



**KNOW ME
SEE ME**

HINSEL MEYER

KNOW ME SEE ME

FAN SERVICE SERIES

BOOK 4

HINSEL MEYER

Know Me See Me

Fan Service Series Book 4

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Prologue

SYNOPSIS

Derek

With everyone around me falling in love, I've never been more certain that I want the complete opposite. I don't want love, I don't need love.

It doesn't matter that my heart skips a beat whenever my best friend smiles at me. Nope, I don't want love at all.

But the universe decided that what I want doesn't matter, because my best friend kissed me, showed me what I'm missing—what my friends found—then immediately breaks my heart.

Hawk

My brother is a dumbass. A drunk dumbass most of the time, and thanks to him I just fucked up the best friendship I've ever had.

But I have a plan.

And the plan goes perfectly, until it makes me realize that patching up my friendship with Derek is not all I want. What I want is much, much more.

I want *everything*.

The only problem is when I think I'm well on my way to getting exactly that, my dumbass brother strikes again.

A NOTE FROM HINSEL

AS A HARDCORE FOOTBALL FAN, I UNDERSTOOD THAT WANTING to make this series genuinely fictional, I couldn't use actual team names in it. I did everything I could to stay true to the schedules and realities of the NFL and regulations but took some liberties so it didn't impact the flow of the story. I hope this doesn't alter your reading experience.

I made a [Playlist](#) as I always do, that for me explains very well the moods through the book. You can check it out before or after reading.

A REQUEST

IF YOU HAPPEN TO SPOT ANY ERRORS, LIKE TYPOS, MISSING punctuation, or factual errors, please feel free to email them to dgbredits@gmail.com.

Please don't report them using the reporting feature on your Kindle, as this can have consequences for us authors when we don't respond quickly enough (and Amazon doesn't always let us know about them!).

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

THIS BOOK CONTAINS MENTIONS OF PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE, parental death, and murder. Talk of a mild case of epilepsy, suicide, and suicide ideation. There is on-page substance abuse, codependency, and explicit sex scenes.

If you feel any of these could trigger you, don't take a chance, I want my books to make the readers feel good and I think your mental health should come before everything else.

THIS BOOK HAS A CHARACTER WHO HAS ADHD. LIKE MANY mental disorders, it's not an exact recipe of symptoms that every person diagnosed suffers from equally. It varies a lot and I hope I did what it's like to live like that justice.

I researched and did everything I could to stay faithful to how Hawk wanted to be written as much as to the reality of ADHD, but like anything in life, Hawk's experience may be different to yours or to those of the people you know with ADHD.

Hawk's ADHD is a part of him, something he's been living with all his life and, because of his privilege, has had help with since childhood. For all of these reasons, his diagnosis is not a main theme of this book.

GLOSSARY WARNING: THERE'S A CHARACTER GLOSSARY ON THE next page with all characters' names and basic info that you can use if you want to know more about all of them, but the list does contain spoilers for previous books in the series.

GLOSSARY

HAWK STORM — HALF OF THE COUNTRY ROCK BAND “THE Storm”. Brother of Wolf, son of Shell Storm and Oscar Miller.

Wolf Storm — Half of the country rock band “The Storm”. Brother of Hawk, son of Shell Storm and Oscar Miller.

Lyla Storm (Aunt Lyla) — Model and owner of Lyval Beauty. Mother of Alexei and Ivan Jankowski, ex-wife and best friend of Ruko “Hulk” Jankowski, wife of Michael Ellsworth, stepmother of Eli Ellsworth.

Shell Storm (Mom) — Songwriter and owner of Carmel Shell Spa. Died 8 years ago. Mother of Hawk and Wolf Storm, married to Oscar Miller until he died.

Derek Johnson — Safety for the LA Warriors (Football). Son of Mia Johnson, brother of Gracie Johnson. Best friends: Adam, George, Mike, AJ, Appleton, Wolf, and Hawk.

Clive Darnell — Retired Quarterback for the LA Warriors. Father of Gab and Peter Darnell. Grandfather to Alex, Lucy, Adam, Kevin, Elliott. Host of the “All About Football” show. Legend.

Hugh Andrews — Agent for Adam, Mike, George, Derek.

AJ Quick — Quarterback for the LA Warriors.

Fred Appleton — Star Edge for the LA Warriors.

George Campbell — Tight End for the Boston Sharks (Football). Husband of Glenn. Best friends: Adam, Mike,

Derek, Bennett, Leaf. Brother of: Ed, Donny, and Frankie. Son of Andrew and Anna.

Glenn Green — Ph.D. on Physics at MIT. Husband of George. Best friends: Sebas, Bennett, Josie. Aunt Carroll (Car) deceased.

Sebastian (Sebas) David — Artist/Sculptor. Husband of Adam Darnell. Son of Rosario (Chayo) and Sandoval David Sr. Brother of Santiago and Sandoval Jr. Best friends: Glenn, Josie, Bennett, and Theo.

Adam Darnell — Quarterback for the New York Kings (Football). Husband of Sebas David. Best friends: Mike, George, Derek, CJ, and Carter. Son of Peter and Diana Darnell. Brother of Elliott and Kevin Darnell.

Mia Johnson (Mom) — Executive Assistant. Single mother. Divorced. Mother of Derek and Gracie Johnson.

Gracie Johnson — Pediatric nurse. Daughter of Mia Johnson and sister of Derek Johnson.

Mike McKinnley — Center for the New York Kings. Boyfriend of Theo Crawford. Dog-dad to Tony. Best friends: Adam, George, Derek. Son of Craig and Abby McKinnley. Brother of Jason and Jennifer McKinnley.

Gab Darnell — Owner of the Las Vegas Rogues (Football) and the Las Vegas Pirates (Hockey). Daughter of Clive and Danielle Darnell. Sister of Peter Darnell. Aunt to Adam, Kevin, and Elliott Darnell. Mother to Alex and Lucy Darnell. Legend, badass, BAB.

Luke Riggs — Quarterback of the Las Vegas Rogues. “Rival” of Adam Darnell.

Rich — Bodyguard, assigned to Wolf Storm.

Tate — Bodyguard, assigned to Hawk Storm.

Lee — Driver. Former driver for Sterling now works for Hawk and Wolf Storm.

Bruce Atkins — Business Manager. Former business manager to Shell Storm. Now business manager to Lyla, Hawk, and Wolf Storm.

Theodore Harrison Crawford (Theo) — Baker. Boyfriend of Mike McKinnley. Son of Harrison Crawford and Mary Crawford (estranged). Dog-dad to Oscar. Brother of Iris Crawford. Grandson of Iris Crawford (Nan). Best Friends: Casey, Paula, and Sebas.

Ruko “Hulk” Jankowski — Former NHL player, now co-host of *NHL Today*, and trainer of NHL referees. Ex-husband of Lyla Storm. Father of Alexei and Ivan Jankowski. Uncle to Wolf and Hawk. Best friends: Paul Wayne and Lyla Storm.

Cindy — Manager to Hawk Storm, Wolf Storm, and Sterling.

Sterling — Rockstar. Father to Ava and Adam Michel. Husband of Jules Dupont. Best friends: Jamie, Polly, Matty, and Lion.

Jules Dupont — Center forward and captain for the Las Vegas Pirates (Hockey). Married to Sterling, father of Ava and Adam Michel. Best friend: Anders Haugen (Mater).

Ivan “Eagle” Jankowski — Left wing for the Las Vegas Pirates. Son of Ruko (Hulk) Jankowski and Lyla Storm. Brother of Alexei Jankowski. Cousin of Wolf and Hawk.

Alexei Jankowski — Cousin of Wolf and Hawk, brother of Ivan Jankowski, son of Ruko (Hulk) Jankowski and Lyla Storm.

Dr. Lulu — Hawk’s therapist.

