’s parents are older, and they’ll leave him even more. So, it’s a little convenient, your moving in so quick with my son, when he can give you the world and you can’t return it.”

“Is this purely about money? Because I’ve not taken a dime from him. And he’s the one that has asked me to move in. I won’t sponge off of him. If you think I’m a good guy, then believe that I’m not out to take anything but his love. And if you don’t know your son well enough to trust him, then shame on you.”

I step away from Mrs. James, taking my phone, telling Noah I’m not feeling well, and I’ll meet him by the car. He won’t believe me, after the length of time we’ve been gone. But I can’t go back into the restaurant and act as if Mrs. James isn’t a horrible person and hell bent on breaking her son’s heart.



Noah

HE'S QUIET. His hand hasn't left mine. Something happened between him and my mom, earlier.

"Wanna talk about it?" I ask, bringing his hand to my lips, feathering each knuckle with kisses as he does to me often.

"What do you mean?"

We're not far from my loft, and stay quiet until we're in the garage.

Placing the car in park, I twist my body to his. "Ashton, you're a talented artist but a lousy actor, baby. My mom said something to you. It has you rattled. So, tell me, what was it?"

"She doesn't like me. It's that simple. I'd guessed it, the day I met her, but now, it's obvious. I'm not good enough for you, and maybe I'm not, but I'm also not going anywhere."

He's hurt. His voice is heavy with pain. My arm moves to the back of his neck, pulling his line of sight to me. "You listen and listen good, Ashton Brooks. You're more than good enough for me. My life has meaning with you in it. I don't care what my mother thinks. I love you. It's me. I'll never be good enough for you. But that's love. We see the best in each other, though we can't see it in ourselves."

Something changes in him, with what I've just shared. His posture shifts, and he sits tall, confident.

“By the way, I have an answer for you, about the question you’ve asked me for a while.”

“You do?” I ask.

“I want nothing more than to move in with you. I realized tonight that I belong with you all the time. I have to work out logistics with Greg and Dave first. And I’m not freeloading. Do you understand me?”

“I do, but I own the loft. I pay a homeowners fee monthly, and utilities, but...”

“I’ll pay rent like I do with Dave and Greg. We’ll split the rest evenly. It’s the only way I’ll agree.”

I tip his chin toward me. “And I’d agree to anything to make it happen, so yes, let’s do this. I want you with me all the fucking time.”

“Well, now that this is settled, let’s go in and celebrate.”

I knew I wanted Ashton with me all the time, after only a few dates. And now he’s given me the best gift ever. I know we’ll fight, we’ll annoy each other but Ashton is my future, and I want nothing more than to grow old with him.

WE’RE frantic as we run to the elevator from my car. By the time I swing open the door, my belt is undone and his suit jacket is off, his shirt halfway unbuttoned.

“Bed?” he asks.

“No, meet me in the television room,” I order. “And you better be naked,” I add.

I grab new items I just bought yesterday and hustle to the TV room. He’s standing, naked, near the couch, and I lower myself down on my knees. I hand him the pens and dice.

“What are these?” he asks.

“Roll the dice. Let’s see what we should do.”

His lips turn into a large and bright smile. “Kinky, baby. I fucking love it.”

“Draw on me everywhere you claim me, and I’ll do the same.” My instructions only make his smile grow larger. “You first since I’m already on my knees, honey.”

I hand him the foreplay dice. “There’s two of them. One to tell us the action, and where on your body I’m doing it.”

He looks at all the options, letting out a sexy mewl. “You’ll be the death of me,” he says and begins reading them out loud. “Penis, balls, ass, mouth, nipples, your choice.” He looks at the actions dice. “Tickle, kiss, blow, graze with tongue, lick and spank.”

“Do you want to add in the location dice?” I ask.

“Fuck yeah,” he answers without hesitation. I hand it to him, and he reads it for both of us to hear. “Bed, chair, shower, rug, against the wall, your choice.”

He rolls the three dice on the coffee table behind me. I can’t see them, and I think he likes it that way.

“Ass, kiss, against the wall.” I know by the timbre of his voice that he’s happy. “But wait, what about an orgasm?”

Good question. “Okay, I have an idea. What about we set the timer for five minutes, if you come, you come, if not, it’s my turn.”

He extends his hand to me, and he leads me to the nearest wall. “Thank fuck this isn’t brick.” Only one wall in my apartment is made like any other typical wall is.

“You don’t want to hurt your pretty dick against the brick wall?” I ask.

He doesn’t turn around but lifts his hand in the air, giving me the finger.

“I think you’re supposed to kiss my ass, if I’m not mistaken, baby.”

And like I have a problem with this command. I wet my lips and open his ass to his beautiful hole. “Fuck, I love this

hole.” He sucks in a long deep breath as I begin to kiss him. It’s not just his tight rim, but his whole ass. He murmurs his appreciation in the form of mewls and whimpers. His hand slaps the wall at times, as he’s getting close, but when the timer goes off, he swears under his breath.

I hop up and twist him around and kiss him. “Come with me, it’s my turn.”

I take a pen, writing on his ass. *Kissing your ass*. It takes up both beautiful globes, and I marvel at my handiwork.

I roll the dice on the same coffee table. I say it out loud. “Lick, balls, chair.”

I lead him to the front of the loft, and I sit on the edge of the reclining chairs Ashton hates. He falls to his knees. “I love these balls of yours.” He grins right before his tongue touches them. He licks them from the front to the back, and all around. I’m so fucking close when the time goes off.

“Fuck!” I cry. “I was so close, but shit, your tongue is so talented.”

He takes a pen and writes on my thigh, with an arrow pointing to my balls. It reads, *Licking your luscious balls*.

I bring him into me, as I push from the chairs. “I fucking love you.”

“Ditto,” he returns.

He rolls next, and it comes up with bed, spank, and nipples. I hum at this idea. “How about instead of spanking, I just flick them?” I offer.

He loves his nipples played with and runs to the bed. I hop on it and straddle his waist while I flick them and take some liberty and even suck on them a little. He doesn’t stop me and growls at every fucking sensation I cause.

At the five-minute mark, I write under his pierced nipples. *I flicked your nipples*.

“One more foreplay, then I’m going to fuck you.”

“Yes please,” he responds as he rolls the dice. “Blow, Penis, Bed. I guess we don’t have to move.”

“You can’t make me come, unless you want to fuck me,” I say.

With the way his lips quirk, I have a feeling I know what he wants. He loves topping. “Challenge fucking accepted.”

I roll over, and he climbs between my legs. He’s trying to make me cum, and with his thrusts, fast and hard, I hope he does. He begins to fondle my balls, and he’s technically cheating, but I don’t care. Sliding his teeth down my shaft, carefully, but eliciting a little pain, I cry out as I fill his mouth with my cum.

He pulls back and swallows it. He’s fucking sexy when he swallows me. He takes the pen and writes on my stomach with an arrow pointing down. *I blew his penis and made him blow.*

I laugh at his words, but I throw him the lube, and he doesn’t take anytime to breach my tightness. He bucks in and out of me, wild, yelling my name. “I love you so fucking much!”

I’ve never seen him this fucking frenzied for me. He fills me up, only to eat his cum out of my hole. Eventually he drops beside me.

“Can we do that again?” he asks. “That was so fucking hot.”

We’re both sweaty and covered with edible marker. “Yeah, I almost insist we do this a couple times a week.”

“AS WE BEGIN WORKING with acrylic paints, let’s review what they are again.”

Teaching these kids not only gives Ash and I something to do together, but gives me purpose, and a reminder of the passion I’ve always had for art. It started at an early age, and has never waned.

“It’s a pigmented water soluble medium that becomes water resistant when it dries,” Lainey calls out next to her older brothers. We’ve been teaching for eight weeks. In that time, Lainey, Collin and Devin Carrol have become special to Ash and me.

Lainey is seven. Devin, who is only sixteen, cares for his siblings like he’s the parent. We’ve been careful stating the truth, but it’s not hard to tell—they’re neglected.

Lainey retains all information, and the second she sees or hears something, it remains in her memory.

“You’re right, Lainey. Anyone else?”

Collin raises his hand. “It dries quickly, and you can easily paint over any mistakes.”

Ash and I exchange a proud look. “What sort of brushes should you use?” I ask, and this will be the rest of my review today. Everyone is ready to paint.

“You can use an acrylic round brush, flat brush, or an angled brush,” another student says before one of the Carrol kids can ring in.

Every student has worked on a sketch of what they plan to transfer to canvas. We’re limited on supplies, although I have no problem buying anything these kids need. But, Ash is trying to reel me in.

“Your sketch should be your roadmap. It doesn’t have to be exact. If you need more paint, or different colors, they’ll be up here near Ash and me. Just try to be respectful of others.”

We walk around the room, watching everyone’s strokes on the easels Kate brought a couple of weeks ago. Every student has one. I walk around the classroom as they work, comparing the painting to the sketches they keep close to them.

Devin paints a Japanese cherry blossom tree, near a body of water. His rendering includes the reflection of the tree.

After an hour, the kids start to clean up. It takes Ash and I forty-five minutes to lock up the supplies, leaving the center well after all our students.

Devin, Lainey and Collin are waiting on the front steps. “I’m hungry, Devin,” Lainey whines. She’s so little to begin with, and Devin moves her to his lap, holding her, and smoothing out her messy, whitish blonde hair.

We exchange a knowing look walking past them.

“Hey, guys. Have you ever been to Frankie’s across the street? They have the best hotdogs. I was just telling Noah I’m too tired to cook. Wanna join us? Our treat.”

Lainey and Collin are the first to accept our invitation, but Devin resists. “You don’t need to, Ashton. Our mom will be here soon.”

Somehow, I have a hard time believing it, since class was over almost an hour ago.

“Actually, you’d be doing me a favor,” I join in. “Could you imagine having dinner with this guy every single night,” I tease, making the air light between all of us.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” Ash returns, “He’s crazy, so I should be thanking you.” Both Lainey and Collin begin giggling.

“That’s not true. You two loooove each other,” Lainey teases, and we can’t help but laugh at her.

The kids lead the way to the diner, and Devin follows. They all order, but when they’re done and find a place to sit with Ash, I ask the young woman behind the counter to double the order.

The kids begin to tell us about their day at school. Lainey is small. She looks five, not seven, with long white hair and deep brown eyes. Collin has a larger build, and he’d be a great offensive lineman if his size at the age of nine is any indication of how big he’ll be when he’s older. Devin is an older version of his sister, with almost white hair, but built like a linebacker, and at sixteen, is almost as tall as Ashton.

As Ashton engages with Lainey and Collin, I take the time to speak with Devin about his art, and what he wants to do after high school.

“There’s an art school in California I plan to apply to. I’ve been working any job where I can take Collin and Lainey with me. But then again, I don’t want to leave them. There are some great programs here. I feel like I’m versatile in most mediums, but oil paints are what I want to focus on.”

“Oil paintings is what I did mostly in college. I know great programs here, but I’m assuming you’re speaking of Lourdes in San Diego?”

Lourdes is a school dedicated to oil paints that follows both Impressionism and Cubism. They rely heavily on the works of Pablo Picasso but aren’t limited to just him, encouraging their students to think outside of the box. The school is very eclectic, liberal, and though the program is hard, it produces some of the most respected modern artists of today’s generation.

“It is, but you must know the tuition is out of my range, and I can’t leave Lainey and Collin.”

I understand what he’s saying without actually saying the words. He is all his brother and sister have in this world.

The food comes, and I feign shock at the size of the order, blaming the staff for everything in front of us. “Don’t worry about it guys because hotdogs make the best leftovers.”

Ashton sends me a sexy wink. He knows my heart is his, but it has room to fall for these kids too, but it already has.

“ARE you saying your lease is up next month?” I ask, crawling into bed next to his naked body. “And what are you doing to me?” I push down the sheet, and sure enough, he’s fucking naked.

“Okay, first things first, babe,” Ash begins, covering his penis. He knows I can’t concentrate when my eyes fall on it. “Greg and Dave know I’m practically living with you. They want to move further north. But, it means I need to be moved out by the end of next month.”

Most of his stuff is here. We only stay at his place on the days we volunteer at the center. “What do you have left?”

He begins to chuckle, a ha-ha sort of laugh. “Only the hardest things to move. It’s all my art supplies. I have everything else here, and I’m not taking any of my furniture, except for my desk. And I’ll buy a new bookshelf.”

I’ve cleared a large area for him in my studio. And I can’t wait to have his art in my space.

He has been essentially living with me for a month, but knowing every part of him will be here soon, and that his art is as much of him as his soul, I almost come undone. It hits me all at once.

“I’m going to marry you one day, Ashton Brooks.”

It doesn’t rattle him. His smile is broad, and his eyes, full of want and need, drink me in. “And I’m going to say yes to you on that day, Noah James.”



Ashton

IT'S BECOME A TRADITION, dinner with Devin, Collin, and Lainey after our weekly classes. It's not uncommon for volunteers to bond with the kids they work with, but there's something about these three. I see so much of myself in each of them. How Devin feels like he should be the man of the house. In my case, my father was taken from me too soon, with Dev, his father is a piece of shit who only comes home to steal money he's saving for college.

Lainey reminds me of Tia, so strong on the outside, but worries from day to day that her security will be ripped from her. She's seen so much—both in her own home and from other neglected children in her neighborhood.

And Collin is a combination of Noah and me, with his heart so full of love and protection for his siblings.

Devin has confided in me that he's going to petition the court for guardianship as soon as he turns eighteen and can secure an apartment and a job. He's enrolling in community college to further his education, staying in Seattle to be the adult his sister and brother have never had.

"I've spoken with Kate," he says out of nowhere. She has become attached to the kids and is blown away by Devin's art. She's helped at the community center a few times. She's taken Dev under her wing, and he helps her before a show. "Kate

told me that I'll have a job with her once I graduate, and she'll pay for my college. I want to learn how to run a gallery. It's my goal to own one, too, and I'd like to further my knowledge in art history."

He has a plan, but supporting two children both financially and mentally is so much to ask of a kid his age. He should be worried about parties, girls, and living on ramen noodles. But, he's willing to take the world on, to support his siblings. I have mad respect for the young man, and what he's attempting to do is honorable.

"Do you think your mom will fight you?"

He shakes his head. "She tells us daily that her life would be better without us. I'm sure it'll cost me, though. She most likely will agree to it, if I give her money."

After the last time his father stole his cash, he asked us to take him to the bank, where his money would be safe.

I realize I had something these kids don't have, and it was one loving parent. My mother sacrificed her life for us. And it's what I want to do for our own children.

As always, we send them home with extra food. I don't ever ask if it lasts long enough for the kids to eat it the next day, but in the past few weeks, Devin has taken our money, promising to use it, if he needs it.

I'm sad every time we drop them off at their house. I look forward to seeing them each week, and Devin has our personal cells if there's ever an emergency. And in our limited time together, these kids have won our hearts.

"Hey honey?" Noah asks when we get on the 99. "What would you say we start taking foster care classes? You never know when someone might need us."

We both realize who may need us one day, and like me, he wants to be prepared.

THE MORNING LIGHT WAKES ME, and I'm in bed by myself. I reach toward his side, and it's empty. "Babe?" I call out through the open space.

I hear his footsteps coming from the stairs leading to the bathroom. "Good morning, honey." He drops his towel, and I verbally growl.

"I like you like that. Please come back to bed, babe."

"No can do, hon. I have your suitcase packed, and we're leaving as soon as I make us some pancakes, so get your cute little ass in the shower so we can get a move on."

His gleeful happiness, and the way his eyes shine, is pure mischief.

"What do you have up your sleeve, Mr. James?"

Noah looks at one wrist then the other. "I have no sleeves," he teases, tossing a pillow my way.

"Okay, you had me at suitcase packed." I'm positive I know where we're going. The morning is quick, and the pancakes are filling. I have a smile on my face when Noah enters the I-5, but he's heading south. The cabin is north, near the Canadian border.

"I fooled you, didn't I?" he asks, pleased with himself.

"Yeah, I really hate you when you're all cocky."

His fingers dance up my thigh. "You love it when I'm all *cocky*," he jokes, emphasizing cock in cocky.

"No, I love your cock, but you, that's still up for debate."

"Oh, your words hurt. But, I thought we needed a break. We've been so busy, between the boys and girls club, the foster parent classes, and Kate wanting us to increase our inventory."

"And starting another program at a new center," I remind him. We want to increase our volunteer hours, and we realize kids near us are in need too.

"Yeah, thanks for the reminder," he teases. "By the way, Collin texted me this morning from Devin's phone. Their mom

hasn't been home in a week. And Devin is using some of the money we gave him to buy groceries. What would you say if we drive down there and check on them on Monday? We can ask to meet at the center. They have that big television room, we can bring popcorn, have a movie night."

"That's a brilliant idea. Sexy and smart. I won the lottery with you."

Silence consumes the car, but it's never awkward. A lot of our thoughts are focused around the kids. Are they safe? Do they have food? Can we do more?

We have an unspoken rule. A couple, actually.

First, our desire to complete our foster care certification isn't strictly to petition the court for Lainey, Collin, and Devin. Another family may need us one day. We want to be prepared when the right situation presents itself.

But, our hearts are with Lainey, Collin, and Devin. Devin shouldn't have to give up his future either. None of these kids have ever had an adult who loves them unconditionally.

Our other rule is marriage. We know it's coming. I'd marry him tomorrow. I feel it in my soul that we're one. We know if the situation arises, meaning a chance to foster the Carrol kids, we'll get married. Not that we'd be rushing into it, because at this point, our commitment is just as deep.

"I hate those parents. How can I hate someone I've never met?"

"Because you love those kids." Noah's answer is simple and fucking on point.

In the past three months, we do more and more for them, and never once have we regretted it.

"It's why we need a little one on one time. I've missed you, and we sleep next to one another every night. But we're always in a rush, in a hurry. Which is fine, but I won't ever apologize for needing to spend more time with you."

"And you fuck me every night too," I add.

“There’s that, for sure. But I still miss you.” He’s playful today, but so am I.

“You going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope, but since we’re in such a great mood, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Buttering me up, I take it...”

Noah groans, moving his neck from one side to the other, like he’s working out a crook. “I’ll be buttering up something later.”

Dropping my head behind me, I too let out a groan. “Okay, what is it, now that both our cocks are at half-mast?”

“I’m about to totally spoil the mood, and our hard-ons will deflate immediately.”

There’s only one place this is going.

“Mom called last night when you were at Greg and Dave’s.” Now that we don’t live together, we have a weekly gaming session.

“Okay,” I reply, my tone low and emotionless. Evelyn James manufactures a kind of anxiety that knots me up with fear.

“I know something happened after my gallery show. Mom is meddlesome and bossy, and invasive. I never wanted to believe she’d try to break us up. And I understand you didn’t want to come between me and my mother.”

“How did you know?” I ask, even though I’ve avoided his mother for the past two months. I shared a little bit that night, but I didn’t fully tell him everything. He’s never pushed, but he had to realize something happened.

“Mom admitted it to me yesterday. I told her unless she told me the truth, we’d continue to avoid her.”

We’ve had dinner with his dad a couple times, under the umbrella of guys’ night, but we’re both avoiding her.

“You’re right, Noah. I didn’t want to come between you two. And I wasn’t sure how to tell you. It’s a kick to the balls

—she doesn't think I'm good enough for her son.”

“I'm a big boy, Ash. But the reason I'm mentioning it is she knows she owes you an apology, So, what do you say?”

Noah is my future. I won't ever want another, and I'll never let him go. If it means I have to play nice with Evelyn, I will for the man next to me. I'd rather eat a plate of chicken livers and creamed corn than converse with Evelyn James, but again, this is Noah.

“Of course, babe, your mom deserves a second chance.”

“I love you for saying that, though I know you don't want to.”

I'm unable to hide anything from Noah.

“I'm sorry, babe.” My hand covers his. “I wish I could say it doesn't bother me, but it does. I've never done anything but love you. We have something special, and I hate that she'll dislike me for the rest of our lives.”

His rich voice carries a reassurance I need. “You have nothing to apologize for. My mother is in the wrong, and she understands that our guys' nights are code *for if she can't accept you, she doesn't accept me*. I'm unable to make anyone like you, no matter how much I think everyone should love you like I do, but she will learn to respect us, if she wants to have anything to do with our future.”

“Our future?”

“Yeah, ours. You and me, and the family we grow, anyway we choose.”

I like the sound of it, and for the rest of the drive to whatever mystery location we end up at, our future is all I think about.

“HOW DID YOU KNOW?” I ask, looking out at Haystack Mountain from our beachfront Air B&B.

“Who do you think has a bigger mouth? My brother or your sister?”

Tia had been my first guess. Living as close to Cannon Beach as we have our whole life, I’ve always wanted to visit, but something always came up. Even after the program that paid for Mom’s college and the house, money was still tight, as she put every extra penny into making our home ours.

I’m sitting on the deck, and for the end of August, the beach is busy, so I can people watch while drinking a bottle of wine or two. He brings me the wine I’d just thought about and moves his chair around the outside table to be as close to me as we can get.

“You spoil me.”

“I don’t do anything that you don’t deserve, Ash. You’re my world, and I’ll prove it to you until you believe it.”

I square my shoulders with his. “I believe it. *You make me believe it, baby.*”

And he does. We sit and watch the world in front of us, knowing we’re a part of something good, the two of us.

I’d dropped my head on his shoulder, and I’m almost asleep when his voice wakes me up.

“Wanna go for a walk on the beach once it slows down a bit, hon?” My head turns up to his. “You were asleep?”

“Because I’m comfortable with you. But yeah, I’d like nothing more than to walk the beach with my favorite guy.” Then a thought hits me. I don’t want to wait. When it comes to Noah, I don’t ever want to miss a minute. I jump from my seat, bringing him with me. “Let’s go now.”

I’ve waited my whole life to walk Cannon Beach. And now I’m here with the man I love.

“What? Now?”

“Yeah, why not?” I’m pulling him through the house we’re calling ours for the long weekend, grabbing our flip flops, and a lightweight jacket.

“Okay, okay, hold your horses. Let me use the bathroom and we can get going. You’re like a little kid, right now.” He drops a kiss on my forehead. “And I love every part of it.”

I wait for him on the steps leading to the beach from our back deck. The waves crash along the sand, and cries of seagulls in the backdrop make a melody I’ll forever remember, along with a picture I can’t wait to paint.

“Ready?” he asks, having found his own jacket, and reaching for my hand. We walk down to the waves, rolling up our pants and holding our flip-flops. The water is cold, but this is what it’s about, getting lost in someone else. I’m lost in Noah, but I’ve never known myself as I do now with him in my life.

“When you think of forever, what does it mean to you?” His question comes out of nowhere, as we kick sand at each other’s shins.

“What do you mean? I think you know the obvious answer. It’s you.”

He squares his body with mine, stopping us as the waves crash over our feet. “It’s you, too, Ashton Michael Brooks.” His fingers slide down my torso, moving to my arm, tugging me with gentle authority.

We round a small area of rocks, and tucked behind it is a table, and two men in waiter’s uniforms stand near it. His lips skirt my ears. “You pushed up the time frame. Dinner is on its way.”

“You planned a candlelight dinner on the beach?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer.

I keep my eyes on the round table, which is not moving, though the wind is what you’d expect at the beach. Music begins to play. It’s “Better Man” by Pearl Jam, but I can’t figure out where it comes from. When I turn my attention back to Noah, he’s not in front of me. Not standing up in front of me, that is.

I tilt my head down. He’s on one knee, and we’ve garnered an audience of beach walkers.

But I tune everyone out, because this is us, Noah and Ashton.

“Ashton Brooks, I knew the minute my hand touched yours for the first time, we were meant to be something great. We’re everything that is right in this world. In the last six months, you’ve shown me what being truly happy looks like. Life won’t always be easy. We’ll fight, we’ll disagree, but we’ll always find our way back to one another. And with you by my side, I’ll smile when I fall asleep next to you, and I’ll continue to smile when I wake up to you every morning in my arms. You’re mine, and the only thing that is truly right in my life. I want nothing more than to call you my husband, and to be the man you deserve every day of your life. Please marry me.”

I fall to my knees in front of him. There’s only one answer to his question.

“Yes.”

“CAN I handcuff you to the bed when we’re back at the house?” he asks, walking hand in hand after our beachside dinner. I look at the thin silver band he’s given me as a sign of our engagement.

I stop him as the waves begin crashing at my feet. “Babe, after that fucking romantic proposal with flowers, wine, and a dinner, you can do anything you choose to me.”

He lets loose a slight snicker. “Well, thanks to someone’s impatience, we ended up with pizza instead of fettucine Alfredo,” he explains, as if the night was less perfect.

“You listen good, future husband of mine, pizza or pasta, nothing will ever ruin this night. It was the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. So, let’s hurry up so you can restrain me.”

We run hand and hand on the sand to the back deck of the house. He pushes me up against the back door, and I’m

already turned on. “I’m going to suck that dick so hard. I’m going to stick my cock in your mouth until you drink me dry. And just think, we get to do this for the rest of our lives.”

His lips lick down my cheeks, my neck, and back up to my mouth. “But, I think we should take this inside, don’t you?” he asks of me. I’m so breathless that I barely nod my head.

He tugs me by the waist of my track pants. “Honey, you and these track pants. I fucking swear no one wears them like you do.”

“Easy access, right?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He moves my hands to his jeans. “Do you want to do the honors and unleash me, or would you rather me unbutton my jeans?”