Michael Ellsworth — Media mogul based in Manhattan. (Owner of TV networks, film production companies, a cyber security company, and two magazines.) Father of Eli Ellsworth, second and current husband of Lyla Storm.

Eli Ellsworth — Son of Michael Ellsworth, stepson of Lyla Storm, stepbrother of Ivan and Alexei Jankowski. Best friend: Alexei.

Oliver Lloyd — Childhood friend of Hawk and Wolf. Has a mild case of epilepsy.

Oscar Miller — Agent to the stars in Hollywood in the nineties. Father of Hawk and Wolf Storm. Deceased.

*This book is dedicated to anyone who's ever felt like they're
not entitled to wish for more.*

You can have it all.

PROLOGUE

Hawk

July — Twenty-Six Years Ago

LIKE THEY ALWAYS ARE, THE BAD MEN ARE WAITING FOR US when we step out of the big building. I want to tell them to leave us alone, but the last time I did, Aunt Lyla told me not to talk to them—“They’ll go away faster that way.”

I don’t think she’s right because they only shout louder and take more photos of us. Every time we leave the house, every time we step out of a car, they’re always there. The flashes barely make me flinch anymore.

But I’m four now, and even though I couldn’t spend my birthday with Mom—no matter how much I wished for it—I know she’s proud of me for walking by myself instead of asking her to carry me.

It’s the first time she’s come out of the building with us, and she said she’d be coming home today. I didn’t believe her until now. Wolfie told me it wasn’t a sure thing so I wouldn’t cry if she didn’t.

He’s older, and knows a lot more than I do, so I trust him. I squeeze his hand harder when we start walking down the big steps. I have Mom’s hand in my other hand, and Aunt Lyla is holding on to Wolfie on the other side. That way none of us are alone. I look up at Mom, her pretty, long blonde hair is pinned back and not moving, and she isn’t smiling as she walks.

I remember her hair used to move all the time, and she wouldn't stop smiling, before that night when Dad—

“Come on up, little fella,” Mom says, and though she is smiling, it doesn't look right.

Not like before.

I try to smile at her, but the tears I've been holding back finally start to fall. It feels different this time. I'm not crying like I do when me or Wolfie have nightmares. This time I just . . . cry.

I don't make a sound as Mom fastens the seatbelts on my chair and Wolfie's. I just look at her and make a wish again.

I want to see her smile like she used to.

“Everything will go back to normal now, my fearless Hawk.”

But it never would. I trusted her implicitly, but we'd find out real fast that we'd never be able to outrun *that night*.

ONE

Derek

February — Three Years and Six Months Ago

I TAKE A DEEP, STEADYING BREATH AS I PICK UP THE PLATTER with all the fixings for the burgers that are cooking on the grill. I look at the dark wood of the counter, and nod to myself after seeing how spotless I left it.

Mom helped me choose a place to rent last year when I got to LA. I didn't let myself hope that I would still be here ten months later, so I put most of my impressive paycheck into a savings account and have used the rest to survive. She made sure to tell me how important the kitchen is to turn a house into a home, and gave me all the tips on how to maintain it.

Nutrition has always been a big thing for Mom, especially with me being an athlete all my childhood and now doing it professionally. Gracie, my little sister, also played softball and soccer every year, and she wanted us both to be healthy and reach our potential.

I've reached my potential. I want to make next season even better than this one was, but that's a tall order.

I won Defensive Rookie of the Year two weeks ago, and three days later I helped my team win the *fucking Super Bowl*. My first season in the NFL ended the perfect way, but I still don't feel secure enough to buy the awesome house I've been keeping an eye on in Santa Monica. Having a historically great rookie season will never happen again. Not only because I'll

never be a rookie again, but because winning the Super Bowl is fucking hard.

I want to believe the best is yet to come, though, and to get to that point, I have to do this first.

There are two men on my patio, sipping beers and waiting for me to feed them.

One of them is my agent, Hugh Andrews, a man who's taken me under his wing and made me feel safe in the big, strange world that is the NFL.

The other one has become a surrogate grandfather of sorts to me during my time in LA. Clive Darnell, an all-round badass and America's favorite football commentator. Some would say he was the first big NFL quarterback fifty years ago, and he'd say that's bullshit.

He also happens to be the most loving man I've ever met, followed closely by his son, Peter Darnell. Another great NFL quarterback, and the father of one of my best friends.

To say I'm nervous as fuck about what I want to tell them is the understatement of the century. I'm barely out of my rookie year and I can't go on the way I have all these months.

With whispered slurs aimed at me in hallways, at practices, in the goddamn locker room.

I just can't.

Everyone, including a very annoying voice in my head, would tell me to suck it up. This is the NFL, the most successful sports league in the country. I don't get to complain about anything while I'm a professional athlete living my dream and getting paid very well to do so.

But I have to. I want to make this a place where other queer men can play and feel safe. I have to risk everything, and I somehow have to tell these men that I want them behind me, supporting me in this insane . . . witch hunt?

No, that's not what this is. This wouldn't be a witch hunt, it's a sentencing.

Witches are angels compared to the fuckers I want out of my life.

Reid, Mitchell, Young, and worst of all, Zack Welton. The defensive end made my life miserable. Always taunting me with slurs on the field, not only at practice or tape-watching sessions, but also during games. The other three weren't as relentless but they took every opportunity to torment me.

The thing is, with my achievements this year, I could ask for a trade to almost any team I wanted. Hell, I bet even the New York Kings would trade for me, and it'd be a dream to play with Mike and Adam again.

But I don't want that.

Not only because I like living in California, where even in the middle of winter I can chill out in my backyard without a hoodie on, but also because there are some other awesome guys on the team. Most of all our QB, AJ Quick, who won MVP this season, and Keith Appleton—our star edge.

AJ is only three years older than me, but he's well on his way to being a legend already. He's gone to the Super Bowl two times since he became the starting QB last season and already won one.

He's also a good man. Appleton too. Both of them made me feel welcome when no one else did, and have helped me figure out a lot of things about being a professional athlete. I've learned that's the most important thing to have around me in life—good people. I wouldn't be here without them, and I wouldn't be the same player either.

I take another deep breath and go out to my patio.

After we devour the burgers—which were spectacular since I followed Mom's recipe to a T—I lean back in my chair, and look at the two men chatting about some other player over in Chicago who's also a client of Hugh's.

I wait until there's a natural lull in the conversation, when Clive reaches into the cooler to get another round of beers for all of us.

“I wanted to ask your opinion about something.” I start, and take a sip to wet my dry mouth. “I—No, you know what? No. What I want is to tell you what I need, and for you to support me.”

Both men look at me with concern in their eyes.

“What’s going on, son?” Clive asks, and that word, *son*, chokes me up like it does every time he says it so naturally. So I start from the beginning, from the moment I stepped foot on the practice field eight months ago and the slurs started.

To their credit, both men stay silent as I do my best to retell the story in order, not hiding anything about how, when, and where everything happened. Their faces get redder and redder, and I just want to get it done as quickly as possible, because Clive can’t afford to get too angry—he’s in his seventies.

“So what I want”—I rush to say the last part—“is to go into the GM’s office and tell him, the only way I’m staying is if they’re going. I want to take that risk, which I know isn’t what you’d advise—”

“Oh bullshit, this is absolutely what I’d advise you,” Hugh interrupts with a burst of anger.

“It is?” I ask hesitantly. This isn’t what I was expecting.

“It abso-fucking-lutely is what *I’d* tell you.” Clive nods decisively and then stands to pace along the table like he always does when he’s thinking. “I’d say you have to make sure he’s got the bargaining chips needed,” he says, looking pointedly at Hugh.

“We already have them.” He throws his hands in the air. “I wasn’t gonna bring it up unless you gave me a reason to believe you wanted to leave, but six other teams have reached out already with interest in you.”

“Really?” I ask, honestly surprised by this turn of events.

“Yes, really,” he tells me with a laugh. “Derek, every team in the league wants you, you won Defensive Rookie of the Year for fuck’s sake. And we can all see you’re just getting started.”

“Oh,” I whisper, and look down at my beer. My throat’s dry again, so I wet it by downing the whole can. “Okay, then,” I say once I’ve swallowed and wiped my mouth. I take a moment to look them both in the eyes with as much gratitude as I can. “Let’s do this then.”

April — Three Years and Four Months Ago

AJ CALLS ME THE SAME AFTERNOON THAT MY NEW SHINY contract with the LA Warriors is announced and congratulates me. “I’m happy to have you to practice with,” he says. “It keeps me on my toes.” I smirk since he can’t see me. Fuck yeah, I keep him on his toes, and dancing on them.

“Since you’re staying in LA”—his voice brings me back to the present—“it’s time you stop acting like an old man and go out to party with us.” AJ’s not a crazy partier, but he does it well whenever it happens. He doesn’t drink, like *at all*, but he knows how to have a good time without it.

I declined every single invitation he extended during the season because I wasn’t sure I was sticking it out here and didn’t want to get attached. To anything or anyone.

Now, I have no excuses left.

“Yeah, okay. Send me the details.”

He does, and standing up from my couch, I get my ass dressed in a pair of black jeans and a nice T-shirt—an insanely expensive Armani one I was sent for some strange reason—and drive to the location he texted me.

When I stop the car in front of the valet at the fancy-ass restaurant-slash-bar-slash-club, I feel a sense of rightness course through my body.

I have no idea what that’s about, but I’m not feeling dread and that’s good enough for me.

I want to make friends in LA, even if I know I don’t really need them. Mike, Adam, and George, my college friends, are the best friends a guy could ask for, but none of them live here.

It couldn't hurt to have more people my age to hang out with. Don't get me wrong, Clive and Hugh are great, and I have a blast with both of them, but they're seventy and forty, not even close to my age.

Though I have no doubt Clive could—*and would*—turn this club *up* if he ever showed his face here. I smirk just picturing it, then the smirk turns into a smile when I think of Adam hearing about it.

The valet looks at me with a confused frown when I hand him my keys, but I don't mind. "Hey, man," I greet him.

"Good evening Mr. Johnson," he says as he takes them. It's still weird as fuck how people know my name when I don't know theirs, so I look down at his name tag.

"Same to you, Will." I nod at him, take the ticket he gives me, and stroll to the entrance where a hostess meets me and tells me she'll take me to my table. I didn't know I had a table here. I mentally roll my eyes at myself. She probably guessed I'm here to see AJ. We're teammates after all, and everyone in the city knows it since we just became their favorite athletes.

The club is full, even at eight in the evening, but there's a roped hallway circling the space that leads to a set of stairs being guarded by a huge man.

"Evening," I tell him, and he smiles at me like he can't help it. It's in his eyes more than his mouth. I just bet he doesn't smile much, and wanting him to relax a little I ask, "Did you smile when AJ got here, or is it only for me?"

I get a smirk for my trouble but nothing else. He just unclips the rope without looking at it and takes a step to the side to let me through.

I follow the hostess up the stairs, looking back at the sea of people and smiling. Last time I went out was in San Francisco after we won the Super Bowl. I was with all my college friends there, and we all ended up leaving pretty early to hang out near Cavendish until early in the morning.

A couple of my teammates—*cough*, Zack Welton—had some issues with me partying with "the enemy," namely Adam

and Mike who play for the New York Kings. Before I could defend their honor though, Mike pulled me back and we got out of there.

I don't think the rest of the guys had issues with it, and there's a tiny part of me that regrets not being able to celebrate with my team after such an incredible achievement, but at the time it felt like the right thing to do.

Now I have a chance to do it and to actually get to know them. I'm grabbing it with both hands because I want us all to become close—I think we're going to have to be if we want another shot at the Lombardi next year. This year was just insane with the amount of talent we had on the roster, and like always, change is the only constant in this league. That means a lot of guys won't get paid what they—and their agents—think they're worth, so they'll go to other teams.

I'm lucky the Warriors thought I was important and good enough to pay me the big bucks, but since there's a limit to how much the teams can spend on players, there's not always room for everyone.

Still, even with all the trades that have been happening—not only those of the homophobic assholes—there's room to get lots of rookies. We'll see where we stand come June and OTA's.

For now . . . I see AJ sitting on a leather couch with his best friends on the team. His left tackle, Quincy Smith, sits right beside him, next is Richard Mathewson, our best wide receiver, followed by Devon Swayma, our best running back, and finally Chance Marks, our center.

I do a quick scan of the space and realize there are no other teammates here. So this is an initiation into AJ's close circle. I stumble as I realize that, but right my footing before anyone notices.

I don't know if it's what I want—to be the only defense guy in this little group of friends. There's a clear line between offense and defense in NFL teams, at least from what I've seen. Then again, my three best friends are all offense guys too, so maybe it won't be so bad.

They're in the last section of the VIP lounge, and while I follow the hostess to meet them, I realize The Storm are here. Hawk and Wolf Storm, who have been huge country rock stars since they were teenagers, *are here*.

They've been famous for practically all of their lives because they're the sons of two people who made . . . choices.

Hawk has a stunning woman practically sitting in his lap—who he isn't paying any attention to—while Wolf throws his head back and laughs at whatever his little brother said. I avert my eyes so they don't catch me looking. I've met so many damn celebrities since I moved here and one thing I've realized is that staring at them is *not* cool.

I walk faster to get to my teammates, and bow in thanks when they all cheer at my arrival. The hostess asks me if I want to order a drink and I decline.

“Man, you really showed up,” AJ shouts over the music as he stands and throws his arms up for an over-the-top hug. Not being a fan of hugs, I grit my teeth, and take it.

“Yeah, I didn't think it was optional,” I mutter. I breathe easier once he leans back and lets me go around the table greeting everyone else.

He barks out a laugh, “No one can make you do anything you don't wanna do, Johnson.”

That's true enough. A shrug is my only reaction.

I sit with them and shoot the shit for a while. Some of them drink, but not excessively. I like that.

I'm laughing at Devon's impression of Chance trying to paddle board, and seriously surprised at how much fun these guys are to be around, when two figures walk over to our table. We all look up and right at the sunshiny smile of Hawk Storm.

“Hey guys!” he says happily, and even waves at us. *Damn that's cute*.

Cute? What the fuck? Since when do I think, or even realize, a man is cute?

Men are hot or not for me, nothing else. But Hawk Storm, with his perfect smile, and his relaxed but happy expression is *very* cute.

Wolf on the other hand, is the furthest thing from cute. He remains stoic, with a drink in his hand, also relaxed, but not smiling at all. He's watching us like a . . . wolf. That's fucking weird, but he is. Like we're the newcomers and he's assessing whether we're a threat or not.

"Hey," I say, when no one else speaks, and Wolf's face relaxes marginally while Hawk's smile gets bigger. He takes a tiny step forward, and Wolf follows him. Damn, what is it with this dude? We're not doing anything.

"We just wanted to say congrats on the Super Bowl win, and that we're huge fans. We hope you get another ring next season."

"Thanks," AJ says.

Then Devon pipes up. "You guys wanna hang out? I'm also a huge fan, by the way." The dude is cool, calm and collected, not weirded out in the slightest.

I still can't believe I'm even in the same room as these guys. George has been a huge fan of them forever, and always had their music playing at the house when we all lived together at Cavendish.

They could pass as twins any day, and they don't look like they're twenty-eight and twenty-six, but way younger. Both with dark blonde hair, deep blue eyes, tall and lithe. Well, Wolf is a bit more buff than Hawk, but just by their actions, stance, presence . . . I can tell they're total opposites.