“Oh, I think I need to do it myself, and I’ll be very gentle,” I tease, starting with his belt buckle, and then the button of his jeans. I slide them down, and his beautiful cock pops out. I fall to my knees to take it. “If I make you come, and I top, how will that work with the handcuffs?”

“Oh, don’t worry your sweet and pretty head over it, baby. I have it figured out.”

I don’t start with the tip, like I usually do. I begin to deep throat him.

His fingers dig into my scalp. I can’t wait to taste him. And my speed increases. “Ho-ly fu-uck,” he moans, his fingernails moving to my back, and I love the pain. “I’m going to lose it in your mouth, baby. I’m going to—” Noah is quiet when he lets go in my mouth, and just as promised, I drink him down.

I stand, and he falls against the back of the couch. “You okay, baby?” I ask.

“I love your mouth. That’s all.” He stays where he sits for a couple of seconds. “You stay by the chair, completely naked.”

I’d thought we’d be on the bed, but this works too. He comes back with lube, and handcuffs. “Now who’s going to be

a bossy bottom tonight as I ride your cock?”

I tilt my head down, and pre-cum is leaking from the tip. “Oh, I may not last that long, baby.”

I turn around, and he cuffs my hands behind my back. He pushes me into the same type of chairs we have at home. I hate them in the loft, because they don’t match the aesthetic, but for what he wants to do to me, yeah, maybe we should keep them after all.

“Why haven’t we done this at home?” I ask.

“Because we have company over who sits on the chairs? Maybe we should keep one and move it to our bedroom solely for sex.”

“Not opposed to it,” I answer.

He straddles my waist, my cock so hard, ready to be inside of him. His hands reach my face, and our eyes stay on one another. “Thank you for saying yes.”

“I told you I would say yes when you asked me.” He smiles when my words hit him.

“That you did, Ash. But thank you for being the man I want to grow old with.”

“And we will. That I can promise you.”

He sinks himself onto my cock, and I drop my head against the back of the chair. He’s a fucking Houdini with the way he controls his up and down movement, holding onto the armrests. He’s slow. Not hurried. The movements continue up and down and up and down.

“You close, baby?”

I close my eyes. I’ve been close since my cock entered him. “I’m trying to wait it out, until I just can’t...”

My words are swallowed by my orgasm as I come inside of him. “Fill me up, Ash. Fill me completely up.” I do as he commands.

“Fucking bossy bottom.” This time I can say these words, where he typically says them to me. “But you’re a fucking

bossy bottom I'll love for the rest of my life.”

He collapses on me. “Ditto.”



Noah

“YOU THINK meeting on our turf will be better?” he asks, dusting the coffee table we keep in the sitting area. He cleans when he’s nervous. “Are we ever going to get another couch, instead of these atrocities you call chairs?”

We’ve changed the apartment around a little, moving the reclining chairs to the front room, and keeping the couch in the television room, so we can snuggle when we binge our shows. We’ve binged several series since starting Jack Ryan six months ago.

“Not sure, honey. If you want a new couch, that’s what you get.” I’m stirring the risotto and watching Ash as he goes all domesticated on me. “But I need a place to lay with you, when we’re watching TV, if we’re not in our room,” I state.

“You’re very good at letting me get my way. Will you let me get my way tonight?”

“Fuck, I love what you’re insinuating, but if my parents get here and I’m sprouting a boner, I’m taking you into the bathroom and fucking you.”

My brother, who has his own key, strolls into the kitchen, and my hand is palming Ash’s cock. “Ah shit, did I have to walk in on that?”

“You didn’t come with Mom and Dad?” I’m ignoring my brother’s laments.

“Nah, I figured if this night went sideways, at least I don’t have to ride home with them.”

Ash returns to the living room, adjusting the magazines he’s fanning out on the coffee table, all color draining from his complexion. “You think tonight will go bad?”

“Great, asshole. Please don’t break my boyfriend.”

Ashton tries to talk a good talk, but he’s anxious. Who doesn’t want to make a good impression on the woman who will be your mother-in-law? I’d be devastated if Caitlyn didn’t like me. But Ash is better than me, so why can’t my mom see it?

Ash’s phone rings, and he passes Liam to grab it from our bedroom.

“Did you have to say that, little brother?” I ask of him.

“Sorry. But seriously, I think mom has come to her senses. What has it been? Two months since you saw her last? In what world can you think helicopter Evelyn is okay with that?”

“It hasn’t stopped her from trying, though, right?”

“You know Mom.” Liam’s only answer makes sense.

Ashton returns to the kitchen, clenching the side of the sink, and from his profile alone, his lips are pursed with irritation.

I shoe Liam away from us, pointing toward the TV room. “Hey, hon. What’s wrong?”

He turns around in my arms. “It was my mom. She’s been sick all day, running a fever and vomiting.”

Our plan was to have both sets of families over tonight, and share the happy news together.

“We can wait until next week. We can try again,” I offer.

He drops his head on my shoulder. “No, because next week it may be Tia who is sick, or Liam. Let’s stick with our

plan, and maybe by Sunday, we can share the news with Mom.”

“Will your sister keep this secret?” He swears Tia is the worst secret keeper.

“Ah, fuck. Okay, maybe we can FaceTime mom later and tell her.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I kiss his forehead, his nose, and then his lips. “I love you.”

“You better. You’re stuck with me for life.”

We’re quiet in our exchange, but I continue to hold him, because nothing seems as perfect as Ash in my arms.

“Can I come back into the kitchen or are you two boning near our dinner?”

“I wonder how he’s my brother sometimes,” I say out loud enough for him to hear me.

“Oh, please, your life would be so fucking boring without me in it.”

There’s a knock on the door. We’d asked my family to come before Ash’s mom and sister, so my mother could speak with him first.

“Let me get it,” Liam offers, making himself comfortable and useful in our home.

My mom walks in with an air of confidence, my dad behind her. My father is a big softie when it comes to my mother, but even he’s been embarrassed by her behavior.

“Oh, there are my boys.” She gives Liam a kiss on the cheek first, walking toward me, with Ash still in my arms.

“Hey sweetheart,” she greets, kissing my cheek just like Liam’s. “Ashton. It’s good to see you again.” She pauses for a brief second. “Ash, my dear, I’m so very sorry for the way I acted, the night of Noah’s premiere. It was wrong of me to treat you like that. Noah is an adult, and I raised him to make his own choices and decisions in his life. And it’s obvious you

make him so very happy, which means, you make me happy too. Please forgive me.”

She reaches her arms toward Ash. I release him from my grip, and he embraces my mom. I’ve always known he’s a gentle and forgiving soul.

“It’s all water under the bridge, Mrs. James.”

“Oh, please call me Evelyn.”

And in that moment, when Ashton forgives my mom, I believe we all will be okay. But hope is a fickle fucker sometimes.

TIA BOUNDS into my apartment in her Tia way. “Fuck, this place is amazing.” It’s the first words out of her mouth, and my mom’s own mouth hangs open in utter shock.

“You invited the sexy anti-Christ?” Liam asks, whispering into my ear.

“I’m warning you, William. She’s off limits.” My caution comes out with a harshness in my tone.

Ashton stands up to greet his sister. “Sorry about my sister. She was dropped on her head a few too many times as a baby,” he says with a chuckle. Tia laughs, but my mother just continues to stare at her, as if she’s seen her before.

“We were hoping to introduce you to Ashton’s mom tonight, too, but she’s sick.”

“I’m the life of the party anyways.” She walks over to my mom and dad. “Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. James. I’m Tiana, but most people call me Tia.”

Her eyes flick over to my brother. “Oh, hey, it’s the parking space stealer. Nice to see your rude ass again.”

My father and I snicker, but Liam simply smiles and winks at Tia.

Ashton is not as amused. “Tiana Frances.”

She shrugs her shoulders, taking a seat next to my mother, who can only stare at the crazy red head. But now we have two crazy redheads in the bunch, and they're both feeding off of each other.

"Sorry, Mrs. James. I'm not trying to be a bitch, but let me tell you what your son did to me. On the night of Ash's gallery show, I was patiently waiting for a parking space, had my blinker on and everything, and in swooped your son. I was in heels, and had to park on the street, farther away from the gallery, with no street lamp near me. Can you imagine what could have happened?"

I love Tia, she's a breath of fresh air, but hell, she's laying it on thick.

"William Andrew, is this true?"

Liam leans forward, grabbing a piece of shrimp from our hors d'oeuvres platter. "Great, are you happy you little tattletale?" he whispers to Tia.

"Oh fuck, here we go," Ash mutters under his breath.

"Well, I'm so sorry to hear my boy was so rude, he was raised better than that, Tia, I assure you."

"Oh, Mama James, you and I will be the best of friends. Want to see what these boys have as far as drinks go? I want to see this place in all its glory."

"Why, yes, that's a great idea, my dear. And we girls have to stick together. The odds are not in our favor tonight."

Tia links her arm with my mother's, and in a matter of seconds, she becomes my mom's favorite person.

I sit in one of the recliners, Ash sitting on my lap. "How is that even fucking fair?" he asks, speaking of my mom and her immediate bond with Tia.

"Oh, it's easy," Liam states, grabbing for another shrimp. "Tia isn't banging her precious little boy—yet. If she was, it would be a whole other thing."

I only heard one word in the bullshit that just came out of his mouth: *yet*.

“I swear to the fucking heavens, Liam, Tia is off limits,” I warn.

“This night has just become entertaining,” my father announces, sitting back as he prepares to take in the Liam/Tia show.

DINNER IS ENJOYABLE, even with both my mother and Tia a little intoxicated at the table.

“I want to hear the story of the fish tank,” Tia begs.

“No!” I say when my brother is about to share it for everyone.

“Ah, you’re no fun, Noah James.”

Ash stands and takes the bottle of wine from his sister. “And you’re cut off.”

Liam smiles at her with a pleased look on his face, but Tia flips him off. All it does to my brother is make him more steadfast in his quest, and by the way he looks at her, none of my threats have helped.

“There’s a reason we brought you all together, tonight,” I announce, and all eyes are on me.

“When you know you’ve found the one that completes you, it clicks. Ashton is the other piece of me in this world. It was like God made him specifically to be my partner in life. Last week, I surprised him with a trip to the beach, and while we were there, I asked him to marry me. And he said yes.”

The entire table erupts in congratulations, except my mother, who sits there and cries.

PART III

DESTINY



The hidden power that is believed
to control what will
happen in the future.
(Via Webster's Dictionary)



Ashton

I'M MARRYING the love of my life. It's almost too much to hope for. But it's happening. Every dream I've ever had starts with Noah James. We're getting married on our one-year anniversary from our first date.

"Happy Birthday, Ash." He runs his fingers through my hair, my head in his lap. We spent the evening at my mom's house, celebrating my birthday.

His strong body is against the frame of our bed, and I'm lying down. We're never too far from one another. It's impossible to be close to him and not touch in some way. "You know, in two days, we'll be husband and husband. Are you scared?" he asks.

"The only thing that scares me, Noah, is losing you. Nothing about our future scares me, unless you're not in it."

"Ditto, hon."

"Hey, I've been thinking, babe."

"About what?" he asks.

"What would you say if I told you I wanted to take your last name?"

His hands stop massaging my scalp. "You really want to give up your dad's last name?"

“I don’t think of it as giving up my last name. I’m choosing the name of the man I plan to grow old with. And I want our children to have the name that we share together.”

“You make me so happy. When I thought it was impossible to be more in love with you, honey, you go and make me fall even harder.

“Ditto,” I return. “But speaking of something hard,” I tease, palming his erection.

He pulls me close to him. “See, I was thinking this tender moment was just the right time to give you your birthday present. And then you go and do this.”

His erection is tenting his boxers.

“I have no doubt we’ll do something naughty later tonight, and in the morning, and for the rest of our lives, but if you want to give me a present, I won’t say no, future husband.”

He moves me off of him, and I drop back to the bed in animated fashion because I hate when we’re not touching.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t take up acting too, honey? Although you’re not very good at it.” I flip him off as he leans down under the bed and pulls out a flat box, I’d say forty by thirty-two inches. “Sorry I didn’t wrap it, but now that you live here, you’re always around. Which isn’t a bad thing.”

Oh, my heart.

“This is as much a present for me, as it is for you, Ash.”

I move to my knees and pull the top of the box off. I can’t breathe. In it is the picture I painted for my premiere, with the sun-shaped piñata on display and two young boys standing in front of it. “It’s where we first met, so I couldn’t let someone else buy it.”

“I have never wanted to fuck you like I do right now.” My mouth crashes to his. And it’s exactly what we do, that is, after Noah moved the picture, which I call *The Prologue to Us*.

SETTING the date of our wedding was easy. We wanted to get married on the one-year anniversary of our first date, even if that happened to be a Tuesday. We chose a small ceremony with family and close friends. My side is rather small, including my mom, sister, Dave, and Greg.

But now that the date is upon us, it's surreal what a whirlwind it has all been.

There was only one place we could think of to say our vows. There was never another option. We met because of the gallery, and we'll always remember our love for each other every time we're here.

Tonight, on the eve of our wedding, and Noah and Liam's birthday, it will only be our immediate family for the rehearsal. Noah's parents are taking us out to dinner afterward.

It's the first time my mom has had a chance to meet Liam. It's funny, our parents have met on several occasions, but it's never worked that Liam was in town. But, then again, we choose to keep Tia and Liam separated, because they're like two siblings who can't get along.

Kate got an internet ordination in order to marry us. It's fitting. The person who set us up is also the person who is joining us together in marriage.

She has asked to decorate the gallery, on her own, for our wedding. Knowing Kate, it'll be as classy as she is.

"It's just you two and your families tonight, right?" she asks, readying herself for the ceremony tomorrow.

"Yes," I answer, and Kate starts to explain some of her ideas, how we enter, where we should get ready.

"Hello, where are you?" my mom calls out from the reception area.

"In here, Mom," I answer, and she follows my voice.

"I think I have what I need, Ash." Kate leaves us alone, and when I turn back to my mother, I can see the tears have already begun to well in her eyes.

"Mom?"

“This is a happy event. And hell, you have chosen well. I love Noah. And your dad would love him just as much as I do.”

She doesn't say what we both know. She wishes Dad was here to celebrate with us.

“You two okay?” Noah rushes across the gallery when he's sees the state my mother is in.

“Don't worry about me. Just take care of my boy here.” Mom excuses herself to wash her face.

“She misses my dad today,” I assure my future groom, who I find is as protective of my mom as I am.

Everyone else arrives, but we're waiting on Liam.

“I hope he's not late tomorrow,” Tia says under her breath.

“Enough,” I whisper, but her evil smile tells me she's ready to goad him.

“Sorry, I'm here. A small work emergency.” Liam comes running into the open gallery, still in his suit, but one look at my sister and he perks up. As a gay man, I can recognize a beautiful guy, and Liam is just that. And for some reason, he's never been subtle that he has his eyes on my sister.

Mom is back in the main gallery. She holds onto me, a small gasp leaving her lips. Even with her fair complexion, she looks like all the color has drained from her face.

I'm about to ask her what's wrong when Liam approaches us. He stops in front of my sister. “Queen of Sheba, nice to see you again.”

She curtsies, staring at him, and replies, “King of all assholes, nice to see you again, too.”

I expect my mom to admonish her, but she's quiet, her eyes fixed on Liam.

“Mrs. Brooks, I'm Liam James. I'm so sorry it's taken so long to meet you finally.”

“Oh,” my mom stammers, “Please call me Caitlyn. And it's very nice to meet you, too. Sorry for my daughter's

rudeness. I'm not sure if Ashton told you, but we dropped her on her head a few too many times as a baby."

The joke makes us chuckle, except Tia who has heard it a few too many times, but I stop my mom for a brief second. "Hey, you okay? You looked like you saw a ghost."

"Kind of felt that way, too." She's quiet for a second, and I'm unsure how to respond to her words. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Don't worry about me. The next few days are all about you."

I shrug off my mother's weird behavior. After all, she's right.

MY SISTER FINDS me in Kate's office. Noah has been relocated to the kitchen. We didn't succumb to the pressure of sleeping apart last night. Now that I have him, I'm not going without his body next to mine in our bed.

Tia is my witness, and Liam is Noah's. It seemed right. Today just seems right. We reached out to Devin, Collin, and Lainey's mom. She's allowed them to come to the wedding, and we were thrilled, because they've burrowed their way into our hearts.

Evelyn is the anomaly in all of this. In the past six months, we've cultivated a relationship. She calls me once a week to set up a coffee date, just her and I, as if she's trying to learn more about me. She still stares, watching every move I make, intently, as if she's trying to memorize me. It's very weird. I still stick to my original assessment—she's odd—but for some reason, I feel a motherly love has grown between us.

Mom pops her head in, just in time to help me with the same cuff links of my father's she gave me last year. She's already crying. "Hey, does that gentleman look familiar to you, the one in a tan suit, with a platinum blonde wife?"

"That's Noah's Uncle Jim. He's not Evelyn's brother, but they call him uncle anyway. And yes, he looks familiar. I can't

place him. Can you?" I ask. This is the least of my worries today, but at least I'm not going crazy.

"It's gonna drive me crazy. Oh well, it's a worry for another day. I'll see you out there. Baby, I love you."

Tia rushes in the room. "It's time. Or at least that's what Kate says. Fuck, she's a feisty one, that girl," she exclaims.

"Pot meet kettle, little sister."

She lets out a mock scoff as she takes my hand. "Let's go get you married to the love of your life, big brother."

Mom waits for me behind the few rows of chairs. Less than thirty people are here to witness our union, but the small and intimate ceremony will always be a reminder of today and those who mean the most to us.

In front of where my mother stands, I have a straight view to the altar. It's something that has been hidden from me. In large shapes, behind where Kate is, are two A-framed wooden stands, made of reclaimed wood. One is a little shorter than the other. It's stained in the color of wood Noah's Grandpa's cabin is made of. The difference between both stands is only two inches. I'm two inches shorter than Noah.

Behind the altar is a sculpture of the tree that shades us from the sun at our bench by the creek.

Where our guests sit—are paintings hanging from the ceiling at eye height on each side. These are all renderings that signify the beginning of our life together. Haystack Mountain at Cannon Beach, the factory that is now the home we share together, a rendering of a Pearl Jam Album—a reminder that we were both at the same concert when we were seventeen, our first Christmas tree, a vineyard we visited in the Yakima Valley a month ago, and Noah and I, standing next to one another in the classroom. Something so special is captured in this particular painting. Noah is looking out at the kids, and I'm watching him. It's how I always watch him—with complete awe.

The art isn't Noah's. I know his paintings like I know him. But I recognize the technique. And they're all oil paintings.

This is Devin. I love that kid! He has captured something so special.

On the other side of our A-framed altar, is the picture I hid from Noah. It's us, the day on the beach when he proposed. He'd hired a professional photographer. From the picture that captured our engagement is the painting I created for today to show our commitment to each other.

Tying everything together aesthetically are white roses. This place is so beautiful, *and so us*, and I know I want to paint it one day.

We haven't chosen the traditional wedding march. That's not us. "Just Breathe" by Pearl Jam begins to play, and Noah and Liam walk up to the altar from a different entrance leading to the main gallery. But nothing compares to the beauty that is Noah. His eyes focus on my painting, and his jaw drops when he sees the six renderings Devin painted specifically for us.

Tiana walks down the aisle, and I take my mom's arm. "Your father would be so proud of you, Ash."

She's already crying. "And these are happy tears, baby. He's watching us from heaven. Not even death will stop him from missing this day."

Oh, sweet baby Jesus. We've barely begun to walk down the aisle, and even with the tears that spill from my eyes, thanks to my mother, my attention doesn't leave Noah's.

Stopping in front of Kate, my mom takes my hand, giving it to Noah. "Thank you for loving my son."

Noah leans over and kisses my mom. "Thank you Caitlyn for taking care of Ash until I found him."

No one wants me to get through this day without crying. He interlaces his fingers with mine, leading me to where we'll promise each other a forever. He leans down, whispering into my ear. "You okay honey?"

"Mom told me Dad was watching me today." Noah's compassion comes from every part of his soul, and he bends over and drops a kiss onto the top of my head. "I have no doubt, Ash."

“Okay, we better start,” Kate says, “before they start kissing each other and marrying themselves.” People begin to laugh, and we join in. “I set these two up a year ago. At the time they were experiencing an artistic block. And I thought, what the hell, what better way to get them past it than...” She looks out at Lainey and Collin. “A really good date. They just needed to go out and have fun together.” Tia lets out a snicker, understanding Kate’s words. Hell, everyone understands Kate’s words, except for the two innocent kids.

“But what I didn’t take in to account is that it could lead to love and a future together. And I’ve never seen two people who love each other as much as Noah and Ashton do. These two have written their promises to one another. So, I’m going to give them the floor.”

I clear my throat to begin. “I’ve never given any thought to soul mates, but with you, Noah Alexander James, there’s no doubt—you’re that person. I vow to live by your side, carry you when you can’t, and grow our family together. In all we do, any adversity that comes our way, I know we can overcome it, as long as we walk side by side. And I promise to walk by your side for the rest of my life.”

Noah turns to our friends and family. “Well, shit. I don’t think I can top that, but I’m going to try.”

He turns back to me. “Ash, my beautiful, sweet, sexy, and amazing Ashton. You’re not only my best friend, my lover, and the person I want waking up next to me for the next eighty years, but you’re the best person I’ve ever met. You make me want to be better, for you, for our future, and for our family we’ll build one day. You’re more than my future, Ashton Michael Brooks, you’re my whole entire world. I vow to never take you for granted. I vow I’ll love you until my last breath, and I vow that you’re the only man I’ll ever wake up next to.”

I incline my head up to his where only he can hear me. “I think you did fucking awesome, and you totally beat me!”

He winks, and I memorize this moment, the moment that I take his name and become his legal husband.

“Well, hell, you both made my job easy,” Kate imparts. “So, let’s make this official. Do you, Ashton, take Noah as your wedded husband?”

“I do. Forever. Only death will separate us.”

She turns to Noah. “Do you, Noah, take Ashton as your wedded husband?”

“I do. Forever. Only death will separate us.”

“By the power vested in me by the state of Washington and Ordainit.com, it’s my honor to present Ashton and Noah James. You two can kiss to your hearts’ content.”

“I plan to kiss you to my heart’s content for the rest of my life,” Noah croons, cupping my face, and doing what he said he’d do—*kissing me to his heart’s content*.



Noah

WE CAN'T CONTAIN OURSELVES.

We drove the two plus hours straight from the ceremony, after the little dinner party Kate hosted, with all the things married couples do. Even with a small guest list, it gave us time to visit with everyone who is important to us. We had our first dance, shoved cake in each other's faces, and listened to Liam and Tia give their speeches.

It was a beautiful day. A wonderful day. And it's not over yet. We hurry from the car to the back door of the cabin, and don't make it past the kitchen.

We're still in our suits, which makes it a little challenging, but I need to fuck my husband. I have no patience. We promised we'd be good until we were able to be by ourselves. But, we're hungry, frantic, and to be honest, a little violently aggressive for the other.

"I knew I should have changed into my track pants," Ash huffs; he's making quick work of my belt, unzipping my jeans. He drops to his knees, his fingers digging into my thighs, and twists my body around. He's passing go and collecting two hundred dollars as his tongue begins to lick my hole. His fingers push past the tightness, and with his tongue and magic fingers, I'll come all over the granite countertops if he's not careful.

“Fuck me, husband of mine. I need you to fuck me right now.”

We're not patient, as our dress shirts are still on our bodies. I'm naked from the waist down, and I've missed how many clothes my husband still has on. *My husband*. My husband is rimming me, my husband is fingering me. My husband is about to top me, fuck me, make love to me, and when he's done, it'll be my turn to fuck him.

“You're my husband, Ash. I will fuck my husband, and my husband will fuck me. My sweet Ashton. As much as I'll never tire of fucking you or being fucked by you, more so, I'll never tire of calling you my husband.”

He's quiet, but his goal is apparent. He's going to make me pass out from the pleasure by his hand. He's finger fucking me, tongue fucking me and...

“Holy heavens and the angels fucking sing, I'm about to come.” His hand cups my ball sack, and when I'm about to release my wedding jizz all over the kitchen, he spins me around, shoves my cock down his throat, and I come in his mouth. An orgasming penis is super sensitive but fuck me twice, and he sure as hell will, his tongue wrings out every part of my orgasm.

“Holy shit balls, Ash, you gotta do that again. Yeah. And now I'm dead.”

He spins me back, my body facing the counter, and pushes my torso flat on the surface. “If you think that's something, wait until I dick you up.” This is Ash, and I love to be dicked up by him.

Somewhere, somehow, he's found lube. “Fuck me hard, husband. Fuck me so hard.”

“That I can do.” He moves his face around to mine. “And you'll take it like the slut you are for my cock, my husband the cock whore.”

“Shit! Holy hell. Call me names. Do what you want, but push that cock in me. Without you, I feel so fucking lonely, honey.”

He's not gentle. I don't want him to be. He thrusts inside, fast and hard. "I love you so much, Noah James."

His pace increases but he's holding on to his orgasm, and I'm fucking here for the ride. "Want my cum to fill you up, my dirty cum slut?"

His dirty talk may be the only reason I come again, so soon.

"I love it when you take charge, tell me how it's going to be." He's pretty bossy when he bottoms, but he's downright obscene when he fucks me.

"Let's see, you're my jizz taker, my cock whore, cum slut. Fuck, baby. I'm going to come, but I want to be inside of you for so much longer."

"Um, Ash?"

"Yeah, my cock whore?"

I'm not expecting words, which sends a shiver down my spine. "We have our whole lives together. What we don't do now, we can do later because we have forever."

"Holy fuck. Your words are pure poetry. And believe me, I won't make it an hour before I'll want to do this again."

One more push is all it takes, and he begins to pump his cum inside of me. "This, Ash. This is what we get to do for the rest of our lives."

We're both spent, and we hold on tight to one another as we ease down to the floor, until strength returns to our bodies.

It takes us an hour, but we're able to move from the floor to the sofa. We've lost all our clothes, and I cover our naked bodies with a blanket we keep on the back of the couch.

"That was intense."

"Um..." I think the sex has made me dumb, because I can't think a coherent thought. "Yeah, that was fucking awesome," I finally stammer out. "Can we do it again?"

"Fuck yeah, we're going to do it again, husband."

“Yeah, about that, husband of mine, when the fuck did you become such a dirty talker? Jizz taker. I swear, it’s a fucking classic.”

“Yeah, you’re my sexy jizz taker. I’m going to have to up my game, because I need new material.” His lighthearted teasing is adorable, and the confidence in his take-charge persona makes me grow hard just thinking about how he fucked me.



A shton

LIAM DROVE up to the cabin last weekend, his present to us loading the fridge with our favorite foods and drinks. He left several “fun” gifts around the cabin. Two extra-large pink penis tumblers sit on the table, next to a bottle of champagne he has ready for us in an electric cooler. There’s a banner hung from one side of the living room, to the other. It says, *you can’t spell happiness without Penis*. On the couch sits a couple towels embroidered with the words “cum rag.”

“We could have used that earlier. Maybe we should have gone further into the house,” he teases.

There’s a note on the console and we step with hesitation toward it. This is Liam after all.

Pull. It’s all the note reads. It’s a small door that holds DVDs since streaming up here is impossible. I look at Noah, and he shrugs. Who knows what to expect. I tug on the door carefully and with just a little pull, it opens on its own, and several plastic penises in various sizes and colors fall to the floor.

“Fuck, baby. Your brother is classy, isn’t he?”

He nods his head slowly. “That he is.”

We continue to open up closets, medicine cabinets and the surprises don’t stop, not until we walk upstairs. I’m the first to

step into the loft, and Noah runs into me.

On the bed are towels, shaped like two doves, kissing. Silver and white balloons sit on a deep gray comforter already folded down. A large, tasteful banner in light blues and silvers hangs above the frame of the bed reading, *I'll love you forever*, and balloons surround the sign. A breakfast tray with chocolates, cookies, and crackers is in the middle of the bed. Candles with lighters near each one covers all the surface areas. There's another sign near an outlet with a cord, reading *Plug me in*.

"I'm a little apprehensive, after the million penises that currently are on the living room floor," I explain, weighing our options.

He does as the note says, and soft white lights line the area where the walls touch the ceilings.

"Okay, this is classy," I admit.

"Almost too classy for Liam." He says what I'm thinking.

Near the wall leading to the bathroom, a large sign is easier to read. *Be sure to check out the bathroom, assholes*.

This is certainly Liam. He reaches for my hands and pulls me into the large space, covered with white and red petals. On the large soaker tub is a basket of essential items. Bath salts, bath bombs, a loofah, shampoos, massage oils and two large fluffy robes hang on the back of the door.

"Fuck, who would have thought my brother was such a romantic?" I'm willing to wager he was helped by a loudmouthed redhead, but I don't spoil the mood.

"Fuck, what are we waiting on? Let's not let any of this romantic shit go to waste."

And we don't.

I WAKE up in the arms of my husband. My husband. I can't get over it. What time is it? We were up late, because nothing we

did satisfied our need for the other. My phone beeps with a text, along with Noah's at the same time. He's on his back, a pillow over his face.

I reach for my phone, and it's ten a.m. The text is from my brother-in-law. I read his name on the screen to myself.

Crazy-ass redhead number two: *Hey, you have a delivery on your doorstep. Be sure to take it to the bench by the creek. By the way, what did you think of all the penises I hid around the cabin?*

Oh, fuck, there are more of them?

"Who keeps on texting us, husband?" His voice is groggy.

I chuckle internally to myself, we'll find penises for the next twenty years.

"It's your brother. We have a delivery, and we're supposed to take it down to the creek, as per his orders." It's cold, being February, but who knows what's in store for us. "Hopefully there are no more penises."

"There's only one penis I want for the rest of my life; well maybe besides my own." Rolling over and sitting up, he's completely naked. "Okay, let's do this, and then we can come back and fuck."

My crude husband stands, grabbing sweats and hoodies for the both of us. I follow him down the stairs and out the back door. There's a large basket waiting, and I immediately smell the fresh baked goods. "Is that Fallon's from town?" We know their aroma as we smell the croissants, bagels, bread, muffins and probably much more, especially since this basket is fucking heavy.

Winding through the trail to our bench, we hold hands, with nowhere to be. At times he grabs me, dropping kisses on my lips, nipping at the back of my neck, or groping my erection.

When we get to the open clearing, there's a large tent, but just not any typical tent. It's a white, bell frame structure, but from the back of it, it's large and round. Moving to the entrance in front of the water of the creek, the heavy material

of the tent is pulled back, showing us our destination for the day. Inside is a king-sized air mattress, standing three feet from the floor, made of the same thick material as the tent, with a white down comforter and many blankets. A table sits to the side of the bed, with folding chairs, and the inside is decorated with balloons like the ones in the cabin.

A note sits on the table. He pulls it from the envelope, but I'm faster and begin to read it out loud for us.

Enjoy your day in nature. I know it's February near the Canadian border, so included are battery-operated heaters. Don't set yourself on fire, or Mom will forever blame me. Be sure to fuck like rabbits, cuddle in bed, enjoy the scenery, and the fact I didn't add any plastic penises to the decorations in the tent. Love you! Liam.

"You ready to test this mattress and see if it can handle our fucking?" he asks. I jump toward him on the bed. We're naked in a quick minute, snuggled under the down comforter. "I think we fucked like rabbits all day yesterday. But right now, next to our bench, and the beauty of the outside, I want to make love to you."

"Look at you—my husband, the romantic. I think tender is what my body needs. All of my body."

We're on both of our sides looking at one another. He kisses the top of my nose. "Did I hurt you?"

This man. I never thought I'd love like this, but to be loved in the same way, is so beautiful. He's so beautiful.

"No, not at all. I'd tell you if I was hurt. I'm just saying my husband making love to me is super-hot."

"Oh, believe me, I can be very hot." He rolls me over, his lips fusing with mine. I could kiss him forever, and we're not frenzied. We're intentional.

"I love you, Ash." He pulls back, and I see tears in his eyes.

"Ditto," I reply.

Noah's infectious grin sets the tone, and I return his genuine smile. I'm under him, and his lips kiss every part of my body. From my nipple piercings, to my armpits, to my elbows, my fingers, the V of my abdomen and the inside of my thighs.

"I'm so turned on, baby." I'm barely able to speak.

"Yes! Yes, you are." He nuzzles up next to my hard-on. But he doesn't begin to suck me. He kisses my raging boner.

"You're killing me here, baby. I need you."

He crawls over my body, kissing me again, his eyes full of sensual need. He pulls back with a bottle of lube, dousing his fingers with it. "I'm gonna watch you, the entire time I push in and out of you, baby. I won't look away, even as I fill you with my cum."

"Please, please, please," I cry out. He pushes past my tight hole, and I take him fully. "Oh, fuck, yes. Make love to me."

His thrusts are slow. He gains further access in me every time he pushes in. "I love you, Ash. You and me, against the world forever."

His eyes don't leave mine, just as mine don't leave his. There's an inner fire that we both share, and it's because of the future we're building together. As we both come at the same time, I cry out, "Nothing will ever separate us."

We share five more days in nature, where our closeness only grows stronger. It's hard to leave the memories we made here, but it's time to get back to the real world. At least, it's the real world with my husband by my side.

IT'S THURSDAY. We've been married two weeks. And it's the designated day of the week I meet my mother-in-law for coffee, and pastries. This was her idea after we got engaged. It's given me perspective into the mind of Evelyn James.

The barista knows us by now, but she had thought for the longest time that we're mother and son, always claiming we looked just like one another.

"So, tell me. What is new in the life of Ashton James?" She had the hardest time accepting my decision to take Noah's last name.

But, shortly after we returned from our honeymoon, she said it was like I was always meant to be part of the James family. She and Tia had a little too much wine. My sister is a bad influence on my mother-in-law. Evelyn only drinks when Tia is around.

"Nothing much. I'm working on a new piece that a gentleman in New York has commissioned. It's similar to the ones I sold at my first show, with abstract forms on the far edges of the painting. He wants me to paint his daughter's wedding. It's quite beautiful, by the picture he sent. I've never been to Martha's Vineyard but one day, Noah has promised to take me."

I show her a couple photos I've snapped and she gasps, covering her mouth like she does with Noah. In the past six months, the woman has gone from attempting to break us up, to my number-one fan, a real cheerleader, like she is with her son. She doesn't induce the same anxiety-ridden terror in my body as she once had. She's certainly overbearing, but her love for her sons is beautiful.

We begin talking about a quilt she's sewing for my sister for her upcoming birthday. It's white, ivory and light turquoise, very classy, very Tia. She has a giving heart. I'll give her that. She's still overbearing. Some people will never change, and Evelyn will always be Evelyn. And somehow, after a rocky start, she's worn me down, and I adore the woman.



A shton

OUR CLASS BEGINS at the normal time. I scan the room, and the Carrol kids aren't here. It's unlike Devin, Collin, and Lainey to be late. They're typically here an hour early, when Mrs. Bronte, the director, serves a late lunch. She understands it may be the only time some of these kids eat.

"Hey Mark," I ask of one of Devin's friends. "Where's Dev today? He was excited when we told him we were starting with oil paints this week."

He's packing up his bag, halfway in the conversation. "You didn't hear? I thought Dev would have texted. Social services placed them in emergency foster care. There was no electricity at the house, and they couldn't locate their mom."

He says it as if this isn't a big deal. And what has he been exposed to, if this is his mindset?

"Why wouldn't Devin call us?" Noah asks of both me and Mark. He's the calm in the storm because my heart is erratic, and I hold onto Noah to steady me.

"I'm not sure. My guess would be he left his phone. It was quick. The kids barely were able to pack, not that it matters. They don't have much anyway. If I hear from Dev, I'll tell him to call you."

He leaves without any more explanation. Our foster classes are complete, and we've combined our certifications now that we're married. We didn't sign up for emergency placement. And we'd asked our case worker to place us with kids whose parent's rights would most likely be terminated. We want to raise a family, and we understand we aren't guaranteed an adoption, but if given an opportunity, it's what we wanted to provide to a sibling group.

"What do we do now?" My body is still relying on him for support. He finds the closest chair and pulls me onto his lap.

"I don't know, honey." His hand rests on my shoulder. I adjust my body, staring at his dark eyes communicating his tortured disbelief.

"Should we call Mrs. Roeger?" She's our case worker, and though King County is large, Mrs. Roeger should have access to their files.

We can't reach her, but leave a voice mail, and we're halfway back to the North side of Seattle when she calls us. I place it on speaker for Noah to hear.

"I'll cut to the chase, guys. The kids have been split up. Devin is at a group home since he's sixteen. Collin is with a foster family that only accepts boys. And Lainey is with an older couple who specifically take in emergency cases only, until a more suitable home has been located. I have a call in to their case worker. I can't speak for her, or her supervisor, but this is a social worker's dream come true. We never want to split the kids up, and with a relationship already established, or what we call fictive kin, it's always ideal to place the children in a home with a family they're already comfortable with. If I was the social worker for these children, I'd thank my lucky stars for you. As long as they have sought out their biological family members first, I can't imagine there should be an issue." She pauses for a moment.

"Is there more, Mrs. Roeger?"

"Well, I know we went over this during your certification, but I want to reiterate it. You realize that the sweet kids you know and spend time with won't be so sweet in your care

twenty-four-seven, right? These kids have been through trauma, but they know and trust you. It's more than most kids get, shoved in with families they had just met. We have great foster parents, but unfortunately, we have some that aren't. But, with it being close to five, I can't imagine we'll have a solution tonight."

The idea of all three being split up for another night makes me physically ill.

"But," she continues, "I'll be in touch. As soon as I know something, I'll call you no matter the time." There's something hanging in her voice, and I assume she has more to say, so I don't end the call. "Let me ask you something, and it has no bearing on this case. Did you get certified for these kids?"

It's a hard question to answer, but I don't have to. Noah answers for both of us.

"Early on in our relationship, Ashton and I discussed children, understanding we wanted a family. He expressed his interest in adopting from the foster care system. I agreed, but didn't understand fully until I started volunteering. We never hoped these kids would be taken away from their mother, and we realize the risk that the mother may want them back."

Even hearing these words is devastating, I think to myself.

"But," he continues, "we wanted to prepare, just in case they needed us, and if they didn't, then we trusted we'd eventually get placed with kids who would complete our family."

"Wow," Mrs. Roeger says. "You two are truly special people. I knew you guys would be some of the good ones. So, when I know, I'll call you."

When we had our home inspection, we understood the bedroom situation was going to be a deal breaker. Behind the studio, on the far wall of our home, was a large space to create three small but enclosed bedrooms, one for any girl or girls, one for any boy or boys, and one for us. The space would be tight, but we'd not get certified without this change. I always

thought it was wasted space, but somehow, Noah knew we'd need it one day.

“Can you imagine how scared Lainey is?” I ask.

“Or Devin not knowing where his sister and brother are,” he returns.

“And Collin?” We can never forget about Collin.

The rest of the car ride is quiet, as my thoughts, along with my husband's, remain on the kids.

IT'S PAST NINE PM, and we've not heard from Mrs. Roeger since this afternoon. It's eating me up inside. We're jumpy, and every time the phone rings, we ready ourselves for bad news. We've been a little short-tempered with each other. This is actual hell.

“Hey, let me ask you something?” Noah asks, climbing in next to me. We have our new bedroom, but have remained in the open space until we have children in the house.

“Go for it,” I answer.

“We've not talked about the next steps, with the kids. I think we had been waiting to see if they'd be placed with us, or another set of siblings, before we chose to tackle this subject.” He kisses my nose.

“Okay, now I'm equal parts intrigued and nervous.”

His smile calms my spirits. “Ah, don't be, honey. What do you think about moving? Kids need space to run and play. This isn't really cohesive for children. I think we'll be fine here until we know for sure how this may play out, but I'd like a picket fence, a dog, and a yard to plant flowers in. Maybe even do that cheesy thing all parents do, and have the kid's handprints in the cement.”

This is a conversation we needed to have, and it's the next logical step, but it hurts my heart thinking of leaving this place. “But you love this loft.”

“I do, and I’ll miss it. I won’t lie. But I love this life we’re building even more. I’ve set aside money for a house once I had a family. And I know you. You’re going to get all up in arms saying you’re not freeloading off of me. But, we’re married, what’s mine is yours. So don’t let that hinder you, or us from getting what we want.”

He knows me so well.

“Fuck, Noah. I love you. And yes, I’d love to look for a place together we can call home and raise our kids in.”

The phone rings before I can kiss my husband, and I pounce on it. “Hello.”

“Ashton, this is Denise Roeger. I’m calling to let you know you have three children who can’t wait to see you tomorrow. Get ready for an instant family. We’ll be over around noon, if everything goes as planned.”

“And that’s it. Nothing else?” I ask.

“Get a good night’s sleep, because after tonight you may never sleep again.” She hangs up the phone.

“Well?” he asks.

“Get ready to never sleep again. The kids will be here tomorrow.”

“We got the kids?”

I don’t think we’ll recover if we have them for six months, just to give them back to a mother who neglects them. But I keep that thought out of my mind.

“Yes, we got the kids.”

I CAN’T SLEEP. Noah’s own slumber doesn’t seem peaceful either, but when he snores, I know he’s at least getting some sort of rest.

I extricate myself carefully from the bed, grabbing my laptop, taking it to what will be our bedroom.

All three bedrooms aren't much bigger than ten by ten. Ours is a touch bigger, just so we could have a king-sized bed in it. But, it follows the protocols for separate bedrooms.

Sitting up against the wall, on our sheet-less mattress, I google homes in North Seattle. I'm uncertain where to even begin, but when in doubt, Google it, right? What the hell did our parent's generation do? I can imagine it now. Stuck to the vicinity of the wall, with a corded phone as they used the yellow pages to call a realtor not knowing their credentials, only to have to leave a message and hope someone calls you back. I like this way much better.

The computer directs me to Zillow, and a plethora of houses appear. Fuck, I can't even begin to know what our budget is. Noah mentioned last night roughly what he could sell the loft for. When he bought it, it was a blank canvas and he sank a lot of money into it, but he'll get a return on it three-fold. He mentioned he has money set aside for his forever home, but with my sales increasing, I too have money I can contribute to the mortgage payment. I may not have what Noah does, but together, I think we can get something really nice.

Starting with filters, I begin adding numbers of rooms, bathrooms, floors, garages, house type, and just for shits and giggles, I added a detached apartment. Noah and I will need a studio.

Not surprisingly, only a few options come up, but when I click on a modern farmhouse with a studio apartment in the back yard, fenced, with five bedrooms, and an open loft upstairs, I think I just found our dream house.



Noah

MRS. ROEGER TOLD US to get a good night's sleep, but with every thought taking up space in my mind, I tossed and turned all night long. And my poor husband, whom I've been married to for less than three months, didn't sleep much better.

I had lists floating through my mind. We'd hit Target first thing, getting sheets and comforters for the beds that were already in the rooms. The furniture was already assembled. Devin and Collin would share a room, and Lainey would be in her own. The bathroom situation isn't ideal, but we'd make it work for now. Towels, toothbrushes, food, shampoo, and a million more items came to me all night long. I'd grab my phone, adding to my lists in my apps, then another item would pop up.

“What time is it?” Ashton asks as the sun rises.

“Almost five.” I'd just put my phone down after adding Goldfish crackers to the list. Shit, we'd gotten less than three hours of sleep. “Did you get up in the middle of the night for a while?”

“Yeah. Couldn't sleep. You were snoring lightly. Didn't want to wake you.”

I roll over, his nose touching my nose. “What aren't you telling me, husband of mine?”

“Well, I was thinking about looking at houses. And I Googled some.” His smile is broad, and I know he’s found something.

“Okay, you might as well show me.”

“And, we might as well get up and start our day. This is ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.” He pushes his back against the headboard, and grabs his computer. “I’ll send you the link. You give me the list. Let’s order as much of this online as we can.”

“Shit, honey, you’re a genius. I know I keep you around for more than just your sexy body, and the way your ass takes my cock.” He winks my way, and it melts my heart.

Ash starts with our Target order, and I click the link he has just sent me. He doesn’t ask me what I think about the house. He’s quiet, but he loves his online shopping. I run through the pictures again, sending Liam a quick text, asking about his work friend whose wife is a realtor.

“Maybe you should add having sex to the list since I’m sure we’ll be very uncomfortable with the kid’s rooms next to us,” he mentions, adding item upon item to our online cart.

The subject of sex is mentioned, and now I’m thinking of it, and my boxer’s tent.

And I’m not forgetting about the sex he just promised me too or the house that would be fucking perfect for us.

We were back from Target by nine am. We’ve washed all the bedding, stripped our bed, and I’m currently breaking it down. We have our bed set up in our new room.

“I thought we’d make this a little play area for the kids, put a PS5 up here, a couple chairs. Something that is their space?” he offers, and I agree.

“We’re not gonna have time for sex, are we?” I ask, and the disappointment is heard in my voice. He flips his watch over, shaking his head.

“No, it doesn’t look like it.” He disappears with more clean bedding in his arms. We’d chosen basic colors. Light

blues for the boy's room, and yellow for Lainey's room. We want something cheerful and happy. The doorbell rings, and I'm almost done. We keep our old bed frame, moving it below the second level, where we have room for storage.

"They're here, baby." Ashton is so adorable when he's nervous.

We slide open the door of our loft, and Mrs. Roeger stands with all three kids in front of her.

"Ashton!" Lainey leaps from the other side of the door into Ashton's arms. And he catches her.

"Are they telling us the truth? We get to live with you? And I get to keep Collin and Devin with me? And you two can be our dads one day? Is it true? Is it? Is it?" she asks.

He leans his head to one side, then the other, as his smile grows.

"Yeah, sweetheart, it's true. But the question is—are you okay with all of that?"

She throws her arms over his shoulders. "Yes, silly. Of course, it's more than okay with me."

DURING OUR CLASSES, the social workers spoke of a honeymoon phase. That everything would be perfect, making us overconfident, and how when we least expected it, the other shoe would drop.

"Breakfast is ready. Come get it while it's hot," I call throughout the loft. The kids have been spending a lot of time in their rooms. The emergency placement had been traumatic, and we see them breaking down, little by little, each day. Ash is in the studio, working on a new collection for his next show, in three months.

"Elaina Carrol, breakfast," Devin calls out near her bedroom door.

“No, not gonna eat,” she screams loud enough for me to hear her clearly.

“Lainey,” he calls again, and his voice is elevated. “Elaina, I’m not going to put up with you being disrespectful. Do you hear me?”

I look back to the bedrooms, but I don’t have a direct line of sight. Ashton does, and he turns his whole body to the commotion behind him on the lower level.

“Devin, stop. Leave her alone. You’re going to mess this all up.” Collin’s voice comes through the loft as though he’s standing next to me. Ashton pushes from his art desk and takes the steps that lead to the back part of our place. I unplug the griddle, walking toward the bathroom, turning toward the noise. Collin’s voice grows frantic, and by the time I get back to everyone, Lainey has her door opened, and she’s crying.

Ashton walks toward Lainey, leading her to the gaming area that was once our open bedroom, and they sit on the couch. I lower myself down on the floor at Collin’s eye level, looking up at Devin.

His eyes knit together, and he opens his mouth to speak, “I was just...” There’s an uncertain tone as Devin tries to find the right words. For several years, he’s the one who has taken care of his siblings.

“It’s okay, Dev. Can you give me a second to talk to your brother?”

He shrugs his shoulders, turning from me and slamming the door behind him. Okay, so he’s just not mad, he’s pissed off.

“Collin, buddy, come here.” I sit in front of the door to our bedroom, and he slides down the wall next to me. “What’s going on? Your brother has been more than your brother for a long time. He was trying to help so we could eat. What gives?”

Tears stream down his face. “We’ll mess up, Noah. And when we do, you’ll send us back. We’ll have to be separated, and I won’t see Dev or Lainey again.”

I knew their time apart, though brief, was painful, but this is next-level heartbreaking. “Collin. Oh, buddy. Do you think you have to be perfect for us? You’re entitled to have your opinions and bad days, bud. We want you to be you. We want you with us because we love you. If Lainey disobeys us or your brother yells at you, we’re not sending anyone away.”

“Really? You’ll love us even when we’re bad?”

Oh, fuck, this is awful to watch, him hiding in himself, and shaking in fear.

“I have a confession to make, but it’s our little secret. Got it?” I ask.

“Um, okay,” he answers apprehensively.

“Do you think I love Ash?” I ask.

“You guys are perfect for each other.”

I begin to chuckle. “We’re not perfect, not even close. But we do love each other very much. What we have is love and respect for the other. We fight, we even say means things sometimes. We’re human, but at the end of the day, I’m never sending him away because even when we have our hard days, it’s better than not having him at all.”

He’s processing my words, looking up at the ceiling. “And to answer your question, Collin, I’ll love you even when you’re bad, make a mistake, or are mad at Ash or I. It’s called unconditional love, because we don’t expect anything from you except for you to be yourself, bud.”

His arms wrap around me, or as much of me as his body will allow. “I love you, Noah. I’m so sorry I yelled and got everyone in trouble.”

I pull back, but move my eyes to his. “Families fight, buddy. It’s what happens.”

“We’re a family?” he asks.

“Yeah, of course we are.”

And he hugs me again, even tighter.

ASH and I haven't had a chance to talk openly about what happened. Lainey was her bubbly self during breakfast. Collin was still affected by the conflict, but by the end of our meal, he was joking and cutting up with Ash.

Devin, on the other hand, had been quiet, barely making eye contact with any of us.

Ash is helping me with dishes when Devin walks into the kitchen with his hands in his pockets.

"Hey guys." He's looking at the floor, and is rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. "I'm sorry about before. Collin has been scared that..."

We want him to tell us in his own words how he's feeling, and we wait quietly for him to explain.

"Well, shit, I guess we're all feeling a little bit nervous. We've never had this." He points to parts of the loft. "And it's not the home, though this place is fucking bad ass. We don't have to worry when we'll eat next, if we'll be locked out of our home, if the lights will be on. We all feel like this world will give us the cosmic fuck you, it always has, taking the best thing we've ever been given away from us. Which is you. But, we'll do better. And you can send me back; just take care of Lainey and Collin."

My eyes tear up, falling down my cheeks. Ash's expression is different. It's full of anger, and not toward the kids. Never the kids. Ash grew up with little, but he had his mother's love, support, and affection.

"See, you're mad. I'll just pack up, but please, keep Lainey and Collin."

He steps toward Devin. "Dev, I'm not mad at you. I'm mad that you've been taught to give up on people. But more so, I'm pissed that the people who should have loved you the most have given up on you. No kid should have to go through that. But, we're not sending anyone back. And if you leave,

we'll just follow you and bring you back home, where you belong.”