"Yeah?" Hawk pipes up with a childish delight that is not what I expect from a global star. "We'd love to." His smile gets even wider, while Wolf sighs and lets his younger brother drag him to the couch.

"Derek," I say, and offer my hand when Hawk sits right next to me.

"I'm Hawk, and this is my brother Wolf. It's so nice to meet you! I'm a huge fan. You were amazing all season, but

man, that sack, forced fumble, and interception in the Super Bowl were impressive.” He widens his eyes exaggeratedly. My lips twitch with a smile, but like always, I don’t let it take over.

“Thank you,” I tell him simply. “It was a group effort.” That’s the damn truth no matter how much of a cliché it is.

I reach over and hold my hand out to Wolf after he’s done introducing himself to everyone else, and Hawk starts his round of telling everyone exactly what they did in our last game of the season that made him gasp.

Wolf’s hold on my hand goes on for a little too long, and his grip is tighter than what you’d consider polite, but I don’t take my eyes off him.

“You’re okay,” he says simply, then lets go. I don’t know what that’s about, but I’m glad I passed whatever test it was.

May — Two Years and Three Months Ago

“BUT YOU SAID YOU WERE LEAVING NEXT MONDAY,” HAWK whines, from the spot on my bed where he landed when he came running in and jumped face first.

The little shit came in like this is his house, or his bedroom, fifteen minutes after I sent a text to our group chat telling him and Wolf I’m heading to the East Coast earlier than planned.

Living so close to the Storm brothers has its advantages—they’ve become two of my best friends here aside from AJ and Appleton, and being two minutes away from them has come in handy—this isn’t one of them. Since I met them last year they’ve burrowed into my life like no one has before. I mean, they have unlimited access to my house, and only my agent has that same privilege—which he only does because of practical matters.

They’re fun and they accept me just as I am. Wolf and I talk only in grunts sometimes which is refreshing, and Hawk does all the talking in the world whether it’s needed or not. The H in ADHD is strong in this one, and I have a bit of a ... weak spot for him.

Suuure, weak spot. I'm infatuated, is what I am, and Wolf knows it.

Which is becoming a problem. It's all just a problem that I need to fix. Maybe some space is what I need the most.

"And now I'm leaving today." I keep my voice as even as possible. *No*, I tell myself. *Hawk isn't cute when he pouts*. I make sure not to look him in the eyes because that would lead to me spilling my guts, and I've done more than enough of that in the past year already.

I don't have time to sit and talk to Hawk about my worries over my mother and sister, and how I wish they'd just move here with me. I have a flight to catch, so no, I can't look into Hawk's eyes right now.

I turn at the sound of footsteps and see Wolf strolling into my bedroom, as at home as his brother and with a can of beer tipped up.

I sigh. What else can I do? "Look, George—I told you about George—he was here a week ago and he got traded to the Boston Sharks, remember?"

"Yeah," they both answer, in that creepy identical way that's even creepier because they're not actual twins.

"You said we couldn't come over while he was here." Hawk pouts again and I quickly look away, but not before I catch Wolf smirking at me. *Asshole*. But he's the perfect amount of asshole, just like I am.

"He was stressed, okay?" And meeting his musical heroes wouldn't have done him any good while he was waiting for his trade to be official. "Anyway, he's getting married ... " I hedge, because I really don't have the time to explain their whole story. "So I'm flying out to Boston, then going over to New York like I had planned for Sebas' graduation."

"Sebas is Adam's boyfriend, right?"

"Exactly." I've talked to these two about all of my college friends, and I feel like they all know each other despite them not having met.

“When will you fly back?” Wolf asks, beer comfortably in his hand, like it’s an extension of it. It has been more and more so the last few months. I want to stay here and help Hawk out with Wolf when his drinking gets out of hand as much as I want to go see one of my best friends make vows to the love of his life.

“In three weeks, I think. Maybe,” I say, as I turn back to zip up my suitcase. I’ll miss them, that’s the simple truth.

I’ve been spending almost every day with them since the season ended for the Warriors in January. We lost in the divisional round of the playoffs, and I may have closed myself off from my teammates after. It was a hard loss.

Mom and Gracie don’t have the time to deal with my gloomy self, so I stayed here.

These two are currently working on a new album. They finished their last tour in March, and they’ll probably start another one in less than a year, since what I’ve heard of the new album is bound to have people going insane.

They’re some of the most talented men I’ve ever met. That includes AJ, who’s by far the most accurate quarterback in the history of the game, and Adam who plays like he’s a bot in Madden and not a real-life human.

Talent just pours out of some people, and Wolf and Hawk have it to spare.

I get all my toiletries and shove them into my backpack, then walk out of my room with my luggage without giving Hawk a second glance.

It’s for the best.

I don’t care if they stay here for the three weeks I’m gone. They’re good houseguests, if you ignore the fact that they’ll eat all your food and Wolf will drink all your alcohol.

I don’t have much more than beer since that’s all I drink, so I’m not worried. Besides, they know that if they don’t leave the place as spotless as it is now, they’re gonna be banned from my place for months.

I walk straight to my garage and dump everything on the back seat of one of my few splurges. My GLS 600 Mercedes Maybach SUV. She's a beauty, in almost-black midnight blue, with cream leather seats. One of my most prized possessions, right next to my Super Bowl ring and my house.

I'm leaving her at Clive's place, and his driver will take us to the airport. It doesn't surprise me that George and Glenn invited Adam's whole family to the wedding. They've all been like family to them these past couple of years since Adam, Mike, and I graduated and left Northern California.

Thundering steps sound from the house before I can walk back in to say goodbye. Hawk wrenches the door to the mud room open and crushes me in a hug.

If it weren't my job to be as strong as a wall, he would've shoved me hard against my precious SUV, but since I am and he didn't, I return the hug and can't stop myself from lowering my head against his hair and closing my eyes. I fucking love how *he* hugs me. Why only *him*? *Why him*?

The same words Wolf said to me a few days ago, when Hawk fell asleep on me while we were watching a movie, filter into my brain.

I'm so fucking screwed.

September — Eleven Months Ago

I RUN OUT OF THE TUNNEL TO THE FIELD AND CAN'T STOP A predatory smile from stretching my mouth at the roar of the crowd.

Having a home game to open the season, and to our divisional rivals no less, means every fan in the stands wants blood.

The Las Vegas Rogues beat us out of the playoffs last season and then went on to lose against the New York Kings.

I still don't know if that makes the loss sting more or less, but it is what it is.

I know damn well Adam and Mike want to win this year more than they ever have, and I don't blame them since I felt

the same the year after I won the Super Bowl, but that doesn't mean we don't want our slice of revenge too.

To my—and the crowd's—surprise, the jumbotron shows a box with not only Gab Darnell—the owner of the Las Vegas Rogues plus my best friend's aunt—and her father, Clive, but also a bunch of hockey players.

The woman went and bought a hockey franchise after her daughters flew the coop, and it seems she invited half the team to come watch her other child play.

The teams really are like her children, so I can't help the jab when I jog out to the middle of the field for the coin toss. Luke Riggs, the Las Vegas quarterback, stretches his hand out to me. I let the same predatory smile come out again.

“How's it feel that Gab brought her new favorite child to come watch you lose?”

He barks out a laugh, totally unaffected like I knew he would be. We've faced each other enough times, in the NFL and during our college years, for me to know the guy pretty well.

I like him well enough.

Off the field.

“She's a proud momma, and we don't like to let her down.”

I laugh then too. Can't help myself. It's not a friendly laugh, not my style, it's more mocking than anything.

We don't roll over them by any means, but we do win by a respectable two-score lead which means I'm agreeable to an after-game press conference.

I did intercept Riggs and ran that shit down to the end zone, so of course they wanna hear me talk. When I'm done with all that, I go out to my mandatory dinner with the Darnells where we talk about life like we're not all millionaires. After all that, I arrive home to the same sight I have all summer.