His white hair frames his fair face, and his eyes widen in surprise. “Really? You still want us after today?”

Ash looks back at me. We both break for these kids.

“We want you. And it doesn't matter if you're mad, or I'm mad, or even if you get in trouble. Our love for you comes without strings attached to it. We love you all because you're you. *Don't change for us, be you.* I mean, we have rules and expect you to respect us and your siblings, but we want you. We like the kid you are. You're wonderful.”

My heart is so fucking full, it's about to burst.



A shton

LAINNEY HAS TANTRUMS, Collin is grumpy in the morning, and Devin is a slob, and still, I can't find one reason not to love them. I'd tried to explain unconditional love to all three at various times in the three months we've lived together, but we continue to model it. Nothing they do could make us want to send them away.

And as we pack up our loft and say good-bye to this chapter in our life, the idea of living in a home, with personal space, a yard to run around and play football in, is so fucking wonderful.

Our life isn't all rainbows and sprinkles. I get frustrated with the kids. They argue with us, just as I had with my own parents. They disobey us. Lainey has taken to purposely seeing how far she can push us before we send her packing. We never have, and never will.

Today is a good day. We'd hired painters to come in to the new house. All the kids picked out their own paint colors. Lainey chose green—dark hunter green. We installed shiplap on the wall her bed would be on, to offset the dark color in her room. She picked out a low-framed bed with a black headboard, using a white and ivory quilt Evelyn made her, and white furniture. She's very tidy and doesn't like her shit out of place.

Collin is similar to his sister, wanting the same, but with rich navy walls, but only half way up. We installed, or rather, Carl installed hand rails, painting the top half white. Collin is practical, wanting similar furniture to Lainey's but everything black. *No girly white* he insisted.

Devin was simple. Gray walls. Black furniture of our choosing. After all, he has a year left of school. He's determined to stay local, thinking he can't afford Lourdes, but Noah's parents have already put aside tuition for his first year. We don't want to overwhelm him, thinking the tuition is a condition of our love, so we'll wait to share Evelyn and Carl's gift with him at a later date.

We've loaded up most of our furniture, taking it to the community center down south. We decided to start over with a new style, and new furniture, but our stuff was in good shape, no reason to waste it.

I stare at the empty loft, so open, with nothing in it. Noah's arms wrap around me, and he rests his head on my shoulder, looking into our old home as I do.

"I'm going to miss this place, honey."

I think of the memories, fucking me over the couch in the sitting area, the countless number of pancakes we've had for breakfasts over the last year—our studio, lying in bed with wine, completely naked, memorizing each other's bodies.

"I am too, baby, but I'm excited about our new home and this new chapter."

"Yeah. Me too. And just think, with us on a different floor than the kids, we can christen our bedroom, the right way." Noah's plan makes me want him now.

Kids make it a little harder to be spontaneous, and maybe he won't be able to take me over the back of the couch, but our need for one another has never waned.

"Now with that visual, let's get a move on. Your sister and Liam have the kids, and who knows what sort of trouble they'll get into."

I think about it for a second, letting a chuckle escape my mouth. “Those poor kids. After an hour with their aunt and uncle, they’re going to beg us for quality family time.”

Tia and Liam fight as much as they ever have. It’s honestly exhausting.

“Yeah, maybe we should let the kids spend time with our siblings more often.”

I slide the door closed, saying good-bye to this chapter of our life, ready for the next part of our story.

“I HAVE THEM IN BED,” Devin says as a greeting. By the time we packed and cleaned, and stopped to get a bite to eat, it is well after nine p.m. “So, I just have to ask,” he drawls sitting on our new camel brown leather sectional. “Were we being punished by spending the day with Liam and Tia?” Oh, they drive our kids crazy too.

He walks by us, giving hugs to Noah and me. He’s an affectionate kid. And in just three months, he understands the security he has in us. “I know I don’t say it enough, but thank you for the life you’re giving us.” He turns around, in a full circle. “I loved the loft. It was bad ass, but this place feels like home.”

He disappears up the steps. Noah pulls at the waistband of my track pants, “Wanna share a bottle of wine with me? Or would you rather have a beer?”

I think on that for a second. Wine is my go to, but beer sounds refreshing. “You have that milk stout we love?”

His grin tells me what I need to know. “Oh, is that even a question?”

I watch him in our space. Our new space. We’ve been moving things over a little bit at a time. Most of our shit is put away, but we still have a couple boxes out.

The house is open as soon as you walk in the front door, with a small entryway to our living room, and black wrought iron steps leading upstairs. Four bedrooms and three baths are on this level, along with open space for a gaming center and some of Lainey's toys. The kids have almost everything they need on the second floor.

But what I love is when you enter our house, besides the open kitchen, white walls, and the beautiful bronze light fixtures, is the line of sight out to our yard and the cement patio. There's a hidden walkway to a second-floor detached apartment. It'll be our studio for now, using the open living room for Noah and me. Devin can use the only bedroom in the space for his paintings.

Noah moves around in the kitchen effortlessly, making a quick fruit and cheese plate. The cabinets are a whitish gray, with marble countertops with deep gray veining. The large island, which can sit six people, is between the kitchen and our dining room table. And our bedroom is nestled behind the kitchen and under the steps.

Like his loft, we want to keep our home minimalistic, but we have more walls in this house and want to display our art. The piece I painted of Noah and me at the Science Center is already framed and hanging on the wall nearest our entryway. The first sketch Noah ever drew of me from our first date is showcased in the hallway leading to our bedroom.

He returns with our drinks and snacks, hitting buttons on his phone, as light music starts to play through the downstairs.

"Hey you." He brings his body next to mine, nuzzling into my neck. "Welcome home."

Home. "This is our home, right? I'm not dreaming?"

"Nah, if you were dreaming, I couldn't do this." His mouth covers mine, as he begins to kiss me with passion and fervent desire. His hands are gentle, rubbing my back in large circles. We break the kiss at the same time.

"Then I guess this is all very real."

“It is.” His bright smile is indication that he’s as happy as I am. “Hey, let me ask you a question, if you don’t mind?”

I adjust my position, opening up my body toward his. “I promised to spend my whole life with you, ask me anything, babe,” I order.

“We have passion for our art. We love creating, but have you given any thought to something you want to do on top of painting? It’s a full-time job, but sometimes I feel like I want to share more of my passion with people who are like-minded. Am I making sense? I don’t feel like I’m making sense.”

Placing my hand over his, I begin to speak. “I know exactly what you mean. I was looking online at art programs for Devin, but found a teacher’s position at a private college not far from here. And they’re looking for someone with an education background to teach a couple classes on watercolors.”

He finishes his beer but doesn’t stand to grab another one. He’s staring at me. “Are you serious? That would be great. I mean, really fucking great.”

“I’d not be held to large restrictions in my curriculum, like I would as an art teacher in high school.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“What about you? You obviously have an idea, since you brought this up?” I ask. He closes his eyes and looks away. “Unless you say you want to be a male escort, I can’t think of anything I won’t support.”

He suppresses a laugh. “I’m not sure why I’m so nervous, but I’d like to open an art gallery, or go in with Kate, maybe connecting two studios, or a partnership. I love the behind the scenes stuff, creating a home for an artist’s cherished piece, and providing them a fair price.”

As much as Noah hates the public, I can see him in this one role. “Well, what are you waiting on then?” I challenge.

“Nothing, now that I have your support.”

This is our life now. And I can't wait to live every day with both my husband and our kids.

"I LIKE YOUR NEW CAR, ASH," Lainey hollers from the third row of my new SUV. Noah wore me down, and now that we're a family of five, one car, let alone a sedan, isn't cutting it. "But if it's yours," she continues to yell, "why is Noah driving?"

"Good question," I answer, turning my head as to not yell at Lainey. "It may be because he's bossy." We're on our way to the cabin this weekend. It's pretty tight with all five of us, but it's family togetherness at its finest. We hike, roast s'mores, watch movies. During the summer we swim in the creek. Devin pulls out the sofa bed, and Lainey and Collin have twin-sized air mattresses for the living room.

"Or," Noah interrupts, "it's that I put my life in danger every time Ashton gets behind the wheel."

"I can't disagree, you scare me. I close my eyes and hope we get to our next destination when you drive." Collin joins the conversation, and I turn around to the second row where he sits.

"Hey, you little turd," I tease. "Dev, you have anything to add?"

"Nope, because I need someone to teach me to drive. I'm not going to piss off one of the people that can make it happen."

"Now that is a smart man," I say, playfully poking Noah in the side.

"Hey, um, question?" Devin asks.

"Yeah, shoot. What's up?"

"Next time we come up here, can I bring, um...someone?"

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Noah smirk.

“Who is this someone?” my husband asks, giving me that knowing look we seem to exchange now that we’re parents.

“Her name is Celeste. We can put a sheet or something across the living room, and she can sleep on Lainey’s side and I can sleep on Collin’s. You know if I do anything, these two will tell on me.”

“You’re not wrong,” Lainey chimes in.

“Maybe we should meet this Celeste first. And I’d think her parents might have something to say about spending the weekend with a boy,” Noah explains.

“You act like it’ll be just me and her. My sister, my brother, and my parents are going to be there, so we certainly won’t be able to get into too much trouble.”

My eyes widen. Noah’s lips turn into a broad smile. He called us *his parents*. I cover my hand over his, squeezing it tight. We can’t get sappy. We won’t make a big deal out of it, in front of the kids, but we both know this is a big fucking milestone.

“YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK?” Lainey decrees after watching *Lion King* for the hundredth time. “We should come to the cabin every weekend. I love it here. And the Wi-Fi sucks, so no one is on their stupid phones.” She calls our phones stupid because she doesn’t have one.

“Maybe not every weekend, but there’s no reason we can’t come every couple of weeks,” Noah answers.

She purses her lips together. “I guess I can accept those terms. But since the night is still young, how about s’mores?” She returns the DVD to the storage area when one of Liam’s colorful penises from our honeymoon falls to the floor.

“Um, I found another one.” She points to the inch-long pink penis, and she begins to laugh. “Uncle Liam is silly.”

“That’s one word for Uncle Liam,” Devin deadpans, walking over to her and throwing his giggling sister over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Come on, Lainey, we’ll get the fire going.” Devin is an attentive brother. He could stay at home for the weekend, he’s old enough, but he hangs on to our family time. He doesn’t want to miss anything.

“Hey wait for me,” Collin cries out, following them through the kitchen and the back door.

“Don’t let your brother or sister fall in the fire pit, Dev,” Noah reminds him and stands up to grab the penis. We find one every time we come up here. “What do we have here, Mr. James?” Noah stalks to me. “We’re alone. Isn’t this nice?”

It’s not like we can have sex, our room is open to the living room. We typically wake up in the middle of the night, horny for one another and hide in the bathroom as he fucks me over our vanity.

“They’re such good kids, in spite of their shitty-ass parents. They’re the best. And I love them so much.”

Noah leans forward, his elbows on his knees. “Have you by chance heard from Mrs. Roeger if we’ll find out anything soon, about their mother and father terminating their rights?”

Mrs. Roeger told us the parents were ready to terminate rights but they’ve fallen off the face of the earth. But what’s telling is that Lainey, Collin or Devin never ask about her. They’re safe here. But more so, they know they’re safe with Noah and me. They don’t have to worry about their next meal, if their clothes will fit if they encounter a growth spurt, and a million other things no child should worry about.

“It’s a waiting game,” I admit, but both our stomachs knot up over possibly losing them.

“So, we’re no closer to knowing when we can actually adopt them.” He doesn’t ask a question. It’s merely the truth, and it hurts us both.

“I know, baby, but all we can do is love them through the uncertainty. If we’re scared, you can imagine they’re terrified.”

“Dads?” Lainey calls from the back door.

“Did she just call us...” He doesn’t finish.

I pull at Noah’s hand, holding it over my heart. “Yeah, she just did. Come on, Dad, let’s go roast s’mores with our kids.” And this may be my favorite day, along with every other day I can spend with my husband.



Noah

“WITH THE AUTHORITY of the state of Washington, I legalize the adoption of Elaina Lyn, Collin Michael and Devin Alexander James.”

The kids wanted to take a part of our names, on top of our last name. Lainey wanted Lyn using it from both Caitlyn and Evelyn. Collin asked if he could use Ash’s middle name, and Devin wanted mine. We were all moved by their decisions.

We’ve been their foster parents for a year, but today we move from foster parents to their actual parents.

The crowd behind us erupts, and Ashton and I have our instant family in our arms. It’s been a long road, one forged in fights, battles of the will, and grief, but also joy, hope, and purpose.

Mrs. Roeger had been spot on when she told us that we’d see a different side of the kids once they were placed in our care. They had to understand that in all the fits, tantrums and battles, that we’d love them through it. We aren’t perfect, and in those opportunities, it had given us a chance to show them that everyone makes mistakes. Do I yell? Does Noah yell? Fuck yes. It’s easy to say you won’t make the same mistakes as your parents when you don’t have kids. But in all of that, we’ve grown as a family.

Devin never thought he'd have a legal family, considering his age. He may only be ten years younger than us, but it doesn't matter. He may think of Ash and me as older brothers, but the family unit we provide for him gives him the confidence to live his life on his terms.

Devin leaves in a couple months for San Diego. My parents are paying his tuition. He's had a hard time accepting our help but he deserves so much more than he's gotten in the past. And it's what grandparents do for their grandsons.

My mother has taken on the role of Grandma in her perfect Evelyn James kind of way. The kids are already spoiled, and with Lainey being the first girl in our family, she loves being a girl grandma. But Collin and she have bonded over baking. She connects very well with Devin. My mom has always been involved in my art. She took classes on art history, learning about the different types, to styles to mediums. Mom may not have been an artist herself, but her interest in the subject is something she and I always shared, and now it's been passed down to Devin.

Both mom and Caitlyn pass through the half door separating the courtroom. Mom has her arms around the boys, and Caitlyn has picked up Lainey, who is still so small for a now almost nine-year-old.

"This calls for a celebration," Mom decrees. It's as if we hadn't already known about the festivities she's planned. "Let's get back to the house and celebrate."

It's mom's thing to throw parties, after all.

"FUCK, this weather is almost too hot," my brother laments, sitting down next to us in the backyard, under a large tree. "Where are my munchkins?" He's staring at us as if we should know. I guess we should. We're legal parents now.

"Caitlyn has them," I answer. "Or at least the two youngest. Devin is spending the weekend with his girlfriend."

“The weekend with the girlfriend. Does Mom know?”

Our mother wouldn't approve, but Devin has been taking care of himself well before we came along.

“I told him to be sure to wrap it, and that pretty much concluded our conversation of the birds and bees,” I answer.

Ashton hasn't said a word, and I move my attention to him. He's watching his mother intently, with Lainey and Collin. They're in deep conversation about something, and Lainey is animated in her features. My mom joins them, beginning to laugh, tugging Collin in for a hug.

“What you looking at, baby?” My eyes are on our family.

“Our moms with our kids. *Our* kids.”

“Oh, fuck, I'm leaving if you two are going to get sappy,” Liam complains.

“Fuck off,” I tease, flipping him off at the same time. I wrap my arms around Ash's body. “You can be as sappy as you want, honey, don't listen to my brother.”

“I never do anyway,” he quips. “But seriously, how did we get so lucky? They're amazing, resilient, and ours. They're ours.”

“Do you see mom, Ash?” Tia asks, sitting down across from Liam. “Oh, hey, asswipe.”

“Back at you Queen B, and that b is not for the honey-making variety.”

I'd worry they were fucking if the hostility between them wasn't so high. We've learned to ignore it.

“Mom is in love with those kids,” Tia starts. “And I am too. And I'm their favorite, over all other aunts and uncles.” Her dig is evident.

“Because you're so lovable?” Liam states.

We ignore our siblings. “What do you think we should do tonight? Wanna take them to the movies? To the Seattle Center?” he asks.

“How about home, where we can make our own traditions?” I answer.

His hands cup my cheeks. “You’re a genius, and I love you.”

Both Tia and Liam begin to gag at the same time. “Well, at least there’s something they can agree on.”

I THOUGHT I’d miss my loft, but the configuration was odd for a family, and the kids didn’t have a yard. There are nights I miss being in bed, with the lights of the Seattle Skyline filling our views from the window. But as we walk into our house, all with walls, and a clear line from the front of the house to the back yard, with the kids tossing their stuff everywhere, I’ve never felt more at home.

“Lainey, Collin. Can you please pick up your shoes and take your presents to your rooms?”

“Yeah, Dad. Sorry.” Collin says, urging Lainey to do the same. In his little heart, he thinks if he’s not good, we’ll give him back, no matter how hard we’ve worked to let him know we won’t ever give up on him.

“Hey, bud.” Ashton drops to one knee before him. “It’s okay. Do you know how crazy we made Grammy? But, you know you’re ours now. No take backs, Collin. We’re your dads, and it’s how it’ll stay.” He waits until Lainey is upstairs, and tears begin to water in his eyes.

“Are you sure? I know you tell me that a lot, but our own mom gave us up. Are you sure you won’t?”

I take the few steps separating me from Collin and Ash, and kneel on one leg like my husband. “Buddy, the woman who gave birth to you wasn’t meant to be your mom. And where we obviously can’t be your mom, the two of us together will be the parents you always deserve, and nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, will ever change that for your dad and me.”

“And when we get upset with you, or correct you, that has nothing to do with our love. If anything, we correct you because we love you. We want you to know right from wrong, but at the end of the day, we will always love you. Got it?” Ash asks.

We open up our arms and he falls into us, and like we always will—we catch him.

“Who is ready for some Korean food? I know I am.” Lainey is at the top of the steps, looking down at us.

“You guys cry more than I do,” Lainey sasses, running down the stairs. “But don’t forget me!” she squeals, jumping into our group hug.

This. I can get used to this for the rest of our lives.

“IS THAT THE DOORBELL?” Ash asks, his voice groggy with sleep. “What time is it?”

I wake to a constant ringing. Fuck, *it is* the doorbell. “Shit, it’s going to wake the kids,” I say, pushing out of bed.

“Too late, Dads,” Lainey announces, walking in with her blanket and teddy bear. “I didn’t answer it. I know I’m not allowed to.” We learned a week into having kids we had to sleep in pajamas because you never know when they’ll barge into the room.

The clock next to my bed reads five. It’s five in the fucking morning.

“I’m up, sweetheart. I’ll get the door. You stay in here with Dad.” I have no idea who the fuck would be at our door this early, but I’d rather her not be out in the living room.

She sits on a bench at the end of the bed, taking the remote, turning on the TV. I guess none of us will be going back to bed this morning.

Moving to the front of the house, Devin is making his way down the steps. “Who the hell is here this early?” he asks. It’s

a fair question.

“Don’t know. Is Collin still in bed?”

“Yeah, almost nothing wakes that kid.” Devin stands behind me, as I disable the alarm, pulling back the door.

I’ve only met her a few times, but there’s no doubt who is standing on our front steps.

She looks past me, and at Devin. “You fucking ungrateful shithead. I fucking swear, you are...”

It’s Anita Carrol. How the fuck did she find us. I’m in shock, and she steps through the threshold of the door before I can stop her.

“Mom?” he asks, but in his voice, he’s not the strong man he’s become since he’s lived with us. He’s turned into a scared boy in a split second. It’s what his mother does to him.

“Yeah, you’re right, boy! *I am you’re mother*. Not these fruits you’re living high off the hog with.”

It takes me a few more seconds to pull my shit together. She’s the last person we ever expected to see. Our kids, and they are our kids, haven’t seen her in over a year.

“Listen, lady. These aren’t you’re children anymore, and it doesn’t matter if you think we’re capable to raise them. They are ours. And we love them. We take care of them, more than you can understand. And...”

From her pockets, she pulls out a gun. She stands between Devin and I, and without thought, I place myself between the crazy bitch and my son.

“Anita,” I call, loud enough that I hope Ash hears me. “Please put the gun down. We can talk about this. Obviously, you want something, right?”

“I certainly don’t want these kids. Stupid asses. They don’t want me, I don’t want them.”

She looks around the quiet house. “Where are your brother and sister anyway?” she asks.

“Sleepovers, with friends,” Devin is quick to answer her.

She looks around our home. The bitch only wants one thing. I know it already. “How much do you want Anita. I’ll write you a check right fucking now. Just leave us alone.”

“Fifty thousand. I want it in cash, too,” she states.

“I don’t have that sort of money in cash, lady,” I return, unsure where this stand still will lead us.

“Then go get your husband. Have him go to the bank,” she commands.

“They aren’t open. You realize that, right?” I ask.

I’m in negotiations with this crazy ass bitch, who still has a gun pointed at my heart.

“Mom?” Collin calls from the top of the steps.

“Fuck,” Devin swears under his breath. “Go back to bed, Collin. I’ll be up soon.”

“No, Collin. Come down here and see me. I’ve missed you baby.”

I can’t let Collin come down here. It’s bad enough Devin is in harm’s way. “No, Collin. Son, stay upstairs. Go back to bed.”

“You realize,” she starts with her raspy voice that sounds like she’s smoked her whole life. “I have the gun on you, right. I can shoot you.”

Collin is still at the top of the steps, his eyes wide in terror. “And you won’t get any money from me if you do that.”

“Mom, please don’t hurt Dad. He’s good to us. He loves us. Please. I like it here.” Collin’s cries grow louder with every passing second.

She points the gun at him, up the steps. “He isn’t your dad. Neither of them are your dads. Don’t you get that.”

She points her gun at me again, her back facing away from the living room.

“I’m not letting you go, not until I get what’s due to me, for having you ungrateful shits.”

Collin disappears from the top of the stairwell, but she turns the gun toward Devin's face, who is behind me.

"Now, what about the money, get it for me, or I shoot him right in the face." Her words don't carry any emotion and seeing she left her kids without a single thought of their welfare, I doubt she's bluffing.

"Okay, but I only have a couple thousand in the safe. You have to let me go, so I can grab it."

I'm holding off, some, hoping the police are on their way. She doesn't have a chance to reply, when the barrel of another gun meets her temple.

"I'd think again about threatening my husband and kids, bitch. You have three seconds to lower the gun, or I'll blow your head right off of your body."

Ashton's hands shake, he's barely ever held a gun, but in his voice, there's no indication that he's nervous. Anita lowers her gun. I disarm her and push her against the wall. The police siren's blare down the street. My family is safe. Thank fuck.

THREE HOURS LATER, Lainey is asleep between us, after crying herself to sleep. Devin took Collin over to Mom and Dad's house. There is just something about my mom and her relationship with our sons.

Ash hasn't stopped shaking. I'd mentioned to him shortly after we moved into our house, that I'd like to buy a gun. Ash who was never comfortable around them, reluctantly agreed, only if I showed him how to use it, and locked it up in our safe in the closet.

"I never thought I'd see the day I was happy we had a gun in this house. But fuck, all I think about is all the ways it could have gone so wrong."

He holds onto me, with our daughter between us. And I'm not sure we ever want to let go of her or us, again.



Noah

“UNCLE GREG,” Collin challenges. “I’ve been working hard on this game. I think tonight is the night—you’re going down.” Collin has been in therapy, along with Lainey and Devin since their mother pulled a gun on us. But, in the past two months, he and Lainey have gotten better, not fearful Anita will return, considering she’s in jail for a long time. Devin has left for San Diego and loves it there.

Greg and Dave have become as rooted in our lives as our own families. And it’s fun watching Greg game with Collin. He’s the only one who can bring him down a peg or two.

“Where’s the popcorn, honey? This is going to be a good show.”

I look around for Ash, and I thought he was behind us in the kitchen.

He exits from our downstairs master bedroom. “What are you yelling about out here?” He’d had an appointment with a professor at one of the universities in Seattle. It’s a smaller school, but they’re interested in Ashton teaching a few classes, primarily on watercolors. He’d have the ability to craft the class the way he deems fit. He won’t have to adhere to a curriculum, as long as the focus is on watercolors.

I shouldn’t be surprised he’d changed from his suit to his track pants.

“Look at you. Can’t stand the constriction of the sexy suit.”

“Oh, gag. Did you have to put up with this when you lived with Dad?” Collin asks of Greg.

“All the fu...effing time.”

“Good save, Greg.” I turn toward Ash. “Husband of mine, come here and tell me how the interview went.” I pull him on my lap, and both guys gag like Tia and Liam always do.

“Where’s Lainey?” he asks, scanning the room for his little girl. Those two have a bond, and it’s so fucking cute to watch.

“Oh, the little negotiator fooled Dave into playing with her Barbie Dream house, in the loft.”

“Hah, I can only imagine.” Both of our phones ring at almost the same time.

He hops from my lap to grab his, and he tosses me mine. “It’s my mom,” he says.

“That’s my dad.” It’s odd for my dad to call me. He texts, and I prefer it, because I hate talking on the phone.

“Hold on, Mom. What? What do you mean? Shit! Oh, fuck.”

I’m getting bits and pieces of Ash’s conversation with his mom. And I answer my dad’s call. “Hey Dad, can I call you back? I think there’s an emergency with Caitlyn.”

“Noah.” A chill runs down my spine. My dad’s voice isn’t right. I know it in the way he says my name. “It’s Liam. There’s been an accident. You need to get to University Hospital ASAP, son. Meet me in the ER.”

My world stills, and I turn to Ash, whose face is drained of all color. “There’s been an accident.” I assume Caitlyn is working, calling Ash to tell me about my brother.

I say, “Liam has been in an accident.”

His next words nearly bring me to my knees. “So has Tia.”



Ashton

DAVE DRIVES us to the hospital, dropping us off in front of the ER. “We got this. Just go be with your family,” Dave insists, having left Greg to hold down the fort.

It makes no sense, how both Liam and Tia were in the same accident, unless they were together.

My eyes fall on Evelyn and Carl at first. “What’s going on?” I ask, and Carl, a big man, falls into his son’s arms. Evelyn’s eyes are so swollen, I can barely see them.

“We don’t know. Caitlyn is trying to find out, and Ash—” Evelyn turns to him. “Tia was with Liam, when a car hit them head on. The driver’s side took the brunt of the impact, and Tia was in the...”

“The passenger seat,” Carl explains. “She was awake and aware, when they brought her in, but Liam wasn’t.”

I know my husband better than myself, at times, and right now, his mind is trying to play catch up with our reality.

I open my arms to catch him. Noah can’t live this life without his twin brother, his other half.

I’m holding him as he openly weeps in my arms. After twenty minutes, the blonde hair and the familiar way she carries herself catches my attention. My mom is rushing

toward us. “Noah! I need you to come with me. Liam needs a blood transfusion, right now.”

“What’s going on, Caitlyn?” Evelyn asks, slowing my mom’s speed down a little bit.

“I don’t know much. I was clocking out when a nurse recognized Tia’s name and came and got me. I saw Liam right afterward, and called Carl, but...”

“Just tell us, please,” my husband pleads.

“He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Tia?” I ask.

“She’s sedated right now. In a lot of pain, but nothing life threatening.”

Evelyn stands in front of Noah, blocking his path. “Wait, I’m his mother. I should give him my blood.”

“Do you know your blood type?” she asks of Evelyn and Carl. They both shake their heads

“Liam is O negative. Meaning he is a universal donor, but he can only receive O negative blood. You all should get tested in case Noah’s not O negative. Either Carl or Evelyn will be O negative, but I’d say Noah stands a better chance.”

“Can’t they use what’s in the blood bank?” Evelyn is very concerned about Liam’s blood, questioning the hospital’s procedures. But Carl is shaking his head emphatically, agreeing with her.

“With an O negative blood type, they can only receive O negative blood. We try to use a blood donor from a relative. It’s policy, to keep the supply up.”

Noah is halfway through the hospital when Evelyn breaks down, a hysterical wail escaping her lips. She wasn’t this upset until now. I guess grief really hits us in waves.

EVELYN PACES THE FLOOR. She doesn't sit down. As many times as Carl comes to her side, she refuses. Her head whips to the door every time the emergency room opens. They've both had their blood drawn, but Noah doesn't return to wait with us.

I hope to see my sister, but with mom's brief explanation, she's not the person to worry about. It's touch and go with Liam. I've not seen Noah in almost two hours, and it's the last time I've seen Mom. I try to text her, but I can't get through.

My phone rings, and I pick it up immediately. It's Greg.

"Hey, man. I hate to do this to you, but Lainey is really upset. She thinks something has happened to you or Noah. We can't calm her down, and no matter what we say, she's frantic."

We'd left with the explanation that Grammy needed us. But in her world, which has always been upside down until recently, people leave and don't come back. With Devin away at school, she's been very clingy to Noah and me. Fuck, I can't leave Noah, but Lainey is so frantic, I can hear it through the phone.

"Dave is on his way. He'll be there in twenty minutes. I'm so sorry."

"No, don't be. She needs her dad, and Tia's injuries are not life threatening." He can't ask a lot with Lainey in the room.

Bottom line is our daughter needs one of us, and it can't be Noah.

"Carl." I call out to get his attention, explaining the situation to him. "Call me the second you know anything. I'm so sorry..."

"No, son. Lainey is your daughter. And she's been through so much." I wait with both my in-laws a little while longer, expecting Dave's text anytime.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see my mom exit the double doors. There's something wrong in the way she carries herself. Fuck. Noah can't lose his brother. Evelyn rushes toward her, Carl following suit.

“Liam is out of surgery. He’s still in critical condition. The doctor will be out in a minute to explain more, but since the doctor knows I’m Noah’s mother-in-law, he’s given me permission to tell you.”

Evelyn drops into her husband’s arms, as I take Mom aside to tell her about Lainey.

“I’ve got to go. Lainey is upset; she thinks Noah or I are hurt.”

Mom doesn’t react to Lainey’s distress. It’s how I realize something else is wrong. “What else is going on, Mom?”

“Oh, nothing dear. It’s been a hard day. But your sister is awake and asking for you. Can you see her before you leave?”

I want nothing more. “Let me text Dave to have him wait.” Sending him a quick message, I ask the question no one has since we’ve gotten here.

“Why were Liam and Tia together?” I’m following her down a narrow corridor.

“Really, Ashton?”

That’s what I was afraid of. “How long has it been going on?”

“I had my suspicions for a while now, but they hid it with their animosity. I’d say since your wedding.”

Fuck, that’s been a year. “It’s not something we need to talk about right now, got it?” she warns.

She opens the door to Tia, and I’ve never been happier to see my sister.

“WE CAN STAY, just in case you have to get back to the hospital?” Dave offers.

It’s taken me an hour, but I finally was able to get Lainey in bed. She fell asleep, crying in my arms. Collin was right

next to me. Both kids have been through so much shit, their past has made them emotionally fragile.

I carried her to bed, but Collin, like many nights when she's distraught, sleeps on the floor by her bed.

"Nah. Liam's not out of the woods, but he's stable. You guys should get home. You both deserve a good night sleep. Someone should, because I sure as fuck won't."

Both of them bring me into a bro-like hug then leave. The sectional in the loft will most likely be the place I rest my head tonight, but with everything that has transpired, sleep will evade me. I try Noah one last time. He doesn't pick up. Where the hell is he?



Noah

I'M FLIPPING through my phone. I've never been a science nerd, but I'm curious how my twin and I don't share the same blood type. The nurse said she's seen it a couple times in her career, so it's not impossible.

"So, which one of my parents are O negative?" I looked up the Red Cross's website, and had a dummy chart for people like me. For one child to be O negative, another parent has to be.

"Oh, let's see them. Um, that's..." She straightens herself, staring at her screen. "Um. I'm sorry Mr. James. This sort of information is protected by HIPPA Laws."

It was as if she was about to tell me then all of sudden had a change of heart. That was odd. "Okay, I'm sure I'll find out. After all, one of them will donate."

I sit in the chair a little bit longer, with my fear of needles and all. One of the blood techs brings me some crackers and juice, before I stand up.

Caitlyn walks by, but she's in a hurry and doesn't see me. I want an update on my brother, and stand up anyway. I feel pretty good considering I just had my blood drawn.

"That's not possible. How is it that neither parent is O negative?" This voice belongs to my mother-in-law.

“Yeah, I almost spilled the beans to the son. They’re twins. Do you think the mom was unfaithful? It’s the only way to explain this, and it wouldn’t be the first time we faced that,” the other nurse explains.

“I know this family. He’s my son-in-law. He looks like his mother but is built like his father. They share many of the same mannerisms, too. Evelyn can be a little clingy but she’s not...” She doesn’t finish her sentence. “Who is in the lab tonight across the street?”

“Jensen. Why?”

“He owes me a favor. Here, where’s the sample?” It’s quiet, and I can’t breathe. Did I just find out my father may not be my father?

“MR. JAMES, HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” the same nurse asks an hour later.

“I’m better. But would you be able to ask my mother-in-law if she can swing by here, when you have a chance?” I’ve not left the waiting room of the lab since I overheard Caitlyn and the other nurse speaking.

“Oh, sure, honey. She just called me to let me know your brother is out of surgery. He’s in critical condition but stable.”

Liam. In the past hour, since learning my mother may have been unfaithful, I’d forgotten about my twin fighting for his life.

My phone rings several times. It’s Ash. He’d sent me a quick message about Lainey. These kids, fuck, I love them and Ash so much. In our marriage, he picks me up when I can’t.

If I answer the phone, he’ll hear it in my voice, and I’ll break down. He needs to be strong for our kids, not for me.

Caitlyn opens the door to the waiting room in the lab. “Hey sweetheart, I was told you wanted to see me.” Caitlyn Brooks has been a part of my life for over two years. I may not

know her like my husband or my mom, but her manner does not seem normal. Which shouldn't be a terrible surprise, given that her own daughter was in the same accident as my brother. "Please tell me they told you about Liam. The next twenty-four hours will tell us more."

I drop my head into my hands, and I cry for the first time since I found out I may lose my twin.

She rubs my back in a motherly way. "It's okay, Noah. Let it out, you've been through a lot tonight."

I turn my head toward hers. "I need you to level with me. Is our dad—mine and Liam's, our biological father? It won't change who he is to me, and to Liam. He'll always be my dad, but..."

Caitlyn's eyes widen. "I'm sorry. I don't want to get you in trouble, but I overheard your conversation with the nurse. I have every right to know, don't you think?"

She looks away as she wipes the tears falling from her face. "You have every right to know, sweetheart, but it can't come from me."

We both know who I have to talk to. "Can you please get my mom, then?"

CAITLYN SETS me up in a conference room. This can't be happening. Mom went on fertility drugs, and went through in vitro. How is this possible? Would she cheat on Dad? Did they use another man's sperm, because Dad's wasn't viable? Now, I'm just making up stories.

The conference room has large windows that look out to the parking lot, but it's private from people passing by. I'm pacing the room, unable to sit down. The doorknob turns. My attention is on it, and I know my life is about to change. Mom walks in, her eyes so swollen I can barely see them.

"Noah, baby." She's not fully through the door, and she opens her arms for my embrace. I step farther away. I hold up

my hands, stopping her advance. I can't look at her right now.

"Please tell me the truth, Mom. Please tell me that you didn't cheat on Dad. Is Dad our dad?"

She doesn't show any of the typical signs of shock or surprise. I was expecting her mouth to fall open, her hand to fly to her chest, her eyes widening or her pitch higher than typical.

"Mom, I deserve the truth. Did you cheat on dad?"

She grips onto the table for support. "Oh, honey. I've feared the day you'd find out about this. I've only tried to protect you, baby."

I close my eyes. I can't watch her as she breaks my heart. "So, it's true? Liam and I aren't dad's sons."

"Oh, sweetheart, I wish it was as simple as me cheating on Dad. But it's a lot more complicated than that."

Why would cheating on dad be the lesser of two evils? My mother has always worn her emotions on her face, and there's a warning in her expression—devastation. "How is it complicated? Am I Dad's son? Are me and Liam Dad's sons? It's pretty fucking easy, Mom."

"Noah baby. I'm sorry. I've only tried to protect you and Liam from the truth. It's what a mother does."

I slam my hand on the table separating us, and she jumps back in shock, surprise, maybe even fear.

"Enough, Mom. It's time to tell me the truth. Dad—is he our dad?"

"Yes, Noah, he's your father. But..."

"But what? How is this so hard?"

She lets a sob shoot from her mouth. I wait for the truth, as horrible as it can be. "He's not Liam's biological father."

Something as light as a feather could knock me over. How is he my father and not Liam's?

“How is that possible, Mom? How is that fucking possible?” My voice grows with every second she stays quiet.

“Because I’m not Liam’s biological mother.”



Ashton

THE DOOR OPENS. I'm somewhere between sleep and consciousness, and I pop from the couch, running downstairs. He's home. If Noah is home, it means Liam is okay.

"Ashton, baby?" The voice isn't my husband's but my mother's. Oh, fuck, something is wrong with Tia.

I stop on the last step leading downstairs, afraid that the closer I get to my mother, the more possible my life will change in an irrevocable way. "Mom, is it Tia? Is she okay?"

She walks toward me. Her tight smile has always made me nervous. And this is no different. "Sorry, sweetie, didn't mean to startle you. She's already bossing the entire staff around and driving them crazy. They need to run some tests on her, but she should be able to come home tomorrow."

Fuck, if it's not Tia, it's... "Liam?" I ask.

"He's doing as well or even better than expected. Honestly, I can't believe he survived the crash. The heavens were on his side today, both his and Tia's."

"So, why are you here? Did you come to sit with the kids so I can go be with Noah? If Liam is okay, I think I should stay. Lainey thought Noah and I were in a car crash, not her aunt and uncle."

My mother walks slowly toward me, her hands held behind her back. “I’m here to stay with the kids. Your husband needs you. He needs you so much right now, and honestly, baby, you’re going to need him, too.”

I watch as her face drains of color, and she can’t look me in the eyes. “Mom, you’re scaring me. Where is he?” I reach for my phone in my pockets but remember I left it upstairs in the loft.

“I think he went to the cabin, baby.”

“How? He doesn’t have a car!” I exclaim, wondering if he came home and I missed him leaving from the garage.

“He took his father’s truck. He left like a bat out of hell.”

The closer I stand near my mother, the more I witness her tears flowing like a waterfall. She’d not simply been crying, she has both sobbed and wept. “Mom, what the fuck is going on? Are Liam and Tia okay?”

“Yes, baby. It’s complicated. It’s so fucking complicated, and your husband should be the one to tell you.”

My hands begin to tremble and my head becomes dizzy. “Mom, you’re scaring me. Oh, fuck, he cheated on me? Did Anita Carrol get out of jail?”

“No, baby. Noah would never cheat on you, and it has nothing to do with the children. I am...”

“You’re what, Mom?” I ask, pulling her closer toward my body. I need her strength.

“Oh, baby. I love you so much. I’m so sorry. I have to prepare you. This is something no one should ever deal with.”

It hits me. And I’m about to vomit “He’s sick. They found cancer in his bloodwork, right?” Now I’m the one who is frantic.

She pulls back, her hands shaking. “No, it’s not cancer or a life or death sickness. And, you’re going to make yourself crazy. Promise me you’ll drive carefully. And don’t overthink. But you have to go to him.”

“Should I pack?”

“No. Take his car. Just grab your phone. I know this is hard, but I need you to concentrate on the road, and nothing else.”

Tears fill my eyes. “I’m so scared mom. I’m so very scared. Is he leaving me?”

My mom’s head drops to my shoulders, and it’s the one question she doesn’t say no to.

THE LONG DRIVEWAY winds behind a large cluster of trees that hide the A-framed cabin. As soon as I pass in front of the house, following it to the back, where we park, all the lights are on. It’s nearing five in the morning. The sun rises early, but it’s still a little dark outside. More so, it means he’s awake. Noah is a stickler for turning the lights off, always, if they aren’t being used.

I sit in the driver’s seat of his Mercedes, giving myself a moment before I attempt to find him. His father’s truck is where Noah typically parks. I open the door, pulling my tired ass out of it. I steady myself for the impossible. My mother told me I shouldn’t overthink but that was fucking impossible. In what scenario would Noah flee from me, and the love and comfort we share?

I round his dad’s vehicle, and he stands on the back porch.

“Noah, baby?” I call out to his large figure on the back deck.

“Ash, what are you doing here?” Why does he sound mad, as if I’m not his world and he’s not mine?

“You’re my husband. I’m yours. When you can’t walk, I’ll carry you. I’ll forever carry you. Noah, tell me that hasn’t changed in the last twelve hours. What have I done to make you leave me? Are we not as strong as I thought we were?”

“Ash, honey. Fuck, my world is falling apart, and all I wanted was you. It’ll always be you, but—”

“But what?” I take a step toward him, but his hand stops me. I hold on to the railing leading to the deck. He’s less than ten feet away from me but he might as well be a thousand miles. “What did I do to you, Noah, for you to leave us, and leave our kids?”

He steps forward, warring with himself, as though I’m a temptation and we’re the sin.

“Ashton, honey. Fuck, it’s not you. Oh, fuck. Baby, I don’t know how to tell you this. I don’t know how to live without you.”

It’s not hot, yet sweat breaks out through my entire body. “You’re not only scaring me but you’re pissing me the fuck off. We took vows. We made promises, not only to ourselves but to our children. To our future. You’re breaking them by keeping this from me.”

His eyes are stormy, but it’s not what I concentrate on. He erases the distance between us, and he’s so quick I don’t realize I’m in his embrace or that his hands are around my neck, until he has me against the closest tree.

“Don’t you ever fucking accuse me of not being true to our vows or our kids. What I know, what has been revealed to me, is fucking killing me. And it’ll kill you too. It’s why I can’t tell you.”

His hands on my throat is enough pressure, but it won’t hurt me. Even in whatever this is, Noah would never hurt me.

“I love you so much, Ashton. You’re my world. I always thought our love was one for the record books, Ash.”

My reply is loud. “It is. Don’t say it’s not. Don’t ever fucking say we aren’t meant to be.”

There’s enough early morning light that I look upon his tear stained face for the very first time. I reach up to caress his cheeks, and he doesn’t stop me. He leans into my touch. “Whatever this is, we’ll face it together, babe,” I vow like I had on our wedding day.

I don't know if his resolve breaks or my will is strong, because our lips crash together and we're two souls connected as one. The way we were meant to be.

"You're my world, Noah James. You're my fucking world." I can't get enough of him, and rut my hips into his. I need him in a way I've never needed him before. But tonight is different. There's an uncertainty in our future. I'm going to prove it to him, that I'm certain. We're rock solid together, and nothing will break us apart.

"I need you," I say in his mouth as our tongues fight for control.

"I need you too, Ash. I need you so fucking much, right fucking now."

I should stop this, make him tell me what the hell has happened, but maybe he needs a reminder of how beautiful we are together.

His hands push down my track pants. I unbuckle his belt, and undo his jeans. He's almost panicked in his urgency, and I match his speed. He tears my T-shirt down the middle, and before I can do the same, he loses his over his head. He turns me around, pushing me against the bark of the tree and placing my ruined shirt in front of my junk, which I appreciate.

His teeth bite down on my shoulder. I want pain. I need to feel the pain, instead of experiencing it emotionally. "Yes, hurt me. Show me you need me. Mark me—so that tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that, every bruise or bite shows that I belong to you. I fucking belong to you."

"From the beginning our connection was more than love. The stars predestined our future, even as wrong as it may be." Noah's declaration slows my beating heart.

"Our love isn't wrong," I protest. But I won't stop. He needs to fuck me against this tree to realize we were made for one another.

"I'm going to fill you up, your cum will leak out of you, and when you're finished, I'll swallow it. And when we're done, you'll do the same to me." His words both hurt and fill

me with hope. How can he talk to me with so much passion and fire and yet want to walk away?

He pushes my face into the bark. “Yes, yes, yes. To all of it, and when we’re done, I want you to fuck me again, and again, until you admit we’re made for one another, Noah James.”

“We were made for one another, just not in the way you think,” he almost hisses, and these cryptic messages are pissing me the fuck off.

I don’t stop him. He can talk in riddles all night long, and as long as he’s fucking me, he’s remembering what we are together. “Lube is in the glove compartment,” I say.

“I can’t stop, Ash. I’ll make you come, and use your jizz to fuck you.” It’s one of his favorite things to do.

“I love you using me in that way, baby.”

He turns me around. “I can’t jack your woody off against the tree, honey.”

There he is. He may not be completely himself, but this is a little bit of his silliness peeking through his closed-off behavior.

He pushes my back against the bark, and again I welcome the physical pain that covers the emotional thoughts that I may lose him.

“I fucking love your balls.” He plays with them, a little harder than he typically does. And this whole night is about feeling something other than our emotional pain.

“This dick. I love this dick. I love how long it is, and when you fuck me, it goes in so deep. So good. You always dick me up so good.” Noah is talking dirty to me. It’s different though. Everything is so different and I don’t understand why.

I push my face forward to kiss his mouth, biting at his lips. “I always dick you up good, baby, and don’t you fucking forget it, Noah James.”

“I can dick you just as good, Ashton James.” He says my last name again, starting to laugh. “James. I guess you were

always meant to be a James.”

His words are ominous, but I ignore him. I ignore everything but his hand on my cock. He starts with long strokes, using my precum to coat my cock, as they speed up. “I love you. I love every part of your body.” His mouth covers my nipples, sucking on my screwball that has replaced my barbells.

“Your nipples. Everything about your nipples has me ready to explode.”

He bites my nipple past the piercing. The pain shoots through my spine and I cry out with both pain and pleasure.

“Hurt me as you wish. You can’t break me. I’m here. I’m never fucking leaving you.”

He pulls back, and a smile I’ve never seen on his lips scares me. It looks like detachment.

“We’ll see. You’ll run so quick, and I’ll never catch you.” His speed increases, and I know I’m about to come. I’m so close. “I’m going to twist you around. Be sure to protect your pretty cock, as I begin to fuck you.”

I come hard and fast all over his hand, and he drops to his knees to swallow me. But as I watch him, he doesn’t swallow. He’s not kidding as he turns me around and I protect my cock with the ruined shirt.

His hands open up my ass, and the second his tongue touches my hole, he uses all my cum as lubricant while he tongue fucks me.

“Oh, fuck. Husband of mine, please fuck me.” It’s a reminder of our vows and our promises to one another.

“Oh, you don’t have to ask me again, because my cock belongs in your ass, Ash.”

His cock pushes against me, but where he works himself in, he thrusts in hard. “Yeah, give it to me, Noah. Give me all of you.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll fuck you where you’ll never forget.”

Is this his way of telling me good bye?

“I’m not going anywhere, Noah. You’ll fuck me for the rest of my life. The rest of our fucking lives.”

He holds my hips and he finds a rhythm as every new thrust is deeper. “I love your ass, honey. I love your ass so much. Going to miss it.”

My heart drops. “This *is not* goodbye because my ass will forever be yours, baby,” I growl.

“You know what I love more, than anything else on your body, Ash? Your heart, honey. I love your heart. It’s so pure, always so pure.”

He has to know I’m never leaving. “You’ll always own my heart, Noah. It’s yours. And only you can unlock it.”

His lips are on my neck. “I love you more than I can ever tell you, baby. I love you more than I’ve ever loved another person on this earth. You’re truly my other half. I just didn’t know how true that was.”

My body soars with him inside. He’s everything that is good in this world, and everything that is right with me.

“I’ll miss this the way we are, the life we built. I’ll miss everything that we have been to each other.” This is his goodbye—or it’s what he thinks. But, I have a fucking say in our lives too.

“Listen to me. I’m not going anywhere. You’re mine, and I’m yours.”

He pumps inside of me, and he’s frenzied, but he still speaks into my ear. “That’s what you think, little brother.”

He explodes inside of me, his words playing in my mind. He called me little brother. It’s what he always says to Liam.

His body pushes against me, shoving me further into the tree. “What did you just say, Noah?”

“You always wondered why we were so perfect for each other. It was more than fate. It was the world playing tricks on us. We weren’t made for one another. We were made

together.” I can’t comprehend what he’s saying. “I told you once that you looked more like me than my own twin brother. And there’s a reason for it. *You are my twin brother.*”

He leaves me naked against the tree. I don’t understand him. I say it over a couple times until his words end my world as I know it.



Noah

I LEFT him out by the tree, naked. I fucking left my soul mate—the man I’d die for—against an old tree. I was cruel, dropping the bomb on him like I had. I want him to hate me. Then maybe saying good-bye to one another won’t be so hard.

The moment Ashton Brooks appeared in my life, the stars aligned, and my world was bright. I wished for him, someone who was made just for me. But my wish has become my nightmare when I discovered his real name, the one his parents meant only for him.

He doesn’t have the facts like I do, and yet I retreated anyway, to our loft upstairs. I’d pulled out every heavy painting cloth I had up here in storage. In the early days I’d spend hours in this space, covering the upstairs with these cloths. Today, I’ve done nothing but draw scary shit. I look at my painting, after destroying my husband’s heart. I can see my pain in it. It’s a canvas full of faces, and each face is the same person, but each expression shows a different emotion.

I’d say it’s fucking brilliant if my own pain wasn’t reflected in the painting.

What have I done? What will become of us?

“Noah *fucking* James.” It’s Ash. I should have known he’s not going away. “You better get your fucking ass down here, or I’m going to drag you down by your fucking hair. I’m your

fucking husband, and you owe me more than a hard fuck against a tree, and the lies that *we're* brothers.”

He has to know it's the truth. The second my mom shared every part of our story, I didn't have to ask if it was true. I didn't need to see proof. I knew her story was just too crazy to fucking make up. This is now our truth.

I look over the loft, where Ashton waits for me. I see it so much clearer—his eyes meet mine, and the color of them, the thickness of his hair, his fear of needles, our shared interest in art. There are so many more things that should have been a clue of our true lineage.

“You know it's true, Ash. In your heart, you know we've always been more than soulmates.”

He hides his eyes from me. It's then I know he knows this is true.

“You owe me more than you just gave me. I'm your husband, at the end of the day, and that hasn't changed. I'll wait for you at our place down by the creek.”

He leaves. I'm alone, and yet my pain with his absence has never been greater.

THE THERMOS IS FILLED with coffee, and I begin the short walk to the bench my grandfather installed to spend time with my grandma. In the past two years, their place has become our place. I see his silhouette, and as I get closer his body relaxes with the breaking of twigs, alerting him to my arrival.

Sitting next to him, I hand him a mug. He takes it, without a word. I pour the coffee with cream and sugar in his mug, then follow suit, pouring mine as full as I can get it.

“Does this bomb you just dropped on me, mean Tia and Liam are brother and sister, too?”

I'd not thought about Tia. I thought of the boy I grew up with—who up until meeting Ash has been my ride and die.

How can he not be my twin, as I believed for so long?