Hawk, sleeping on my living room couch.

I can't really blame him since that thing is magical—probably more comfortable than most mattresses, even if you're not exhausted and going through a tough time, which Hawk is.

“Hey,” I whisper, hoping it's enough to wake him up without me having to nudge him. “Hawk,” I say a little louder, and his eyes open wide.

“Hey, great game.” He smiles sleepily at me and sits up.

My heart squeezes like it always does when he unleashes that thing on me. No matter what he's been through, he always says the same after one of my games, even if we lose.

“Thanks.” I keep whispering for some fucking reason, as I sit a safe distance away.

“He went out, and I just ... I couldn't stay home.”

“I know. I'm glad you came over. Did he drive?” I know how tense, how enraged my voice sounds no matter how much I try to disguise it.

I don't know who or what the rage is directed towards, but I know it's not Wolf. No matter how much I wish I could hate him, I don't. I actually love him. In a totally platonic way ... which is insane because *he's* bi, and not straight like Hawk, who I very much don't have platonic feelings for.

Erosion happens slowly.

My heart is definitely like a rock—I've made sure of that—but Hawk is like water.

Shaping me to be something inviting to him, covering me until he's all I can think about.

I shake off those thoughts, there's no use for them. I should've learned this already.

Hawk is straight. Hawk is straight. Hawk is straight.

If I think the words enough times, then maybe someday I'll learn.

I don't do relationships anyway. What's the point? Only the really lucky ones get to find the perfect person, and I know

damn well I'm not one of them. Mainly because I don't want to. I don't want the temporary happiness, the dangerous hope.

No. What I want is my feet firmly planted on planet Earth and my head in the present.

Back to Wolf. I wish there was a way—a physical, tangible way—to show him how much he means to us. Then maybe he'd start to love himself just a little.

“No,” Hawk says, bringing me back to the present. “He—” he grunts and clears his throat looking down at his hands. “He asked me to hide all the car keys, but Rich is with him.” Hawk speaks softly, like he's about to break, and I know he is. He shrugs like it's no big deal though. Knowing his bodyguard is with him makes me relax—fractionally.

Looking at him, I know Hawk will put himself back together tomorrow and face the new day with a hopeful smile. Damn if there's anyone stronger than Hawk Storm.

“Lee too?” I ask. Their driver has been a godsend since he started working for them nine months ago.

“Yeah,” Hawk answers, still whispering, still vulnerable, still not looking at me.

“Good,” I grunt. “Let's eat something then.” It's close to midnight, since I played on Sunday Night Football, and I already ate, but I know Hawk probably hasn't had dinner.

When he's finally done pushing his pasta around, I lead him to the guest bedroom and give him a hug in front of the door.

Hawk loves hugs and he, along with Mike, are the only two men who I gladly and freely hug often. Mom and Gracie aren't big huggers, just like me. We Johnsons show our love in different ways. But Hawk always asks for a hug. Or at least he did, until I started giving them to him without prompting.

“It's gonna be okay,” I whisper in his ear. “You sleep, and we'll have a better day tomorrow.” I hope.

“Thank you, Dee.”

“Always, sunshine.”

I almost don't call him the nickname I chose for him, but what's the point in denying myself?

If I'm going to be single forever, then who am I hurting by pining after my best friend?

Besides me, I mean.

Fuck.

TWO

Hawk

February - Six Months Ago

WOLF HUFFS NEXT TO ME IN THE BACK OF THE BIG ASS SUV taking us away from the craziness of the stadium. I know he's annoyed with me, but I can't seem to stop fidgeting.

The high of performing in the Super Bowl hasn't worn off, and I'm betting it won't for another few hours.

The preparation for fifteen minutes of performance took months, and since it went without a hitch, I don't regret it for a second. People are always bashing halftime performances, and I don't doubt they'll find plenty of things to critique since they're specifically looking for mistakes. People always have been when it comes to Wolf and me.

All our lives we've been scrutinized for who our parents were. No matter what we do, gossip magazines and celebrity news channels are always either warning people we're too similar to our father, or critiquing us for being too whimsical like our mother was.

I don't think either of those assessments are true.

Yeah, we're almost perfect copies of our father—physically—and we have our mother's artistic nature, but we're not them.

We've never allowed reporters to question us about them, since we decided we wanted to be musicians at the oh-so-wise age of twelve and fourteen. We knew everybody wanted to

know our side of the story of *that night*, and well, that's just never going to happen.

The fact that the world of entertainment salivated at the thought of two teenage boys reliving trauma is disgusting, and it will only ever be disgusting. That we're adults now doesn't really change it to anything else in my opinion.

But tonight, I couldn't give less of a fuck about what all those haters looking for faults in our performance are thinking. Because *we just played the fucking Super Bowl Halftime Show*.

The only thing that could've made this day any better was if my best friend's team, the LA Warriors, had won. It wasn't only my psychotic obsession with the sport that made me hyperventilate when they offered us this opportunity, it was the chance that I could be there with Derek, on the same field, when he won his second Super Bowl.

Because I knew even back in September that he'd be here tonight, playing. It was supposed to be the year of the Warriors again—everyone thought so.

Alas, the Boston Sharks won, giving one of Derek's college friends, George, his first win. Which I know Derek is very happy about, despite everything. He won't ever say it, but I know he wanted his friend to win as much as he wanted to hold the Lombardi over his head again.

I also know he would've absolutely been chosen to get on that platform to hold up the shiny platinum trophy, because if LA had won, he'd have been MVP of the game. I mean, he did win Defensive Player Of The Year on Thursday, just sayin'.

He's been rooting for his friend all year long and was devastated—but also secretly kind of glad I know—to find out he'd be facing him in the Super Bowl.

He didn't say as much, Derek never does when it comes to emotional shit, but I know, I just know he's prouder today than he was three years ago when he won.

So after the endless interviews and photographs and requests for autographs, we're on our way to see Derek and all his already legendary friends.

I've heard all about the tight bond the four football players who were roommates at Cavendish have in the time I've known Derek. He's incredibly thankful to have them in his life, and I'm kind of nervous about meeting them.

They're such important people in his life, and I want them to like us.

I know George will be happy to meet us, because Dee's told us how much of a fan of ours the Thor lookalike is, but everyone else is a gamble.

Like I said, Dee's one of my best friends and I wanna keep it that way, not only because he's an awesome grumpy human, but because he's also super close to my brother.

That doesn't happen often—more like never—because Wolf and I are so different. He's the yin to my yang, the dark night to my sunshine.

But my brother is also going through a hard time. I squeeze his arm as we walk to the elevator in the underground garage of the New Orleans Certon Hotel where we're staying. He's been struggling since Mom died eight years ago, and I can't say I blame him, but I wish he'd get some help instead of losing himself at the bottom of a bottle every other weekend.

Derek's had a huge impact on our lives. It doesn't feel like it's only us against the world anymore, it feels like we have someone in our corner who has our backs. Of course we have our uncle, aunt, cousins, our manager, and even our bodyguards, but Dee's special. He loves us simply because of who we are, not *what* we are, or have. He understands Wolfie's not an asshole and I'm not a brainless little shit with just a little bit of talent.

Finding a person who likes us both equally—someone who sees and *listens* to us—is rare, and that means Dee's special.

So yeah, we gotta nail this.

Rich and Tate, our bodyguards, leave us in front of the suite Dee texted us to come to since it's ten steps away from both our suites. Bruce, our business manager, has a room one floor down.

I take a deep breath and give one last squeeze to Wolf's arm, then knock on the door. A long moment passes, and my frayed nerves tell me no one's gonna answer—even though I heard noise on the other side before I knocked.

Dee's smile and his hulking frame greet us when the door opens, and I can't help the relieved breath I let out. My smile drops, though, when he steps to the side as he opens the door to let everyone inside the suite see us.