“I guess it does. Wait, why were they together last night?” I’d not asked. Between almost losing my brother, or whatever Liam is to me now, and the thought that my father wasn’t my biological dad, I’d not pieced it together. Ash answers me when he arches one brow higher than the other.

“Oh, fuck. Tell me they aren’t...”

“Fucking? I assume they are. They’ve kept it on the DL since our wedding.” A year. They have been together a year. How did my mother let this happen?

“I’m trying to work it out in my mind, Noah. Help me make sense of it.”

His tone is low, but void of emotion. He wants facts.

“You have asthma, right? Didn’t Caitlyn say you needed breathing treatments from an early age?” Ash nods his head as an answer. “My mom was told after she gave birth to the second twin, and he was rushed to the hospital, that Liam would most likely have asthma, and would be on breathing treatments and an inhaler. She took Liam to a lung specialist a week after the birth, and they found nothing wrong with him.”

“Wait, I was airlifted, too. Did you know that?”

The puzzle pieces continue to fall into place. “You never told me, until my mother explained it earlier. But, I remember your mother mentioned the baby she gave birth to, had a scare, too. Hypoglycemia, right?”

“Fuck, the first time we had dinner with your brother, he mentioned he was hypoglycemic.” He drops his head to the back of the bench. “But how? How did your mother know?” He stops and stammers, as if he shouldn’t say mother.

“Right before our tenth birthdays, Mom had this feeling. She called it a mother’s intuition. Not only did Liam and I have completely different features, we were as different as two kids could be. We were close. You know that.”

“I assume there’s a but in there, right?” he asks.

“Well, yeah. She started doing research into babies switched at birth. The statistics were higher than she assumed. She asked my Uncle Jim to investigate. He has skills that are good for this situation, and after just two days of digging, hacking, and probably every other illegal thing he’s able to do without detection, he found that there was a one day old admitted to the NICU on the day Mom’s second baby was being air lifted. It didn’t take much investigation to put Liam’s hypoglycemia and your asthma together. He took a picture of you, gave it to mom, and she knew the second she saw you that you were the baby whose name should have been William Andrew James.”

“What? Evelyn has known this whole time?” His voice changes, and every bit of emotion he has been hiding is present in his question.

“Yes, she knew. But there’s so much more to the story, Ash. So much more.”



A shton

I DIDN'T HEAR my husband right. His mother knew? "What? Evelyn has known this whole time?" My voice cracks. Where I've tried to remain as detached to this clusterfuck as I could, I find it's impossible.

"Yes, she knew. But there's so much more to the story, Ash. So much more," Noah begins, moving his hand to my knee, only to remove it quickly.

"Tell me, then. All of it. Your mother—I mean, I guess our mother—kept us separated. Why didn't she come forward?" When Noah told me we were twins, I wanted to deny it. I tried to. But something as crazy as this can't be simply made up. It explains so much; the connection, the chemistry and our pull to one another.

"Mom loved Liam. In her eyes, he was her son, but she knew she had you, too. And as much as she wanted to be there for you, the unknown was too scary. She was afraid your mom would take Liam and she'd never see him again. She loved you, as soon as she laid eyes on your picture—or so she claims. It was why she reacted as she had when she first saw you. The same with Uncle Jim."

There are so many questions, but my fragile mind is limited on the amount of questions and information I can process.

“How did Uncle Jim become our social worker?” I always knew he looked familiar, but now the pieces are making sense, and I remember my mom welcoming him into our home.

Noah holds his head in his hands, massaging his temples. “Mom couldn’t bear the thought of you growing up in such a bad area. Her heart ached for Caitlyn. Mom has always known what motherly love looks like. Just because she struggled financially, didn’t mean your mother didn’t love you. Mom met Caitlyn once. Mom came in to order a drink at the bar she worked at when she needed money, and as it slowed down, they talked about each other’s kids. She spoke about how talented you were. A real genius with a paint brush. Showed her a picture of the four of you, one that included your dad. Mom recognized the resemblance right away between your dad and Liam. It was obvious you were taken care of, but she and Uncle Jim made up this whole elaborate grant program for single moms. Jim didn’t spare any expense making it look official. He backtracked it to make it look like others had been awarded it. It paid for your mom’s house, her tuition, an allowance while she was in school, and your education, along with Tia’s.”

“Wait—mom—or Caitlyn or whatever I should call her, paid a mortgage on that house. She paid on it for ten years. Which I know is on the shorter end of mortgage payments but —” I’m unable to say anything else because Noah interrupts me.

“That money went back into the account. Helping with repairs on the house, and other things. Mom wanted to make sure you and your family had every possible thing you needed.”

I process his words but I keep going to my original thoughts after he left me naked against the tree. “None of this changes who we are to one another, Noah. I can’t help that destiny brought us back together. That somehow, some way, we were going to live our lives together. Is it twisted? Yeah. Is it wrong? No. I love you. I loved you before I found out about our fucked-up lineage, and I love you still. We have children, our lives, and in it all, even if it’s a little fucked up, like

everything else, we have a family who loves us, more than we ever imagined.”

“Do you hear yourself?” he asks, breaking our closeness, pushing to his feet.

“I do. We’ve always been meant to be more, Noah. You’re not my brother. No, you’re someone so much more important to me. You’re my soul mate.”

When I first met Noah James, he quickly became my world. We always said the two of us together was fate, but could it simply be reality slapping us in the face?

I CAN’T KEEP my eyes open. I barely made it back to the cabin. Noah stayed at the bench by the creek.

I take the steps in the front of the house, leading to the loft. I’ll fall down on the bed, asleep within minutes. But, I have to check my texts from Mom about the kids. Can I call Caitlyn Mom anymore?”

But I stop at the picture on an easel in the loft. Noah has several thick drop cloths placed on the floor. But it’s the picture in front of me that makes me want to cry. I can feel his pain in every stroke, every color, every shade, all of it. It’s pain. This picture encompasses his agony, sorrow, anguish and heartache. He’s tortured, and this picture embodies it all with passion.

I look at my phone and there’s a text from Mom, telling me everything is fine on the home front and to take as much time as I need. She doesn’t ask me if I know, or how I’m doing. I don’t think I could put it into words if she had.

I fall asleep, staring at the painting that I realize also includes my own pain.

I WAKE. It's a nightmare. It's all it is. I'm not married to my twin brother. And then reality slaps me in the face, and it fucking hurts. The picture I fell asleep to is gone. Does that mean he's gone? My feet take over, and I'm down the stairs, running toward the back part of the house.

He's in the living room. Pushed up against the wall, his knees up to his chest, his arms surrounding his legs. His head rests on his knees.

"Noah?"

He tips his head to mine. He doesn't speak but doesn't look away from me.

"Noah, what is it. Fuck, is Liam okay? Tia?"

He shakes his head. "No, they're good. As a matter of fact, Liam's been moved from ICU, into his own room. He has a long recovery, a broken arm, and a broken leg. He'll need knee surgery, but he'll be okay. And Tia is being released tomorrow."

"Then besides the obvious, what is it?"

He wipes tears that threaten to spill from his eyes. "Liam, he's asking for me. What do I say? And my dad? I have no idea if he knows. Liam is his son but *he's also not*. And your mom? How is she dealing with this? Liam is her son, and she never knew. And then there's Tia."

His concern is for everyone around him but not for me, or for him. I find it interesting, he doesn't mention his mother. *Our* mother.

"This affects us all, babe. And your dad, my mom, Liam, and Tia are concerns. They really are. But they'll be looking at us, and what we do in this situation."

His head is resting back on his knees. "I can't give you up, Ash, but how can we be together, knowing what we know? It's like toothpaste. We can't push it back into the tube, as if we never found out that we're twin brothers."

How is this our fucking life? I think to myself. "True. But your mom knew and never said anything. She tried to break us

up, but then resigned herself to the fact that we're better together than apart."

"But the law? It's illegal, Ash. We could go to jail."

I don't know the legal ramifications. I mean it's illegal, yes. And I know we would go to jail if it was done with intent, but we didn't know. I have no idea who knows, or if the hospital was made aware, and if they're going to launch a case.

"Who knows? Does the hospital know?"

"Jim hacked the files, where they could never find out that you and Liam were switched. The nurse who did my blood sample was told my mom cheated on my dad. Caitlyn took the DNA to a private lab across the street, not connected to the hospital, and put phony names on the DNA sample. The guy has a crush on your mom, apparently."

I'm in the middle of the room, and I cross to the wall he's sitting against and fall down next to him. I have to be near him.

I can't believe we're having this discussion. "I can't say it's foolproof, but it seems pretty fucking foolproof, to me. We keep this contained between the two of us, Tia, Liam, my mom, your mom, and your dad. And of course, your Uncle Jim. Does his wife know?"

"According to Mom, no. And he has more to lose than we do," Noah explains.

"Then why can't we live our lives? Fuck, we can move to a state where it's not illegal," I offer, like I know off the top of my head what states those are.

"I'm not moving to New Jersey or Rhode Island, honey. Our life is here, our kids are here."

He just delivered the star evidence as though I'm about to argue a case before the Supreme Court.

"And did you just hear yourself? Those are our kids. We have a life to fight for. You're right, we can't get the toothpaste back in the tube. But we've done good—not just for

one another, but for others.” He’s quiet, not responding to me, and I change the subject slightly. “What did you do with the painting that was upstairs? All the different facial expressions, same face.”

“It’s in the hall closet.” He pushes to his feet, not offering to help me up. “I’m going to go paint for a while. Please let me be by myself, for now.”

I hate how cold he is, as if I’m the problem and I broke our family apart. “You know, I’m not the one at fault here.”

He stops but doesn’t turn around. “I know, Ash.”

“Then stop treating me as if this is my fault. This isn’t my fault, nor is it yours. Fuck, I can’t even blame your mother, really. She was just trying to do what was best for her child. If anyone understands the love for children that aren’t biologically hers, you and I do. Stop treating me like I’m the enemy. You don’t need to be the martyr. You’re not the scapegoat. You don’t have to punish yourself just because we find ourselves in an impossible situation.”

He bows his head like he may pray, though my husband isn’t a religious man. “And maybe you can stop treating this situation as if it doesn’t change a fucking thing. Because it does. It changes everything.”

He continues toward the front of the house, and the steps that sit right behind the front door. I let him go. For now.



Noah

HE LEFT THE HOUSE. I heard the old hinges on the back of the door, and how it slammed when he walks down the porch, leading to the line of trees. I stand at the window in our bathroom looking out the back part of our land. He's walking toward our bench. I follow his movement until he's out of my line of sight.

"I love you, Ash," I say out loud for no one but me to hear. "I love you so much."

He has so much faith we can overcome this. I don't. Can I make love to him, like I have in the past, and not think about how we were born together? I can't say what happened early in the morning was making love. It was raw, and gritty and violent. We both needed it. And fuck, why was it so hot? But, when we're gentle and loving and we're one, am I able to look at him the same way?

I turn around, leaving the bathroom, stepping in front of my canvas. It's a piece that shows as much raw emotion as my last one. It's a collage of so many places that make up our history, our story. It's a road. I've painted an actual road, with turns and bends and bumps in it. But off of it are the places we've been, blurred. I'd not call it completely abstract. You can make out the Space Needle, but it's hazy and a bit distorted, along with Hay Stack Mountain, hiking here in Maple Falls, and Kate's gallery. I'm not done with all the

places our road has taken us, but now I look back not with appreciation but regret.

Could it be what society has taught me? That loving him is wrong? And maybe I'm the problem too. Twenty-four hours ago, I would have thought the same thing. But, Ash was right. We didn't go out with the intent of falling in love. I didn't date Liam, which the world would have thought wrong.

It's so fucking confusing. It doesn't help that Liam is calling me. He needs me. And part of me needs him. Will I still feel that strong twin connection that has always been there? Will this ruin me and Liam too?

I continue with the colors, starting on my place on *Our Map of indecent Desire*. It's not a very subtle title for the piece.

I begin on the outside of the old warehouse. The brick facade is clear, but the part where our home had been, the cluster of windows, the place we called ours when we first married, is vague.

How does this hurt so much? Oh, yeah, because he's my fucking world.

My phone begins to ring. I walk over to the bed, seeing Liam's face on the screen.

I can't ignore him. I grew up with the man, and although I have no idea what he is to me, all those years mean everything to the both of us.

"Hey." I almost say little brother, but he's not. He's technically older than me.

"Where the fuck are you? I about died, and you weren't here when I opened my eyes. Is this about me seeing Tia, which I assume is out of the bag now?"

In two sentences, I realize blood or no blood, Liam will forever be my brother. And fuck, how am I not there for him?

"So, where are you, asshole? And why isn't Mom up my ass? I'd thought she'd be bossing every fucking nurse and doctor around. Dad's here, but he's a little off. Then again,

duh, I almost died.” There’s silence on my end. “Are you going to speak?”

“Yeah, sorry, Lainey is having a hard time. Give me a couple hours. I’ll get there soon.”

He’s quiet on the other end. “You’re not mad about Tia and me?”

“Oh, I’m mad,” I reply. In retrospect, I have so many other things that consume me, but right now I don’t have the energy to worry about Liam and Tia. They’ve dated for over a year. Ash and I were married within a year. I assume they’re serious and it’s a hurdle they’ll have to cross, just like Ashton and me. “But in the whole scheme of things, it sounds like you’ll be walking out of the hospital, which is a miracle in and of itself.”

“I guess you’re right. I was going to tell you, but mom was so weird about Ash that Tia was afraid Mom would hate her too.”

Now I know why she hated Ash. It had been all a smoke screen. She could never hate her flesh and blood.

“I get it. I’ll be there soon. I love you, Liam.”

“I love you too, big brother.”

He ends the call, and I begin putting my paints away. I don’t know if I can handle saying good bye to Ashton. I mean, if we were to decide we’re through, it’s not like I can walk away today and never see him again.

But, I’m not sure I can say good-bye for right now. I need time. I don’t know what time will do. At the end of the day, I’ll still love him, and he’ll still be my brother.

I brought nothing with me. I’ve changed into clean clothes that I keep up here, and Ashton is still gone. Penning down a quick note, I leave before I can second guess myself.

CAITLYN STANDS outside Liam's room, her back to the wall next to the door, and her head turned down. She just found out the son she raised isn't hers, and the son she gave birth to almost died last night.

I stop in front of her, and she turns her head to see me. "Oh, Noah."

"Who has the kids?" I ask.

"Your dad is with them." She wraps her arms around me. "How's Ash? How is he?"

How do I answer her? So, I don't.

"No one has to know. Nothing has to change. We can decide amongst us, as a family, how to move forward." Caitlyn sounds like her son. Or is he her son? Again, this is so fucking confusing.

"How are you doing? Have you seen him?" I ask, staring at Caitlyn as though I'll see the resemblance in Liam and her.

She shakes her head. "I can't bring myself to go in there. And I saw it, the second I met him, it was like I was looking at Aaron. How could I not feel my child was in front of me?"

"We all carry so much guilt. I mean, what are the odds? One in a trillion? So, he doesn't know?" I ask.

"Your father didn't think that it was a good idea. He wants him to get better before his world gets yanked from him. We'll tell them at the same time." She wipes a tear from her eyes. "Your father found a diamond ring in his suit pocket. We think he was going to propose."

I slide my fingers through my hair, turning away for a brief second. "This is a clusterfuck."

She grabs me by the shoulders, getting my attention.

"I won't argue with you, but I think it's more than a colossal shitstorm. I think it's fate. You said it yourself, the odds of you dating him is so fucking low, and yet not only did you and Ash find your way back to each other, so did Tia and Liam. That's called destiny."

She really sounds like Ashton now.

“Don’t give up on Ash. I may not have given birth to him, but he’s my son, as much as Liam is. *So please, don’t you give up on him.* You can have the life you deserve. And you deserve the world.”

“He’s my world, but it doesn’t mean we should stay together,” I try to argue. And part of me knows this is wrong, but the other part can never say good-bye to him.

“He’s your world. Leave it at that.”

She walks away, and I’m alone in the hallway. I’ve delayed the inevitable for as long as I can. No turning back now.



A shton

CARL'S TRUCK is gone when I return from the creek. I shouldn't be surprised, but I'm hurt. I'm so fucking hurt and the only thing that will make it better is Noah pulling me into his large embrace, and telling me we'll be okay.

Walking into the kitchen, a note sits on the counter.

Ash:

Liam called. He was upset I'm not with him. He doesn't know. And he's been through so much. I don't know what will happen with us. I wish I could say we'll make it to the other side of this, but, how can we? Please know one thing: I'll always love you.

Noah

There's no reason to stay at the cabin, and I reach for a bottled water in the fridge before locking the door behind me. In my mind, I'll stop at the hospital, to see Tia. But can I look at her, speak to her, knowing what I know?

The trip is short. The two and a half hours speed by, and before I know it, I'm on a familiar street in the Queen Anne area of Seattle. We spend a lot of time here. After all, Evelyn insists on cooking for us weekly, especially now with the kids.

I didn't give myself permission to end up here, but as I knock on the James's front porch, it's where I know I should

be.

The door opens and Evelyn stands in front of me. Her eyes are puffy as they were yesterday.

“Ashton. Oh, Ashton honey.” She steps forward to embrace me. But she stops herself. “Oh, sweetheart, please come in.” She opens it wider to let me through. I step over the threshold, and she motions to the sitting area off the foyer.

“Have a seat. Would you like coffee, lunch?”

I have no concept of time, but the summers in Washington are full of long days of sunshine.

“No, Evelyn, I’m just here because...”

“You want to know the truth, right?”

I take a seat on the formal couch, and she sits kitty corner on a chair.

“I think I deserve it, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course you do, baby. First, you have to know I never hated you. The day we both met, I wanted to throw my arms around you, happy to have finally met the boy I gave birth to. I knew instantly. I mean, how many times have we been asked if we were mother and son? You and Noah look so much like one another, don’t people ask if you’re twins?”

It’s happened on occasion, but more times than not, we’re holding hands. No one would fathom two brothers were kissing, let alone married.

“Evelyn,” I urge. I want facts. It’s all I can work with right now.

“You heard the stories, about how I thought Liam would die, and it was touch and go when he was first born. As Liam and Noah grew older, I couldn’t shake off this odd feeling, that I had another son out there. Part of me didn’t want to know. It wouldn’t take away the love I had for Liam, but if my child was out in the world, I had to know he was okay. What if his parents didn’t love him? *I had to know.*”

She's not overly emotional, which isn't the Evelyn James I'm most familiar with.

“When Jim found you, and brought me that picture he snapped of you walking hand in hand with a younger Tia, I cried all night long. Would I take you from a mom who loved you? I had to speak with her. Jim found out that she worked nights because she was a widow and money was tight. Caitlyn couldn't contain herself when we spoke about our kids. You were her world. Liam was mine. Him and Noah. Separating them would have killed Noah. So, I had a decision to make. Jim gave me a solution, creating a grant for single women. He made himself fake credentials and offered your mom a new life. I had to take care of you from afar, even if I was never in your life.

“We never wanted to stir up questions, Ash. I wanted to find out how you two were switched, but it would just alert others, and they'd start looking into all the births. Jim checked on you a couple times a year by phone, with your mom. I asked him to keep all communication private. Unless you were sick or abused or neglected, I had to trust your mom would do good by you. And she has. Oh, Ashton, I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to get to know you. Or tell you how proud I am. And you may hate me, and maybe I deserve that, but I did the best thing I could at the time. You may hate me. Liam and Noah may never forgive me. Your sister, who I fell in love with, is certainly going to despise me. Carl, well, Carl is Carl. He's already forgiven me. I have no idea what this means for anyone I hold near and dear, but at the end of the day, I only wanted to protect you and Liam.”

I don't hate Evelyn James. I can't find it in my heart to even try.

“Say something, Ashton. Please tell me anything. As long as it's the truth.”

I attempt to make sense of it all. “You could have told us at any point.”

“Yes. You don't realize how many times I was so close to telling you, sweetheart. But you'd already been intimate, it

was obvious, and well, in my mind, you two couldn't have biological babies. I warred with myself, but you two were so happy. Why take it away when no one had to know?"

I rest my elbows on my knees. "But now there's Tia and Liam. What the hell should we do about that?"

"They hated each other so much. I mean, who could have seen that coming? And yes, I don't know how they'll react. And it had hurt so much, trying to break you both up. When it was obvious neither one of you would budge, I decided to embrace it. I got my son back. I had all three of you, and then Tia came and I fell in love with her too. I know it's twisted, but life took so much from us already. Why make it worse? But Ashton, sweetheart, I never saw it playing out like this. I still stick by my decision to let you live in the home you were raised in for ten years. If there's only one thing you believe, believe this. I felt like I lost a limb knowing you would never know my love. I do love you. I hope you know that. But it hurt like hell every day of my life."

I don't know what I was expecting from Evelyn. I wanted to hate her. I wanted her to be the villain in our story, but she's not. She made an impossible decision that affected everyone's life, but it was out of love. This much I know.

I extend my arm over the space separating us. Her eyes lift to mine. "I believe you, Evelyn."

She lets out sobs that I imagine she's held in for years. I could never hate this woman. I see her heart, the same beautiful heart as Noah's. She loves us. This part I'll never doubt.

"DAD IS HOME! DAD IS HOME."

Lainey bounces down the stairs, Collin on her heels. She jumps from the third step right into my arms. I catch her, and she holds onto me so tight, I'm barely able to breathe.

"Lainey, sweetheart, I'm here. I'll always come home."

I look up the steps, wondering if Mom is here or if Noah has made it home from the hospital, but it's Carl. It's the man I'm part of. With Lainey still holding onto me, my eyes hit his. It's different this time. I'm looking at my biological father, the man who I'm built like, both of his sons are built like him.

"Hey Ash," he says, like we're meeting for the first time, and in a way, we are.

"Hey, Carl." What do I say to the man who is so much more than simply my father-in-law.

"Lainey, could you give me a chance to speak with Grandpa for a little bit? Think you and Collin can play outside for a while? It's beautiful."

"Will you come out and shoot basketballs with me, later?" Collin asks. We put in a half court on the side of the house, and he spends several hours outside practicing his skills.

"Of course I will, buddy."

"Can we play horse, Col?" Lainey asks, and Collin nods his head. "You're going down, brother."

The kids are my therapy. I have no idea what will happen with Noah and me, but these kids will always be the best thing I've ever done.

"I love those kids so much," Carl states as we both watch them disappear through the backdoor. He's five feet away and turns toward me. "I know this is a stupid question, but how are you doing, son?"

Son. He's called me son from the beginning, but today it holds a whole new meaning.

He's always been welcoming of me, and today is no different. He opens his arms to receive me, and with the two steps, I let him welcome me as his son.

"I'm so sorry, Ash. I'm not sure if I would have done it any differently. I want to be mad at Evelyn, and we love Liam as our son, that will never be in question, but..."

I get it. Caitlyn will always be my mom. It has taken me a while to figure out if this changes things with my mom or Tia.

And it won't. They are my family, but now Evelyn and Carl are too. It doesn't change things. It just adds to the amount of people who love me.

“Caitlyn is my mom. I get it. But, I'm still your blood.”

He still has his arms around me.

“I saw Evelyn this morning,” I say. He pulls back from this embrace that is almost twenty-eight years in the making.

“You did? She gave me space, once we knew Liam would be okay. Though, I've already forgiven Evvy. Then I came here to give Caitlyn some time to see both Tia and Liam. Caitlyn needs to see you, son. She is distraught. And you need to tell her what you've just told me, how Caitlyn will always be your mother.”

“I'm going to the hospital later, but the kids have to know I'll always come home. I want to play basketball with Collin, Barbies with Lainey, and take a much-needed shower. Are you willing to stay with them a little longer?”

Carl has tears spilling over his eyes. “I'm here for you, anytime and anyway. I'll start some dinner, and you go spend time with your kids.”

“Carl?” I ask, and I pull him back into an embrace. “Thank you for everything.”

“I love you, son. My love for you is unconditional, as it always will be.”

I didn't realize I needed to hear his words until they hit my ears. And I'll hold on tight to them.

AFTER A COUPLE of hours of one on one with Collin, playing Barbie's with Lainey, a shower, and Carl's famous spaghetti and meatballs, I'm pulling into the parking garage. I have no idea where Noah is. I want to see him, but my focus is my mom and sister.

The door to her floor opens and I turn to the nurses' station. They all know me. "Ash, are you here to see the General?" Sonya, mom's work bestie, isn't joking. Tia is a handful on the best of days. On the worst, she is bossy and domineering.

"The General? Tia giving you grief?"

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "She's something, and we're all having grace on her because, well she's Caitlyn's little girl."

I understand. As charge nurse, my mom is very good to all her nurses. "I'm looking for Mom. Do you know where she is?"

"She told me she was off to see Tia's boyfriend. By the way, your sister is mad because we won't let her go down and visit him. He's still a little groggy and she's..."

"She's what, Sonya?" I ask.

"We just need to watch her a little longer."

I fucking hate HIPPA laws. There's something Sonya isn't telling me. "I thought she was going home today?" I ask.

"The attending is keeping her another day." It's all she can say.

"Thanks Sonya. If you see mom, let her know I'm here."

I take a step toward the general's room, and the television is on low, playing *The Wedding Singer*. Tia's favorite movie, ever.

Her eyes are closed, and she has her purple blanket pulled up over her shoulders. I forgot about that old and torn blanket but it was something our dad gave her. Mom and he teased her at the time, saying it was three times bigger than her. She didn't care, and it's been her comfort for years. I bet she wore mom down before mom when to her apartment not far from the University.