An abrupt silence settles over the room, and I can just feel a twitch coming. I also know that if someone doesn't speak soon, Wolf's gonna lose his mind—because I'm gonna start talking a lot.

“Congrats on winning the Super Bowl, buddy,” Derek says looking back at George, and it stops me from fidgeting because he has one of those rare but magical, teeth-showing smiles on his face.

I think I've only seen it three times in three years, and it leaves me speechless.

I know you shouldn't say this, like *ever*, to *anyone*, but he should smile like that more.

“Derek,” the slender brunette guy says from his perch on the couch. That's Sebas, who I know is Adam Darnell's boyfriend thanks to Derek. “What the actual fuck are Hawk and Wolf Storm doing in my suite? Those are the rock gods that did the halftime show tonight, right? I'm not hallucinating? Anyone? Oh!” He points at me. “You were wearing Derek's jersey on stage! I thought that was only because you have good taste in players, not that you knew each other. And *oooooh*, how do you know each other? God fucking dammit, someone make me stop talking!” Everyone in the suite cracks up, and I can feel—like I always can without looking when it comes to Wolf—my brother's amusement. The already all-time-great Adam does shut him up with a loud smacking kiss.

Mike McKinnley stands, looming over everyone at six feet nine, and walks over to greet us. He stretches out his hand to me. “Hey, I'm Mike. Big fan of yours. Loved the show

tonight.” I take his hand and smile at him, a bit shyly—for me—and introduce myself.

Most people don’t expect me to, but I think it’s just basic decency. “Hawk.”

Wolf stays quiet as he shakes his hand, and obviously doesn’t give the star center of the New York Kings even a tiny smile. I know it’s because he’s nervous, and not because he’s a complete asshole.

Next to Mike, appears a tall man who I recognize from the pictures of him crying in a hospital waiting room that were all over the news a while ago.

He must be the infamous Theo Crawford, the son of a billionaire who’s never been in the limelight. A rarity, that’s for sure. You can feel the love between them. It’s pretty intense when they look into each other’s eyes.

Everyone introduces themselves to us, and once we’re done, and before another awkward silence can start, Derek pipes up.

“Now, c’mon,” he says, walking back to the living room of the suite. “You guys took so long getting here that there are no seats left. You’ll have to stand or sit on the floor, but I’ll grab you some beers.”

His friends all have faces with varying degrees of confusion, but we do as he says. George, the new Super Bowl champ, has flaming red cheeks as he looks at us and stutters out his admiration. We take it with a practiced smile, and even Wolf tells him he’s a fan, too. The guy about passes out, but his boyfriend, Glenn, the buff looking nerd, holds him up.

Wolf gives Dee some shit when the conversation dials down. “Well, there were about a million reporters asking us questions, Deedee.”

“*Deedee?*” I see Mike mouth to Adam, who’s the only one not staring at us like we’re aliens.

He shrugs at his center and voices the question. “Deedee?” he asks, and even without having met him before, I know he’s about to burst out laughing.

Derek scowls at Adam with his patented “shut up before you get your face caved in” look, but it doesn’t seem to faze him in the least.

“You can’t fucking call me that. Only Wolf can, because I lost a bet.” He points a finger at Adam, then Mike. They raise their palms in defense.

“I didn’t say anything,” Mike says with a shit-eating grin.

“Out loud.” Derek’s scowl loses some of its power, and that does the giant in. He lets out the most contagious belly laugh I’ve ever heard in my life. It makes the edges of my mouth tip up slightly even while I’m still feeling the nerves. “I’m never calling you anything other than Deedee for the rest of my life.”

“You little ... ” Derek stalks towards Mike, apparently forgetting he was supposed to get us beers. He looks just as determined as he did on the field a few hours ago, but I’m really not sure what he can do against Mike. I mean the dude is half a foot taller than Derek and at least eighty pounds heavier, but before we can find out, Mike’s boyfriend steps in front of him.

“Uh-uh.” He shakes his head with a lot more attitude than he had a few minutes ago. “You’re not going near him with that look in your eyes. He’s still recovering. Go get those beers and cool off.”

Mike looks astonished at his boyfriend’s actions. It makes me want to snicker but I hold it in. Still not sure how to act to make these people like me.

“Damn, Theo’s got claws, *meow*.” Sebas defuses the tension in the room. Well, not tension really, but I guess Theo acted out of character because everyone still looks surprised.

Theo whirls on him. “I’d normally have no problem letting Derek put his life in Mike’s hands, but not while he’s still not at one hundred percent.” He tilts his chin up, and the indignant look finally breaks my resolve. Mike had a really scary injury on the field about a month ago, and the whole world saw him cough up blood and start to turn blue before the cameras

stopped showing the scene. So I understand why Theo's so protective of him.

I can't stop the snicker anymore when I watch Mike hug Theo from behind and, not quietly at all, murmur, "Wanna get out of here?"

"Really?" Theo asks incredulously.

"Yeah, that was hot as fuck, Teddy."

"Awww you call him Teddy?" George interrupts. I'm glad his face is losing some of the redness from before, otherwise I'd be worried for his health. If he really is as much of a fan as Dee's told us he is, his heart may have been in trouble when he saw us. It's been an eventful night for him.

"Oh my GOD!" Sebas screeches. "You guys! You're Teddy Bear." He points at Theo then at Mike. "Get it? Teddy and Bear! That's totally your ship name, I'm calling it right now."

"That's a *terrible* ship name, Sebas, but I'll allow it because Mike's being an asshole, *aaaand* you can't leave yet, we haven't hung out enough, and I still have to get to know your new bodyguard better," Derek says as he finally gives us our beers.

"Only I can call him Teddy, got it? And you bet your ass he guards my body." Mike stares seriously at Derek, and I see my friend give an almost imperceptible nod back, before Mike turns and leers at Theo who's still snug in his arms. Theo lets out a laugh and turns back around to look at Derek.

The look reminds me of how my Aunt's husband looks at my Uncle Hulk. There's appreciation, respect, and gratitude in it. Like they understand the love they have for Mike despite it being different.

Like Theo knows how much Mike means to Derek, just like I do. They were friends with benefits for a year in college, and then just ... stopped hooking up. They knew they weren't right for each other, and Derek knew Mike wanted the real deal—which he's now found in Theo—but they're still best

friends. They're still as close as ever. Just like Aunt Lyla and Uncle Hulk.

Something about the way Mike stares down at Theo grabs my attention and doesn't release it for a long moment. They look like they've been together for years, and not months like Derek told me they have.

I wonder—not for the first time—if I'll ever find a girl who accepts me just as I am and loves me because of it. And I wonder if maybe, someday, someone will see me holding her in my arms and wish for the same.

My gaze goes to Derek, and when his eyes meet mine, my heart starts beating faster. What's that about?

I take a pull from my beer, and when the liquid hits my tongue my eyes automatically drift to Wolf. The worry creeps in when I see he's already chugging his damn beer. I feel my body tense and I open my mouth to say something, but Mike's voice stops me from making that mistake.

I've tried before, and I know it won't work. *One day at a time.* I remind myself.

"C'mon," Mike gestures to us. "I'll sit on the floor with you guys, and you can tell me the unfortunate story of how you met that asshole."

Mike does just that, settling between Theo's legs, and listening intently and with an incredibly sweet smile as we tell the story of the night we met Dee.

By the time I finish, I'm already way more relaxed around everyone. They're Dee's oldest, best friends, since he lost contact with his high school buddies. Of course they're all gonna be awesome, kind people.

Their dynamic is special. There's so much trust between them. They tease each other—a *lot*—but always with a smile and a hidden compliment.

George even warms up to us and can speak normally by the end of the night, which makes me mentally sigh with relief. It's always so awkward when people view you as otherworldly only to find out you are, in fact, human.

All I can think about, as I look at the group of men around the room, is I'm glad Dee's got them. I'm glad they're such good friends to him.



DEREK AND I HOLD MY BROTHER UP, EACH TAKING ONE OF HIS arms around our shoulders as I unlock the door to our suite. Now I wish I had woken Tate up to come and give us a hand, because my brother being a sack of potatoes isn't fun at all.

This isn't the first time we've had to take care of him while he's drunk out of his mind. I've accepted it won't be the last. Hell, it's not even March yet and this isn't even the first time this year.

At least Wolf's not a mean drunk. Small, very small, silver lining. That's one thing he always uses when I try to talk to him about drinking so much. He says he doesn't have a problem because he doesn't hurt anyone else.

I'm very aware that all my brother wants to do is forget. At least consciously he drinks because of that, I'm not a hundred percent sure about his unconscious reasons. My guess is he wants to punish himself—God knows for what.

But I'm not a psychologist, so what the fuck do I know?

We drag Wolf to his bedroom and dump him on the bed. We make sure he's more face down than face up and leave the door open on our way out.

I've learned that doing something as simple as putting a trash can close to him is only another enabling act, just like taking his shoes off or leaving some painkillers and a glass of water next to his bed.

I won't do shit to help him feel better after he's made himself feel so bad.

“Did the Warriors stay in the Certon, too?” I ask Derek, as I get a water bottle for myself from the fridge in the bar of the suite. I offer one to him and he nods, so I get another one out.

“No,” he answers while I grab it.

“You can stay here then. It’s late, and you shouldn’t be out and about at this time of night.” I can’t help but offer. I’ve been feeling more and more needy when it comes to Derek in the last few months, and Wolf and I are leaving for almost six months the day after tomorrow. The next leg of our tour is in Asia, then Australia, then Europe. In August we’ll finally come back home.

Derek’s not coming with us, of course. He’s going home to spend some time with his mom, Mia, and Gracie, his sister, then getting right back to training.

The man hardly ever takes a day off.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “That couch looks okay,” he says. It does look comfortable, but I wouldn’t know, since we’ve hardly spent time here in the last week because of last minute rehearsals and endless press conferences.

It’s not nearly as long as Derek needs though. “Don’t be ridiculous, you can sleep in my bed, otherwise you’ll have to twist into a pretzel to sleep on that thing.” I gesture at the short couch.

Derek stares at me for a long minute. I know how red my cheeks are getting by the heat I feel on them, but I can’t seem to look away from his penetrating gaze.

“Okay,” he murmurs. “Thank you, sunshine.”

I only nod. There’s no use in finding out how my voice would sound with the baseball-sized knot in my throat. *What the hell is that about?*

“You can use the bathroom first,” I tell him when we enter my bedroom. I walk to the bed and take off my watch, my rings, place my wallet and phone on the nightstand, and take off all my clothes, except for my boxers.

I stand, nervous as fuck for some reason, when the bathroom door opens and Derek’s silhouette appears, backlit by the bright light. I can barely see his face since the bedroom lights are off, only my nightstand light helping me make out his relaxed expression.

“Derek,” I croak. He looks worried as he walks to me. The platform of the bed makes me as tall as him, which is a new experience. “I—” I start to speak but he hugs me.

Derek’s hugs are the best.

How did he know that’s exactly what I needed when I didn’t know?

I tuck my face against his neck and breathe deeply. I thank whatever higher power exists that brought him into our lives that night almost three years ago. Because even though Wolf’s drinking problem had started before, it only became truly too much for me to handle after Derek became our best friend.

Now, I know a lot more about addiction and codependency. I know it’s not my job to take care of Wolf, and having Derek close helps me breathe easier most days.

I lean back to look at Derek. I want to look him in the eyes when I thank him for all he’s done to support us. But my breath catches when I realize how close I am to him—to his lips—my body pressed to his, from chest to knees, and the tight skin of his back warms against my palms.

I ... move.

His lips part in surprise a second after I kiss him, and my fingers curl against his skin with the same instinct that has me thrusting my tongue into his mouth and stroking his.

My brain shuts off and all I can do is feel.

Feel a groan build in his throat and reverberate against my mouth. I feel his hands move lower on my back. I feel his—yes, that’s his erection—harden against my hip.

I startle so much when I realize my dick is also hard that I break the kiss.

“Hawk,” Derek rasps in a warning tone, but his eyes look dazed, the edges of his lips tipped up, and I don’t want to hear any warnings. All I want is more of whatever that was. I haven’t had enough.

I go back in and kiss him harder, needing to feel the absolute *rightness*, the freedom, the elation Derek’s kiss brings

me.

I can't stop, I don't ever want to stop, but he's the one who pulls back then. "Hawk," he repeats. I go for his throat then, biting, licking, savoring, worshiping every inch while my hands explore the rest of his body.

"Hawk," he says again, with more force on the word.

"Please, Dee," I can't help but beg. "It's okay, it doesn't have to mean anything." *Maybe he's worried this will affect our friendship?* "It'll be fine, just once, please. I need this." I'm not sure what the fuck I'm saying, all I know is, this can't end. Not right now, not after those kisses.

But Derek takes three steps back and I almost fall off the platform. I regain my balance just in time to see his stunned, hurt expression. I've never seen it before. I didn't even know he could get hurt.

"What?" I ask, needing to fix it. I'll do anything, say anything to get him to come back to me, to press against me.

"You're such an asshole," he whispers. "It does mean something! I didn't think you'd ever be so heartless."

He freezes me on the spot with those words. *Heartless?* What does he mean? I need him, I thought he felt the rightness as much as me.

Next thing I know, Derek's rushing out of the room, his clothes bundled in his hands.

I unfreeze then. I can't let him leave me like this. I have to make this right.

But when I come skidding into the sitting room of the suite, where the main door is, he's gone.

What have I done?

Three Weeks Later

"FUCK, BIRDIE, DID YOU REALLY NEED TO MAKE ME FEEL EVEN worse?" Wolf groans when I lower his head onto my lap. The same head I pulled up, to sit at the end of the couch in the

plane we chartered for the whole tour. We're flying from Australia to Europe—no idea which country.

“That wasn't my intention, Wolfie, but since Dee won't speak to me, you're all I've got for now. I can either talk to you when you're hungover or when you're drunk since there's no in-between with you, so I'm choosing hungover.”

“Yeah, that's fair.” He closes his eyes as I start to comb my fingers through his hair. “All right, what'cha wanna talk about?”

“I think I'm bi?” I say, like a question.

“Mmhm,” he hums.

“That's all you've got to say?” I demand.

“Birdie, you kissed our best friend less than a month ago and have been going insane over it ever since.”

“It's not like you've been mister cool, calm, and collected.”

“Because I'm fucking scared that we're gonna lose him.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I'm scared too.”

“But we're gonna fix it. Since he doesn't want to talk right now, we'll fix it as soon as we get back home.” I can't agree with him. I have no idea if I'm capable of actually fixing it. “Now tell me what you've been thinking about that has you so quiet.”

I try to sort out my thoughts for a moment, but as usual, that's impossible, so I just speak them out loud. Wolf can make sense of them.

“I've been thinking about it since I kissed Derek. Looking back, you know? Trying to think of another guy I was attracted to. Because if I'm bi now, I've always been bi, right? But sexuality is fluid ... so it was always a possibility but it's ... solidified now? Is that how it works? I don't know *anything* Wolfie, and I don't want to fuck up even more with Dee when we get home. I don't know what I feel, I don't even know if I'm attracted to Dee the way I've been attracted to women before. I don't know if I've ever thought of kissing another

man. All I know is, I do wanna kiss Derek again. I want to make him smile, and he smiled after the first kiss. I'm sure of that."

"Okay, let's go one step at a time. Why do you want to know if you've always been bi?"