I take a seat near my sister, taking in every little bruise and cut on her body. She's not short. Neither Mom nor Dad were short. Mom is five foot ten inches. Dad was right at six foot

and one inch. Tia is slim, with a small waist. She's just a touch taller than Mom, closer to Evelyn's height. I always wondered where I got my thicker frame. I still have abs, and a defined physique, because I take care of my body. How did I miss all the signs? I'm built just like Carl. So is Noah.

I fall asleep and when I wake to a hand on my shoulder, I look into the loving face I thought was my mother for my whole life.

I stand, without thought, throwing my arms around her. "I love you, Mom. Nothing changes."

"Oh, honey." Her own hold on me is just as tight. "I needed to hear that today, baby."

She pulls back, searching my eyes. "I hope you know it changes nothing with me, either, Ashton Michael Brooks."

She's calling me by my birth name to remind me I'm always a Brooks.

TIA HAD BEEN in and out of sleep.

The kids begged me to be home before they went to bed. And I have to go see Liam. I drop a kiss onto my sister's forehead. "I love you." I whisper in her ear, and say good-bye to Mom.

At Liam's door, I give it a light knock. "I'm not naked, if that's what you're worried about."

Typical Liam. "It's Ash. You up for some company?"

I'm still at the door, and can only hear him. "Thank fuck. Your man is a grumpy ass without you."

Taking a few steps into the room, Liam looks like actual hell, and Noah is sitting next to him, his legs crossed over his knees. He's not shaved, it doesn't look like he's slept, and yet I've never seen anyone as handsome as my husband.

"Liam, you look like shit warmed over."

He laughs with my analogy, “Yeah, asshole. You’re not wrong. So please put me out of my misery, what the fuck is going on with you and my brother? I had a feeling something was up, but Noah didn’t get up and maul you, so I now know. Spill it.”

My eyes search Noah’s. He gives a shrug, but this is not the way Liam needs to find out.

“Wait a second, asshole. We’ve not addressed the issue at hand—you and my sister.” I try to deflect.

“Yeah, averting isn’t working. Anyway, you two were blind if you didn’t realize that our animosity only grew. Hate sex is the best.”

Noah doesn’t laugh. He’s in his mind still.

“I swear I’ll hurt you if you mention sex and my sister again. However, to answer your question. Couples fight. Even Noah and I. So, it’s just a little spat, and I’m sure everything will be fine soon.”

Liam looks at me, then at Noah and back at me. “Okay, but as much as I’ve messed with you all over your PDA, I miss it in comparison to this shit.”

I pull a chair over on the other end of his bed. “So, tell me, what are your intentions with my sister?” I ask.

It’s his turn to shrug his shoulders. “What can I say? I’m in love.”

Of course, he fucking is. My line of sight meets Noah. We both silently say *Oh fuck!*

“HEY, WAIT UP, ASH,” he calls when I hit the buttons on the elevator.

“I wanted to give you some more time with your brother, baby. When will you be home?”

He scrapes his fingers through his hair. “I don’t think I’m coming home. I’m staying at my brother’s place for now, but I’ll be by tomorrow, to spend time with the kids.”

“Noah, we make our own rules, baby. You don’t have to do this. Please come home.”

He reaches toward my fingers, then quickly pulls away.

“I need time. I have to process it all, and honestly, I’m a little concerned you don’t.”

I push him with my body up against the nearest wall. “I don’t need time. You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go, asshole. We’re too good together. But, don’t forget you have kids. Apparently, everything that is important to you, you seem to have forgotten. I’ll give you the house for the day, but don’t fucking forget you have a family who loves you.”

Now I’m fucking pissed.



Noah

“YOU CAN CONTINUE to stay with me, big brother, but you can’t ignore this clusterfuck.” Liam has no idea what a clusterfuck this truly is. It’s been a week, and he’s still in the hospital.

“I’m ignoring your advice. You have no idea what we’re going through, and anyway, you get discharged tomorrow, and need help getting upstairs, asshole, so maybe you should say thank you.”

“Yeah, about that,” Liam clears his voice. “I’m staying with Tia. Her apartment has an elevator. Her and I have some decisions to make moving forward.”

“Fuck,” I swear under my breath.

“Hey, by the way, Mom and Dad want to come over tomorrow. They were quite insistent on it. Do you know what it’s about?”

Thank fuck. Someone is taking care of this. I can’t be a part of their talk. As much as Liam will need me, and I’ll be there for him, I’m unable to have the expression of his face be something I remember forever.

“Not a clue,” I lie through my fucking teeth.

“So, what are you going to do to get your husband back? This shit is infuriating. And Tia told me last night that Lainey

cried herself to sleep, thinking she's the reason."

The blood drains from my fingertips, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up on end. "What?" I ask, pushing from my seat.

"Okay, calm the fuck down. You know those kids have been through hell. What would you expect?"

My phone rings, and I'd typically welcome a phone call from the person whose name is on my screen. But something tells me I shouldn't.

"Hold on a second, Liam," I say to him, answering my phone.

"Hey bud. What's up?"

"Dad?" His voice is so low. And he started calling us dad right before he left for San Diego. "I'm home. I'm standing next to my other father. Lainey is in tears, and Collin is in his bedroom, withdrawn, and won't come out."

"Wait, Dev, you are home?" I ask.

"Yeah, when my sister is crying and my brother won't leave his room, and I can't get answers, you bet your ass I'm hopping on a plane and coming home to figure this shit out."

"Hey, watch your language, please." It sounds like something a father should say.

"Yeah, I'll watch my language when you start behaving like the dad who adopted us."

He hangs up the phone, and I had forgotten I was with Liam.

"Did you call him?"

He shakes his head no. "But can you blame him? He trusted you two. You used to have your shit together. So yeah, he's pissed, and rightfully so."

I grab for my jacket, and stop in front of his bed. "And when you find out what the fuck is going on, then maybe you'll give us some grace, asshole." I storm out of his hospital room, leaving as I attempt to come up with something,

anything, that will help explain this shit to Devin. I'm not sure he'd even believe the truth at this point.

ASHTON IS WAITING OUTSIDE for me when I pull up to the house we chose to raise our family in together. "What do we say? Should we trust him with the truth? I think he should know. We're tearing his world apart. He suspects one of us is stepping out on the other. And as fucked up as this is, and as stupid as you're being right now, don't you think he deserves the truth?"

"But, we all chose to leave it at the amount of people that have to know, like Tia and Liam," I insist. "I know he's technically an adult, but is this something we want to burden him with?"

"So, what do we say? He'll think its cheating. He already asked who cheated on who.

And he's mad, so fucking mad, baby." He reaches for me, holding his hand on my hip.

"I can only imagine. He trusted us with his brother and sister, so he could live his own life, and we promised we'd put them first. But, if we're on the same page, divorced parents do it all the time."

He steps back, his touch leaving my body. "We're not getting a fucking divorce, Noah James. This is a setback, but you need to get out of your own fucking mind. The world won't know about us. And we're no different than we were two weeks ago."

This is the same conversation we have each time we're together. And it doesn't solve anything.

"We can discuss our future at a later date. What do we say to Devin? We need to have a united front."

"I don't know. You're the one who wants to rip our family apart. So why don't you fucking tell me what we should say. We can't tell him the truth, and you're ready to throw us away.

So, you come up with something, you fucking jackass homewrecker.”

He leaves me on the porch, slamming the door behind him. I guess it’s now or never. I’m expecting just Devin, but when I walk in, Dev, Collin, Lainey and Ash sit on our sectional couch, all eyes on me.

“Hey guys.” I walk in as if this isn’t a big deal. I haven’t had a chance to figure out what to say. I move the large oversized padded ottoman back so I can see everyone. “I’m sorry this is happening to our family, guys.”

“If we did something wrong, I promise we won’t do it anymore. We’ll put up our shoes, we’ll scrape our plates after dinner. Just don’t leave us, Daddy.” Lainey is crying, and Dev picks her up, placing her on his lap.

“Lainey, it’s not your fault,” he whispers in her ear. He shoots his attention to me. “*Go to school* you said. *Be a kid*, you said. *You deserve this*, you said. *We have Collin and Lainey*, you said. And I did. I trusted you both. And I get a phone call from Collin that Lainey is so distraught and you moved out.” He moves his attention to Ash, “And you are spending most of your time in your room. I understand that shit happens. If anyone does, it’s me. We don’t expect you to be perfect and if you’re getting a fucking divorce, then do it. But be honest with us, especially these two kids who trust that you will never leave them.” He stands with Lainey in his arms, and reaches for Collin’s hand. “Come on, guys. I’m too mad to talk with our fathers right now.”

They ascend the stairs, and the door to Devin’s room shuts, and we’re left in silence.

“Fuck, Ash. He’s not wrong. We’ve completely fucked up.”

Ashton pushes from his feet. “I can admit I should have been more attentive to them this week. That’s on me, but you left me to pick it all up. You’ve been detached and not around. I have feelings too, asshole.”

He's out of the back door, taking the path to our studio. This is one hundred percent on me, and I have no idea what I should do next.



A shton

THE HOUSE HAS TOO many reminders of Noah. He's been gone for two weeks, and our entire world has blown up. Tia is inconsolable, and Liam can't accept my mom, no matter how much she tries. Seeing my mother hurt, having a child she gave birth to rejecting her, is brutal.

He won't talk to me either. We're in the same boat. This happened to us, and yet, Liam is pulling into himself like Noah is.

I can't watch my sister cry every time I see her. Coming to grips that your brother, who has always been her best friend, isn't her brother, or that she's in love with a man who is her real- life brother, is hard to swallow. We're in the same boat.

I'm spending time getting to know Evelyn and Carl, never forgetting my own mother, the person who raised me. To my knowledge, Liam only speaks to Noah, not even the parents who raised him. Our family is broken. Will I ever find a day where the pain isn't so great?

I'm at Carl's boat today. He's given me access to every part of their life, depositing money into my savings that they swear should have rightfully been mine. I don't want it. I never want to gain from this pain. But, if Noah and I divorce, I want to hold onto our house, for the kids. As a parent, I'll push aside my pride to do what's right for them.

I just want to be today. I don't want to feel. But every little memory, in the days I've lived without Noah next to me, is a reminder of the life we should be living.

I'm on the bow of the ship, looking into the vast blue of the ocean. I don't have a glass of wine, No, I'm drinking it straight out of the bottle.

The inside of the boat rocks a little, like someone is here. Carl told me I should have the boat to myself when I asked about it this morning.

But Noah or Liam never asked their parents.

I pull at the door leading from the bow to the cabin, and as I do, it opens up, swinging right toward me.

"Ah fuck!" I scream. I can't worry if someone is robbing me, because the door has opened on my nose.

"Fuck!" the other person screams. I know the voice, no reason to open my eyes, as I cover my nose. "Shit, Ash. I'm so sorry. Here, let me look."

Noah's fingers touch my own, and in his tenderness, I almost believe that we'll be okay.

"Fuck, Noah. First you break my heart, then my fucking nose. Wanna go for the leg? The arm. Maybe my neck."

I can't see him, but a dark chuckle, almost vile in nature, so unlike my Noah, falls from his lips.

"Dramatic much. And anyway, how the hell was I to know you'd be here?"

I'm still holding my nose, and his fingers are no longer on my hands. "I don't know, maybe call your dad. He told me I could have it today."

He begins with the same evil laugh, just as foul in nature. "I've never had to ask my dad to use the boat, or anything that belongs to him. And I won't start now."

He's in a mood, but he doesn't have his nose all busted up. I sit down on one of the cushions on the bow, my head tilted up.

“Can you let me in, so I can see what the damage is, Ash?” he asks, his voice low, tender. It’s like the Noah I fell in love with.

I lower my hands, and I can feel him push his strong body over me. His fingers barely touch my nose.

“Does that hurt?” Noah asks.

“You’ve barely touched me. How would I know if it hurts?”

“If your nose was broken, you’d wince at even the slightest touch. It’s not bleeding. Let me get you some ice.”

Do I leave? Should I? He’s been an asshole, and I get it. He’s having a different reaction to finding out we’re brothers. He’s hurt me all the same but I still want him in my space. We’ve barely seen each other except for the times he’s picked up the kids. But he’s living with his brother, so at this point, he’s taking them for the day, or over to his parents.

“Here, put this on your nose.”

He looks at my bottle in my hand. “Who is picking up the kids from school?”

“My mom. As you probably know, she’s having a hard time. Her heart is hurt, like she was the one who kept this secret this whole time.”

It’s not meant to be a dig at Evelyn. No, I love both her and Carl. I loved them before I found out they were my parents. But as my biological mom and dad, I do love them. “Liam is treating my mother like she personally wronged him.”

“If it makes you feel any better, he’s treating mom even worse.”

I release a snort, followed by a scoff and my mouth pulls into a sour grin. “Why the fuck would that make me feel any better, asshole? I don’t want my mom or yours to be treated like the enemy.”

“It’s an impossible situation,” he offers. He stares at me with a bland half smile. “How’s Tia?”

“Miserable. Absolutely fucking miserable.” Even in his half smile, it’s wiped away by my strong words.

“You’re drunk?” It’s a question. And I don’t plan to answer. I needed a day, by myself, and I don’t drink at home, with the kids in case there’s an emergency. “Sure, ignore me, Ash. That’s rather adult.”

He can’t call me out on this behavior when he’s the one creating it in me. I stand a little too fast, holding onto the side of the boat to right myself and I walk the few feet that separates us.

I straddle his waist, my face close to his. “You will not make me feel like the bad guy here. You fucking hear me?” His cock grows under me. “Especially when your cock wants me. I feel it, and you feel it.”

He attempts to stand up, but I push his elbows down. “No, you don’t get to walk away from me. We’re in a fucked-up situation. But us being brothers doesn’t change the two years you claimed my ass, sucked my cock, and dicked me up. That happened. You know why? Not because we’re sex starved, it’s because we’re devoted to each other.”

“Ash, honey.”

“No, you don’t get to Ash me or honey me. You love me. And I don’t see it going away. Because I won’t ever stop loving you. You can leave, but then again, you know I’ll follow. You and me. We’re Ash and Noah, and we’re fucking good together.”

He lifts me from his lap and places me down, disappearing through the boat.

“You don’t get off that easy, asshole,” I yell. He’s in the cabin, his hands splayed on the countertop of the small galley. I pull at his arm.

“Ash, I’m warning you.” His words come out as a loud hiss.

“What are you warning me about? Are you going to hit me? Are you going to release that beast who wants me? Or maybe you can fuck me against a tree, just to leave me there in

humiliation, after the hottest sex we've ever shared? Wanna break that leg I offered up earlier? Really, asshole, what are you going to do to me?"

He turns his body to mine, his hand around my throat, like the night we fucked against the tree. It's just hard enough but won't inflict pain. "Do you really want to do this?" he asks, his eyes, just like mine, wild and heated.

"And what is it you're talking about?" I'm goading him. I know what this is. It's hate sex. It'll be brutal and hard.

"You know what this is. Give me permission, Ash. Give it to me."

"Fuck me, Noah."

I drop my pants, and he follows suit.

It won't be kind, it won't be gentle. He turns me around and pushes my torso on the top of the table. "Stay right there, don't fucking move."

I think he's retrieving lube but comes back with Evelyn's coconut oil. His fingers dip into it, then they dive inside of me, prepping me.

He leans over my face. "You missed my cock, Ash?"

"I missed all of you, Noah. All of you."

He digs his teeth into my shoulder. "This is not sweet. This doesn't change anything, Ash. This is about a need. My dick, your ass."

I find that his words hurt more than if he were to stop. And I immediately push up, our heads hitting hard.

I keep my palms on the table, though I'm standing up.

"I'm your fucking husband, you can't talk to me like that." I won't look at him.

"Ashton."

"Fucking leave. Leave me the fuck alone."

I'm still looking at the wood of the table.

"I said fucking leave."

He's fiddling with his jeans. And he does as I ask. He's gone.



Noah

I NEVER SOLD my loft in the old factory. It was under a lease. My tenant moved out a month after everything went down with Ash. I've moved back in, yet, it's scarce.

"Is that all the stuff?" Liam asks, bringing up the last of the boxes. I am using some of mom's old cookware and dishes and towels for now. She made new quilts for Lainey and Collin, so they'd have a piece of grandma here and at the other house. They love their grandma's quilts. This time she did a pink one for Lainey and a basketball pattern for Collin.

Liam and I have spent all day putting together beds for all the bedrooms. I have a sectional in the television room, along with a large TV on the wall, which was a bitch to put up. "I don't know if I have it in me to build anymore shit today," Liam states.

He's still healing from his accident, though his leg isn't as fucked up as they first thought.

I point to a cheap table I bought from Amazon. "I only have that left, but I can put it together tomorrow. Lainey and Collin won't be here until the weekend anyway. After I speak with Ash to make arrangements."

"I'm gonna miss you. My place will be very lonely without you in it." He hides his face from me. We don't talk about what has happened but it stops fucking now.

“Liam,” I call to him from one side of my kitchen. “This fucking sucks. I don’t deny it. We both think it’s wrong, yet the people we love so much are pushing for something we can’t give. I want to give in. I do. But shutting me out, not talking to me, your brother...”

He interrupts me, “But...”

I stop him before he’s able to say it. “Don’t fucking say it. You’re my fucking brother, no DNA test can tell us otherwise.”

“How is Ash dealing with this?” he asks. If anyone understands Liam, it’s my husband.

“We don’t really talk, and when we do, it ends up in an angsty conversation.”

“You have kids to think about, you know. I guess Tia and I are lucky that never happened.”

I hate seeing the pain on his face.

“I better leave. You overworked me. And I’m falling straight into bed when I get there.” He gives me our standard two arm bro hug, but this time I hold onto him a little tight. “I love you, Liam.”

“I love you too Noah.” He slides the door closed, and he’s gone. I’m alone in this large space. And more so, there are so many fucking memories of Ashton.

I have my art studio set up but it’s sparse considering everything is at the studio in our backyard, but I have what I need for now.

There’s a loud knock on the door, and I pull it back, expecting my brother. It’s my brother, but not the one I was raised with.

“So, it’s true?” he asks, crossing into the loft.

“What? And by all means, come on in, Ash.”

He pushes up on his feet to erase the two inches between us. “This. You moved back into your loft.”

I take in a calming breath. We've not seen each other since the day on the boat. "You wouldn't let me have the kids overnight at Liam's. I have a place now, and I can bring them here when they're not in school."

He stands still and quiet for a couple seconds. "You know what I think? You held onto this place, this entire time, looking for an out. Your safety net, your plan b. And here you are."

I tilt my head down, the half inch separating us. "You think I predicted I'd married my twin brother, or that the brother I was raised with, fell in love with his sister? How could I have seen this coming?"

Ash acts as if he didn't know it never sold. When we decided to lease it, it was only because I owned the loft out right and it covered our mortgage on our new house. Not that I needed the money, with my art selling faster than I can create it, and the inheritance from my grandpa.

"Maybe it's not because you thought we were brothers. But something. You held onto it because you saw us ending and you wanted an out."

This time, it's not me pushing him into the wall, but he's the aggressor. I come to a complete stop, almost knocking the wind out of me.

"Admit it, you never saw me as forever. Did you?"

"Ash," I begin, "You've lost your fucking mind."

"I don't believe you." He pauses for a brief second. "Are you going to try to fuck me again, an easy fuck, because that's all I am to you?" Ash asks.

I kiss the top of his head. "Ash, you're so much more than a fuck. You know that."

"What am I to you then, Noah?"

"You're my world, Ashton James. You're my world."

His hands caress the stubble of my cheek. "Then let me be your world. No one will have to know. No one."

I pull him tight into my arms. “But I will, honey. *I will know.*”

He pulls out of my reach. “You’re the stupid asshole who is giving it all up for what others think is acceptable. But we know, regardless if we’re together or not, I will always be your world, and you will always be mine.”

He tugs out of my embrace, and stops at the door. “You can have the kids Friday night through Sundays. Come for dinners on Wednesday, and you can help the kids with homework or watch a movie. I’m not giving up on you, but it’s time the kids start coming first.”

He slides the door open and leaves, taking my heart with him.



Ashton

Three months later

“LAINEY, Collin? Your dad will be here soon. Do you have everything packed?” I call upstairs. We have a plan. We have a routine. We’ve been honest with all three kids. First, they did nothing wrong, and that sometimes adults have problems that mean they may need to take a break from each other. Lainey, in her astute wisdom, asked us flat-out if we fell in love with another guy. We were clear there was no one else and that adults have disagreements that are too big to solve in a short amount of time.

With the open communication and family dinners on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, we have bridged the gap. Do they want us living back together? Of course, and they’ve not been quiet about their hopes that we’ll eventually clear this up.

It’s Friday. And typically, we have dinner before Noah takes them for the weekend. But tonight, something came up last minute, and I had to cancel, though Noah and the kids are spending the evening with Grandma and Grandpa.

“Dad, I have the best idea,” Lainey announces, jumping from the last step and running to me at the couch.

“Oh, yeah? I can’t wait to hear this!” I reply, and she frowns at my sarcasm.

“Brace yourself. Just for the record, I told her it was a horrible idea, but you know her,” Collin explains, carrying a bag and sitting on the couch opposite me.

“Go ahead, sweetheart. What’s your idea?”

She stands near me, clearing her voice. “You want Daddy to come home. I want Daddy to come home, and Collin wants Daddy to come home. So, I think you should tell him that you’re dating someone else. Make him jealous, and he’ll know what he’s about to lose.”

Noah had been honest with the kids when Devin called us out. He told all three kids that it was his idea to leave. He didn’t elaborate, but they know I want him back.

“Hmm.” I grimace, looking at her pleased expression. “Unfortunately, sweetheart, it’s not a great solution. I don’t want to trick your daddy to come home. I want him to come home because he wants to. Does that make sense?” I ask, and her happy expression falls. Oh, my sweet girl.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I thought it was a good idea.” I pull her toward me, holding onto her tight.

“Oh, baby. It really was, and I love you so much. Don’t ever forget that.”

She has tears in her eyes. “I just don’t like it when you’re alone on the weekends, Dad.”

“Don’t worry about me. I have plans with Uncle Greg and Uncle Dave in the afternoon and Aunt Kate and I are going out for dinner tomorrow,” I mention, hoping it will ease her worries.

“I miss Aunt Kate. Tell her I need a manicure, very soon. Will you?” She extends her hands, where I see her colorless nails. Lainey loves all the girly things Kate does with her. I let out a chuckle at her request.

“Yes, I’ll be sure to let Aunt Kate know you really need a manicure.”

The doorbell rings, and Collin runs to the door, tackling Noah. He has dinner with us on Wednesdays, works on

homework with the kids and does the night time routine.

Collin loves me, I have no doubt, but he has a stronger bond with Noah, where Lainey, who loves her daddy something awful, has bonded more with me.

“Hey, guys.” He crosses the threshold with Collin attached to him. His smile reaches mine. I’ll forever love this man. He may decide we can’t move past this, and I’ll never love another like Noah James. “You okay, Ash?”

All I’d said in a text today was something came up and I couldn’t do dinner.

“Yeah, sorry. It’s work related.” He has chosen not to be a part of my life for now, so my personal details are off limits to him. I share stuff at dinner, how my new job is going. We never talk about Tia or Liam. *Their story is their own to tell.*

He talks more about his parents, because they are important to me. I spend Saturdays with them, getting to know one another better, and accepting they’re my parents. Caitlyn Brooks will always be my mom, but there’s enough love in my life for them.

“Hey, do you have a second?” he asks, pointing to the outdoor space, in the backyard. I stand, heading that way. “Hey guys, give your dad and I a second to talk.”

They settle on the couch, turning on an anime episode both kids are watching together.

I stand near the outdoor furniture. “What’s up?” I ask.

He slides his hands into his lightweight jacket. It’s November, but he’s always hated heavy jackets.

“I think maybe it’s time to get lawyers. I think the sooner we can have a clean break, the better it will be for the kids.”

I’m not surprised, not in the least, but it doesn’t hurt any less.

“No.” I answer.

“This is happening, Ash, whether you want it or not. I don’t need your permission.”

I point to the door leading back into our house. “Then go. Break up our family. Be the asshole who breaks those kids’ hearts.”

He steps closer to me. “Go!” I yell. “Get the fuck out of here. I’m telling you right now, I’ll never sign your fucking divorce papers.”

He tries to step forward, closer to me, and as he gets within reach, I push him away. “Get the fuck out of my face.”

He retreats, and both kids’ attention is on us outside. He leaves without another word. I pick up the phone, canceling my meeting with the dean. I can’t function. I can’t think. I move into the kitchen, grabbing the tequila I use in my margaritas. Tonight, I don’t need anything else but this fucking bottle.

HAS IT BEEN AN HOUR? Two hours? I don’t fucking know. I drink from the bottle of Patron. I’m watching *Fifty First Dates*, but Drew Barrymore and Adam Sandler are starting to look blurry. Not sure if that’s the patron or my TV.

The phone rings. It’s Noah. I send it to voicemail. It rings again, and it’s Noah *again*. I’m sending it to voicemail *again*. At the third call, I figure I should answer it in case it has something to do with the kids.

“Hello, asshole. Want to break my heart some more?” I ask. My words are slurred.

“You’re dating? You have the audacity to react the way you just did, and yet you’re dating someone?”

I have had a lot to drink. I have to think hard. “I’m not dating anyone, asshole. And like it would be your business, after asking me for a divorce.”

Did he hang up? I’m about to end the call, but his voice booms through the line.

“What were you doing tonight, that you canceled our family dinner?”

I laugh through the phone. “We’re not a family, not anymore.” I end the call and pass out on the couch.

Am I unlocking the door? Why is the door opening? I guess when you drink half a bottle of tequila, you can’t expect to really know what’s going on.

“Ashton?” I hear the voice. I know his voice, but I can’t open my eyes to see him. “Noah?” I call out with my eyes closed.

“Hey, I’m here.” His hand is on my cheek. It feels so cold. And I feel so hot. “How much did you drink?” His fingers move to my forehead.

“I only had a little bit. Just a little bit.”

His smirk makes me want to fully open my eyes and tell him to never leave me.

“I find that hard to believe. Come on, honey, let’s get you into bed. The kids are staying at Mom and Dad’s, so let me make sure you don’t drink yourself to death.”

He attempts to pull me up, but I’m limp. “And you can’t call me honey. If you ask for a divorce, you can’t call me honey, asshole.”

“Duly noted, honey. Let’s get you in bed.”

“You can’t fuck me. Can’t ask for a divorce and then fuck me.”

He chuckles again. “I’m not going to fuck you, Ash. Let me get you into bed.”

“But you miss fucking me, right? Because I miss fucking you.”

He slings my arm over his shoulder. “You have a lot to say tonight, honey.”

“No!” I shout. “I’m not your honey. And you only came over here because you’re jealous.” He stands up, and in turn, I

stand up as he's helping me back to our room. "But, answer the question. Do you miss fucking me?"

He lets out a moan. I may be drunk, but I know his moans and groans, and what they mean.

"Is that a yes, Noah. You miss my dick. You miss my ass?"

"Shut up, please. Will you just shut up?" he pleads.

We're past the doorway of our bedroom, and I fall into bed. "I won't shut up, Noah. You miss me, my body. You want my cock. You want my ass. And it's been too fucking long since you had it."

"Go to sleep, Ash. I'm staying the night. I need to make sure you don't vomit and choke on your puke and die."

He doesn't answer me, but I know he misses my ass so fucking much.



Noah

TONIGHT, was supposed to be simple. I picked up the kids. I had made plans with Mom and Dad last minute, but then Lainey told me Ash was going out on a date. And now I'm back at a house we bought together, to raise our family, and he's drunk.

More so, he asked me if I missed him. I miss every part of him. Sure, I miss his cock, and his ass, and making love to him, but there has always been more to our life than sex.

After I barely get out of the room, not answering his question, I check on him twenty minutes later, and he's snoozing hard, his snores filling the room.

I won't leave him, but I need space. I write him a quick note.

Painting. It's what I do when I feel like the world is about to swallow me whole. I take the small walk from our back door to our studio. I enter the key code and walk through the door. Turning on the light, I see nothing has changed. I have my space, and he has his. I walk over to a blank canvas, and begin with a picture in my head. It's the profile of Ash. My strokes aren't exact, and there's a level of abstractedness to it, but fuck, it feels so good to give into my desires and paint the man who will forever own my heart.

I asked for a divorce, but I'll never love another like I love my twin brother.

When I'm done with the first painting of Ash's profile, I begin my next piece, which is his face, as if I'm looking straight at him. The painting is beautiful like him. I capture the pain when I told him less than ten hours ago that I wanted a divorce. It's evident on his face, like the brown eyes we both got from our mother.

I start on a third painting, and it's how I saw him tonight, on the couch. The world would think this picture is a man sleeping, but he's drowning his sorrows so deep, and I know the truth. I've destroyed him.

I reach for another canvas when I look outside and notice the dark night has turned to early morning. I should make sure my husband is still alive, but when I cross the room, Ash is leaning up against the wall.

"You're still alive. How do you feel?" Fuck, he's beautiful.

He cocks his head to one side. "Like I drank a half of a bottle of tequila."

"You sort of did, you know that, right?" I ask.

He moves further into the room, over to my paintings. He looks at each one of them. "No one knows me like you do, Noah. If anyone tried to paint me, they'd never capture the pain in my face like you do."

"I have caused you a lot of pain lately," I admit.

"But you've given me so much more joy than pain. If we're over, I need you to know that."

I gaze upon the paintings. He's right, no one knows him like I do. The way he scrunches his nose at night, or sleeps with a pillow between his knees, the way he can't stand mint flavored toothpaste and gags the entire time he brushes his teeth.

"Were you on a date last night?" I don't have the right to know, but I ask anyway.

He lets out a little huff, almost a laugh. “No. I had a meeting with my dean but I ended up canceling. It was Lainey’s idea to make you jealous. I told her not to do it. I want you to come back to me on your own, and not because I’m with someone else.”

I take a step closer to him. But stop and move away. “I want to come back to you, Ash. I really do...”

“But you can’t get over you and I being actual brothers, right?”

I lower my head. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“I won’t fight you on a divorce, Noah. Mainly for the kids. If it’s what you want, and if we can’t have a future, might as well do it sooner than later, so the kids can heal from it.”

It should make me feel better. I know this is the right decision but why does it feel so wrong? I wonder to myself.

He steps farther from my reach, heading to the door. “Wait, Ash. Wait a second.”

He turns around. I can’t read his expression, but he stands there, waiting for me to say or do anything. I walk toward him. I’m slow and deliberate. Hell, I still have paint all over my hands.

I grab for him, and pull him into my body. My lips reach his lips before I can overthink it. I push him closer to the wall, knocking my paint palette on the floor. We leave it. There’s not even a thought that we’ll stop to pick it up. My fingers, wet with paint, touch his cheeks, painting them blue and orange.

I leave his lips for a second. “I was so fucking blind with rage, thinking another man was going to get a chance to fall in love with you.” I continue to stare into his eyes. “This is so wrong, but why does it feel so right?” He drops his head to mine. “I need you. I don’t know what this means, but...”

“Just shut up, Noah. Shut the fuck up and make love to me.”

I swing him around. I can't fuck him against the wall. I want him underneath me, and I push him to the floor, on the drop cloth we just spilled paint on, but it doesn't matter. "On your hands and knees, Ash," I order, and he pushes up and rolls over, greens, purples and yellows painting his thighs and his back.

"I love you covered in my palette." I begin kissing his back, moving my hand around to his cock, stroking it. "I fucking missed your body, honey."

"And I missed yours, Noah. I missed you so much."

"I still can't promise anything," I begin again.

"Shut the fuck up. Just make love to me, cover me in your paints, and in your cum, wear my ass out, bite my back, do whatever you want as long as you don't stop touching me."

"I've missed my bossy bottom." I lean over his back, kissing his neck, and rub my skin over his, his painted body covering me with the same colors.

"I missed everything about you, Noah. Now, are you going to fuck me?" he asks.

I stand for a brief second, and in the kitchen part of our studio, is a small tube of lube we used when we wanted to be loud, but the kids were home. We'd sneak out here.

I sit on my knees behind him. "Please do something, baby. Please." He's begging me now. My hands open up his ass, and my tongue begins to rim him. "Oh, fuck yes. It's been three months. I'm going to lose it. I fucking miss your tongue."

I can eat his ass out all night long, but my own cock is screaming for a release. My hand wasn't enough for my dick, and my cock loves Ash's ass as much as I do.

"You want my fingers, or do you want my cock?"

"Is that even a question, babe?" he asks.

I line the tip of my cock up to his hole, and push in gently. "You won't break me, Noah. I need you to split me open. I need you to fuck me like this is our last time."

His words sting, and he's been the one fighting for us the whole time. Now, *he's* ready to talk of a divorce, and that this may be *our* last time. But, fuck, a divorce is what I wanted. Wasn't it?

"Now it's your turn to shut the fuck up, honey. Just let me fuck you good and hard."

I push inside of him, and start slow, but I can't contain myself. We barely went a day without sex. And now it's been three months. Every part of me missed him in this way. And if I'm being honest, every bit of me missed *him* every day.

"I love you, Ash. I love you so much."

He doesn't return my words, but pushes his ass back into my cock, and we're fucking like rabbits. I hold onto his hips, and I don't let him go. Can I ever let him go?

I'm unable to hold onto him anymore. Not one fucking second more. I release inside of him, and we both fall onto the floor in a heap of wet paint, a fucking mess. But I can't find a reason to care. He's in my arms, after I pushed him away for so long, and as wrong as we might be, I can't let him go ever again.

We fall asleep. I wake, positive I have paint in crevices I'll never be able to clean, but I don't fucking care. I open my eyes, and Ash is gone. Next to my naked and colorful body is a note.

Noah,

Last night was beautiful. But I can't do this anymore. You want a divorce and then you make love to me in a way I'll never tire of. You want me, you want to raise our family together as we had planned, I'll be at the cabin. Come get me. If not, after this weekend, I'll start looking for a divorce lawyer. We just made love, and I didn't think anything other than "this is my husband." I love you. But I'm not a yo-yo. I can't go from one extreme to the other. It's unfair.

Ash

Is there a future in loving my twin brother? Can I still love him, without questioning my decisions? I don't know if it's

ever going to be that simple. *Our love isn't simple.* I don't know if it ever was.

I think of a science lesson that has stayed with me for years. The scientific study of trees is called dendrology and I always found it fascinating. As a branch is an extension of a tree, the intricate roots work together in a way that is unknown to the human eye. Yet, we know it grows beautifully from a simple seedling. Our teacher continued the lesson explaining so much of how trees grow, but at the end of the day, we look upon the tree with so much awe and curiosity.

Like the simple seedling growing into a strong tree, the human eye can't explain how fate works. If two people are preordained to live their lives together, will destiny find a way to convolutedly weave their existence as one?

Can I accept that fate has intervened, after we were separated—giving us a second chance?

I'm either all in or all out. It's a decision I have to make. And if I'm going to prove to Ashton that I'm all in, there is a lot I have to do. How did I think I could have ever walked away from him? Brother or not, he's my whole world.



A shton

I'VE BEEN at the cabin for two hours. It's noon. I don't know what to expect, but I keep myself busy cleaning. It's been a while since it's had a deep clean, and the place is in need. It looks like Noah has been coming up here a lot on the weekends. He has paintings all over the downstairs. I look around the cabin and inspect his pieces. All are some sort of expression of our life together. But I stop on this roadmap, all places on our map that are important to us. But in the paintings, is a pain that radiates off of every image, with the hazy pictures.

There is so much that I'll miss without Noah as my partner, my husband. But we share parents. We share children. We will forever be a fixture in our lives.

I wasn't lying. I'll never love again, because there will be no one like Noah. Plus, I'd never hurt him, even if he's giving up on us. I can't see the pain in his eyes if he saw me kissing another man.

These paintings are beautiful. They deserve a home in this house, and I begin to frame them and hang them around the cabin. It needs a little bit of character anyway.

Right before all this shit went down, Liam, Noah, and I were talking about adding to the property. We wanted a large cabin, a room for the kids, a place to spread out, but not too

much space. We loved our closeness with the kids here. But soon, Devin would have a family. We wanted him to have a place here too.

We didn't know it at the time, but Liam had mentioned a girl he was serious about. And had wanted to make the main cabin larger, adding onto the back of it, not messing with the front part and the beautiful A-frame.

Who knows what will become of this place.

Evelyn told me last week, at dinner, with just Carl and her, that they were changing their wills. I was a part of their family too. She wanted to change everything, splitting it three ways, but I felt it was unfair. She swore she'd spoken to both Liam and Noah and they agreed. Not that Liam is speaking to anyone lately, except for Noah.

I miss Liam too. We barely see each other anymore. But he's still processing a new family he never dreamt existed, and a father he never had the chance to meet. Then there's Tia. She's the sister he loves deeply and passionately, and certainly not in the way someone should love their sibling. If anyone understands this, it's me.

Have I forgiven Evelyn? It's a question I often wrestle with. But the simple answer is yes. It's much more complicated than it is simple, but at the end of the day, she was trying to do right by her boys. And me. Who knows what could have happened to mom, Tia, and me if we never got out of that horrible apartment building? But Evelyn loves with her whole heart.

The day turns to night, and I admire all the paintings on the walls. With the A-frame, the downstairs is virtually all walls. I have some hung high, some low, and some in between. Kate would be proud with my placing of the pieces. I found more of his art in a closet. There were so many different pieces, that I used it all. Or as many as I found frames for. There were some funky looking lamps, I'm sure were his grandfather's in another closet, but it fit the vibe. I rearranged the furniture, washed some older blankets that matched with the overwhelming oranges in the paintings, and then I vacuumed.

I didn't have the heart to go upstairs, to the bedroom we shared. And with a bathroom under the stairwell and off the living room, I didn't have to.

I removed all the junk from the countertops, and I have a clear view of the living room and large windows that are completely full of the night sky.

I roll my watch over, searching the time. It's well after nine. I'd been up too early this morning, especially given the fact that I'd drank myself into a stupor last night.

I'll pull out the couch and sleep tonight, and head home in the morning. He's not coming. The chances were low, anyway. It's not our chemistry or love that had been in question. It never would be.

I take a glance at the beauties on the wall. Who knows if Noah would approve but I don't care. I think it's beautiful. I change into a pair of shorts and crawl into bed. This will be the last time I rest my head here.

When we said our vows, I never thought there was something that could break us up. I guess we weren't as strong as I thought.

I close my eyes with thoughts of Noah. And there are so fucking many.

“ASH, BABY. WAKE UP.”

I'm dreaming. Noah's speaking to me. It's got to be a dream.

“Go away, you're not real,” I whine, closing my eyes again. *But I see him. He's real. He's sitting in front of me.* And all the lights are on.

“Did you do this?” he asks, pointing to the thirty-plus pictures that cover the walls.

“Yeah, I was bored. Wait, why are you here?” I touch his clean-shaved cheek.

“Isn’t it obvious? I choose us.”

I touch him again. I even pinch him. “Ouch,” he cries.

“You can’t fuck with me, Noah James. I can’t do this back and forth thing. I need to know this is real.” I understand it’s been hard on him, but living in hell without him for months has been unbearable. And I won’t make it easy on him.

“I’m not fucking with you. You’re my seedling, turned into a beautiful tree, honey. I choose you, I choose us,” he claims.

“What the fuck? Have you hit your head?” I ask, staring at his eyes. Is he high?

“Nothing, I’ll explain the analogy later, honey. I know I’ve put you through hell. Fuck, I’ve hurt you, but there’s no manual for loving your twin brother.”

He’s got me there, and I’m speechless for a few seconds, unsure what to say. But I won’t give in without questioning his motives. “After one night, you’re giving into what you fought against for so long?” I ask. “For months, you’ve pushed me away. Fuck, just yesterday, you brought up a divorce?”

“Ash, honey, do you think it was easy to stay away from you? And the divorce? It was a stupid fucking idea. I had to tell myself I was doing right by you and the kids. It was a decision I made every day to end what we had. But, I’m tired of fighting what we are to each other.”

His words hit me hard.

“Well,” I begin. “I’ve been here all day. It sure took you long enough to make up your mind.” Why am I rearing up for a fight?

His smile widens. “I had a couple things I needed to do before I could come up here, to prove to you that I choose us. I can’t say I won’t ever get into my head about our lineage, but I love you, and that will never change.”

“And what was the reason again for taking your sweet ass time coming to me?” I have my arms crossed. I won’t accept anything but the truth.

“I had to move all my shit out of my loft and back into our home. I also put the loft up on the market today, proving to you that I don’t have a plan b or a back-up plan.”

He shows me a picture of our closet, and all his immaculate suits are hung up across from where my clothes hang.

“You’re not leaving me?”

He drops his head to his chin. “I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you. I was so fucked up in the head.”

“Well, if you can’t forgive yourself, then I’ll prove it to you every day *that I forgive you*. I want nothing more than to raise our family together.”

His hand strokes my cheek, his spare hand on the back of my neck.

“Fuck, I love you, Ashton James.”

There’s only one way I know to answer.

“Ditto.”



Noah

Five years later

DID I almost walk away from the best thing in my life? Fuck yeah, I did. How fucking stupid could one person be?

Ash and I have spoken often of growing our family. Collin is sixteen, and Lainey is fourteen. My gallery, a shared venture I opened with Kate, is established, and Devin works with us. We even premiere in New York at a friend's gallery once a year. Ash is now a professor at the college he's been with for five years. We're slowing down, a little.

We have so much more love to give, but adopting was out of the question. What if there were blood tests? DNA samples? The possibilities of being caught were too high. Too fucking high. It meant there was only one option. After nine months of watching our baby grow in a surrogate, we're about to hold him in our arms.

Ashton is greedy, beating me to the nursery. The nurse has our little guy wrapped like a burrito and is rocking him back and forth. We stop at the entrance of the nursery. They have a room set aside for this reason. It's the first time we're meeting our son. And he's so beautiful.

It didn't matter who the bio daddy was. He'd have both our DNA. No one knew this, of course. But, we had to know who the bio daddy was. It was important to keep this secret,

and Ash asked me to do it. I wouldn't say no, but it didn't mean he would be any less the father to this boy.

Lainey was upset when we told her it was another boy, claiming she was even further outnumbered. But I had a feeling when she was able to hold him, everything would change.

“Okay, Daddies. Only one of you can hold him first. Who is it going to be?”

Ash holds up his hand, and I point to him. “This little guy is so cute, but I probably don't have to tell you two that. Do I?” she asks.

Ash stares at his son. He probably sees the same nose we both share, along with the thick black hair sticking out of his beanie.

“Does he have a name yet?” the nurse asks.

“Aaron Carl James,” we both say at the same time. The nurse leaves, and it's just us.

“Oh, Noah. He's ours.”

He's ours. There's no doubt about that. And to think I was the stupid motherfucker who almost gave this all up.

I tip Ash's face up to mine, and stare at him, then at Aaron. “You're right, Ash. He's forever ours. Because you're forever mine.”

This is not the end!



*N*arrator

The children's hospital, in the mid to late nineties.

THE STORY of Noah and Ashton James isn't over. It won't ever be over, because their love surpasses all understanding. It may make people uncomfortable. But at the end of the day, this is their love story. And they won. They overcame unbearable obstacles, in order to live their life together.

But there are details they'll never know. It's a part of the story, that I—the creator—put into motion the day the baby who was supposed to be named William Andrew James was born.

The helicopter touched down onto the top of the children's hospital with the team from Issaquah, who tried to keep him alive on the ten-minute flight.

There were times the father of this baby looked over and his son's lips were blue, and he didn't see his chest rising and falling.

The pediatric NICU met the baby and the team of doctors and nurses who flew with the newborn, as they worked hard to keep him alive.

They were yelling numbers and words the father couldn't understand. He watched his baby work so hard to breathe his first breath, and it had become so difficult for the little guy.

“Are you the dad?” One of the nurses from the children’s hospital asks, and he could only give her a nod of his head.

“I want you to come with us. We have a waiting room for you, and we’ll come get you the second we know anything.”

His thoughts were still on his wife, who was bleeding out when he made the decision she would have insisted on. He left his dying wife to be with the baby she wanted so desperately.

He followed them down to the same level the newborn NICU was on, and he paced the floor for what felt like hours. A doctor appeared in the waiting room, but he wasn’t one of the many that started working on his son right away.

“Mr. James. I just spoke with your wife’s doctor. She lost a lot of blood, and they had to perform an emergency hysterectomy. She’s in recovery, and she’ll be asleep for some time. Her parents are there, and your son, the first-born twin, is as healthy as an ox.”

“My wife, she’s alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

He wipes drips of sweat from his brow. “Wait,” he remembered, “you haven’t said anything about my other son. Is he okay?”

“Your second son is having a hard time breathing. He’s sick, but we can’t figure it out. He most likely will need breathing treatments and medicines his whole life. We have him in the NICU nursery, in a regular bassinet for now, but we’re keeping a close eye on him.”

The father didn’t like what he heard. Losing this baby would kill his wife.

The doctor escorts the worried father to the NICU nursery. “Let me make sure you can come in first. But for now, that is your little boy.” The doctor pointed to a small baby in a blue beanie cap.

The nurse and doctor spoke. The doctor nodded his head at the nurse, a frustrated expression on his face.

He walks from the nursery, and Carl's heart falls. "The nurse will bring your son to the glass. They want to keep him monitored closely, but soon, you can hold your baby."

The nurse picked up the little boy, and Carl watched him intently. What a small baby compared to his older and bigger brother.

William had his wife's nose. He was tiny, not much bigger than five pounds, with such skinny legs.

The nurse stepped away from the window, and the ankle bracelet fell off of him. Carl knocked on the glass, pointing to it. She shook her head and picked it up, speaking with another nurse.

She came around the viewing window, opening up the door to speak with him. "I'm so sorry, Mr. James. When babies are rushed over here, in an emergency, they secure a quick bracelet on their ankle. Many preemie babies have a hard time with the ankle bracelet and they kick it off. But me and my other nurse are about to get him secured with both ankle and wrist bands. I'll be sure to bring you a matching one you can wear."

It made sense, after all, William was whisked out so quickly, and his little ankles were really no larger than one of Carl's fingers.

Another man, with red hair, a bit shorter than Carl's larger build, appeared at the open window, staring at a bassinet near Carl's son. He turned to Carl. "Is your son in there?" the stranger asked.

"He's in the bassinet next to your son. That's William. What about your baby?"

The stranger took in a deep breath. "His blood sugar was low, and he was rushed over here. They assured us that he'll be fine. But he's being reunited with his mom tomorrow. He was born yesterday, and my Caitlyn hasn't held him yet. She's very distraught." He explained. "He's small, just barely five pounds, but he's ours, and that will never change."

Carl was jealous. Why couldn't his son be healthy? There was the unknown with William. He wanted to continue speaking with the father. That way he didn't have to worry about his son. "Does he have a name?"

"Not yet. My wife wants to name him Aaron, after me, but I don't know. We'll see."

The gentleman Carl knew as just Aaron left with a good-bye. Carl stared at his son. How would he tell his wife, that one of their two babies they would ever have in this world, may not make it or could struggle with his health most likely his whole life? It would destroy Evelyn.

His stared didn't leave his baby boy. He loved him so much but life was cruel. The nurse picked William up, and brought him to the glass again. He was precious, so perfect. She pointed to the ankle monitor, where she mouthed, "We're changing it, now." Speaking with the other nurse, she directed her attention to the baby with no name. The other nurse picked Aaron's baby up, and his ankle bracelet fell off too. She moved close to the nurse with Carl's own baby. They were typing information on the computer as the bracelets for both babies were printed out.

Alarms began to sound and William's nurse left him, visibly saying something to the remaining nurse, but Carl didn't hear them.

The baby with no name began to cry, and she picked him up from a few empty bassinets they kept near them, calming him down. At the small work station, she grabbed for his band, securing both onto his wrist and ankle.

She took the baby with no name back to the bassinet in front of the window, placing him in Williams's bassinet, bringing the parental bracelet to him. He's in the wrong bassinet, but they aren't marked like typical nursery bassinets are with a tag placed in a slot above the baby.

She walked back over to William, reaching for the bands, securing them on his son's wrist and ankle then bringing him back toward Carl and placing him in the other bassinet.

Carl was so confused. He'd kept his eyes on William the entire time. He pointed to the babies and mouthed, "Can I see him again?"

She smiled, and turned around to pick up the baby with no name. Both babies wore the same white, hospital-issued onesie. He read his bracelet first, with William's name. Then he looked at the wrist band for the baby with no name. He read it out loud. The baby with no name's bracelet read William Andrew James. The nurse, without intention, just switched the two babies.

The father stared at the accident with horror, with wonder, and with a decision to make. Should he say something? Or let his wife raise the baby who was healthy, because after all, if something happened to her baby, it would kill his wife. He couldn't have that.

And now you know—it was me, Carl. I walked away as if I didn't see a thing. And no one will ever know the whole truth. I didn't know who my biological son was until almost twenty-eight years later, but I'll never regret my decision.

I did it for love, never doubt that.

The End.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE COMING!

Ready for Tia and Liam's story?

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Do you like forbidden books?

**What happens when a son asks the
impossible of his father?**

This is the premise of

The Father/Son Duet.

Now Live

Like Father Like Son

I said good-bye to my son. But he had one final request—a letter I'll never forget.

Dear Dad,

If you're reading this, it means I'm gone. I had one dream, growing old with Holland. Death won't stop me from providing for my wife. And because you're the best man I know, what I'm about to ask—my last request—I know you'll do. Please take care of Holland. Take her back to California

with you. It's a lot—I know. But, I'm placing my most precious possession in your hands.

Love,

Scott

But the thoughts swirling through my mind are certainly not what my late son had in mind. How do I resist this woman in front of me?

After all, you can't choose love, it chooses you.

Different as Night and Day

I laid my husband to rest....

Scott was my world and my future. His love for me transcended the dimensions of time and space—having made provisions for me in the event of his death. He was after all in a war zone and the odds were high he may not come home. But now I can't help but think about the new man in my life – my husband's father.

Maguire creates a desire deep inside of me I never knew existed. This is more than lust. I keep on asking myself the same question. Have I fallen in love with him because he's so much like my late husband or because he's his own man? Only time will tell.

After all, you can't choose love, it chooses you.

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Give (BDSM—MF)

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IT TAKES A VILLAGE!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Lennon is a mother, veteran and a wife of a cancer survivor. Originally with a degree in education, she started writing as an outlet that has led to a deep passion. She lugs her computer with her as she crafts her next story. Her imaginary friends become real on her pages as she creates a world for them. She loves pretty nails, spikey hair and large earrings. Leigh can be found drinking coffee or wine, depending on the time of the day.