He asks the question with so much fucking rationality in his voice it makes me grit my teeth. I want emotion, not logical thinking. But this is what I get when I talk to my brother.

"Just to know!" I snap at him.

"But how's that going to help with what you're dealing with now? Do you have any objections to being bi?"

"Of course I fucking don't," I shout down at him.

"Good. You shouldn't. Being bi is fucking awesome, and maybe you've always been bi, who knows? Who the fuck cares? The important thing right now is that you kissed Derek. Was it because he was the only one around, or because he's Derek? That's what you gotta ask yourself."

I think about it for a few minutes. "Definitely because he's Derek. He's just so ..." I sigh dreamily.

"Yeah, I figured. I've seen you taken with a few women before. You've had your crushes, but you've never looked so gone for someone as you do right now." What is there to say to that? He goes on before I can figure it out. "Now the question is, do you think putting our friendship with him in jeopardy is worth taking a shot at it?"

That ... I don't know.

THREE

Derek

August — Present Day

“WAKE UP, YOU ANIMALS.” CLIVE’S SHARP, BOOMING VOICE has me bolting up from the couch where I was happily dreaming of Hawk bouncing—

Nope.

Not gonna go there today.

Just ... no.

“The fuck?” George grunts from the other side of the coffee table where he fell asleep on the rug.

“That’s exactly what I’m asking myself. What did you do to my damn living room?” Clive demands, hands on hips, and his face set in an attempt at a frown. His twitching lips make it way less intimidating, though.

“Sorry,” Adam mumbles while he rolls over to his back right next to the wingback chair. “We’ll clean it all up.” There are plates and glasses everywhere, the controllers of the gaming console on the floor, towels from our time in the pool and our T-shirts on the back of the dining room chairs, as well as the plastic bags of all the chips we’d consumed.

It really is a mess.

Mike groans from the opposite side of the couch. The poor dude squished himself into the corner and will probably have a sore back for a week.

“Damn right you will, but the buzzer just sounded, and the Freesh team with the photographers and everything just arrived, so you better hustle.”

That has us all shooting panicked looks at each other. We sprint to our rooms—thank God Clive has so many guest bedrooms—and I save time by shrugging my clothes off and turning the shower on at the same time.

Dammit, we stayed way too late, playing, shit-talking, and catching up.

Last time we saw each other was at Sebas and Adam’s wedding back in May, and since they went on their honeymoon to Italy right after and got back in time for OTAs and summer camp, our photo shoot for the latest campaign of Freesh is the perfect excuse to get together before the season starts.

This off-season has been ... different.

To say the fucking least.

My three best friends have found the men of their dreams and have made all their other dreams come true as well, even the ones they didn’t know they had.

We’ve all won one Super Bowl, we play in the NFL, and are recognized as some of the best in our positions.

I’ve never dreamed of having a “man of my dreams”. I’ve known for a long time that it’s not something I would ever want for myself.

Because I’ve seen the aftermath of when it goes to shit.

In any case, this off-season I ... moped.

Despite what happened after the Super Bowl, I still consider Hawk and Wolf my best friends too, but it stings that Wolf hasn’t reached out to me. Though I guess he’s always going to be on his brother’s side. Which is fine of course, except when his little brother’s the one who fucked up royally.

I was fine not doing anything about my little crush. For more than three years I’ve been able to squash the need to kiss Hawk senseless, and he threw it all away in a second.

Then he broke my fucking heart.

I'm well aware he didn't mean to. I know that. He couldn't have meant to, it's just not who he is.

Hawk's adorably clueless about my crush, or at least he was, but I know damn well Wolf had a talk with him in the days leading up to the Super Bowl. Wolf told him he better not break my heart or hurt my feelings, and that he had to respect me enough to not stop being my friend.

I know all that because the asshole actually recorded the fucking conversation and sent it to me.

So then, for Hawk to kiss me days later, drive me fucking insane, then tell me it could mean *nothing*?

Yeah, that was out of line, and it was something I couldn't get over. So I got the hell out and gave myself some time to cool off. By the time that happened, I was angry again because the two idiots hadn't bothered to text or even call. When Hawk finally did, I knew there was no way I was hashing it out with him—or with Wolf, the asshole—over text or even a phone call.

No, I decided to make them squirm all the way to hell, and demanded he call me when they were back in LA.

So yeah . . . I moped.

I went to Portland after I was done dealing with end-of-season stuff, and moped there. I gave my best shot—not good at all—at convincing Mom and Gracie to move to LA with me, *again*. And they said no, *again*. Their whole lives are there, they said. We can't just uproot and follow you around, and blah, blah, blah.

I quit while I was ahead, accepting it's still not time, then I pulled myself together enough to spend three weeks with these guys for the production that was Sebas and Adam's wedding. After, I came back here . . . and moped some more.

Eventually, I got my ass up and started getting in shape again in time for summer camp.

Now I'm finally ready for game day. Not that I'll be playing next week when preseason starts.

The Warriors, and our head coach, Johnathan Rodriguez, are notorious for literally not giving a fuck about preseason games. We've lost every single one for fifteen years because we always treat it like practice.

It's actually pretty fun, which is why I hate that I only played in my rookie season. I've been benched for those games ever since. Still, our defensive coordinator, Keeshan Savage, has been letting me call the plays on defense for those games the past two seasons, so I have a good enough time as well. The sidelines are a party during preseason games, unlike the rest of the year, where we're pushed every game like it's the Super Bowl.

I step out of the shower, and put on some briefs and one of the new lightweight shorts the people from Freesh sent me a few months ago.

They're gonna have us changing a million times today anyway, and they'll style my hair and try to paint my body with some disgusting glittery stuff I hate—it's fucking hard to wash off too. So there's no point in putting in any more effort.

The four of us have been through this song and dance four years in a row. It's a well-oiled machine by now.

I walk out onto the quiet patio, just in time to see some people walking down the small hill that's Clive's backyard and to the beach. They're all carrying hard suitcases, backpacks, and who knows what else. From experience, I know there are lighting tools, makeup, clothes, and a bunch of cameras in those cases.

I think there are about seven people, and I guess they respected Clive's wishes not to turn his backyard into a circus.

Normally there'd be at least double the amount of people, but when Sebas and Adam finalized the plans for their wedding and honeymoon, Hugh, our agent, arranged for the shoot to happen later in the year than normal.

We've been to all kinds of places over the years, and even went to Mexico last off-season. Somewhere in the Yucatán peninsula, I can't remember the name of the place, but it was isolated as fuck and one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.

So, Hugh talked to Clive and asked if the photoshoot could happen here, since his beach is in a part of Malibu that's still underdeveloped thanks to all his neighbors having bought their land around the same time as Clive—about fifty years ago.

The location is exactly what the people over at Freesh always want—beach, without people around, and killer views. It's all worked out perfectly, for me to have a few days with my friends before we're all too busy with the NFL.

George and Mike step out onto the patio, both with their hair still wet and with coffee cups in their hands. The saints bring me one as well.

I see Mike tug nervously at his T-shirt, and my blood instantly boils with rage. I know very well Mike's not ashamed of his body, he's actually quite proud of all the muscle and weight he can maintain throughout the season, but some assholes commented on it the last time the ads came out, and I know it's affected him.

I fucking hate that my ray-of-sunshine best friend read those comments, and especially that he still remembers them.

So I do what I think will work best in this situation.

“Take off your fucking shirt, Mike,” I say in a hard tone. My only way of speaking, normally, but I always tamp it down with Mike—and with Hawk—but not today.

Today he needs to hear me loud and clear and know I'm not fucking around.

He looks down at me, startled. I stare into his eyes, unflinching.

“What?” he whispers.

“I said take it off. It's a hundred fucking degrees and will probably get hotter. You're only going to leave pit stains on it,

so take it off, and if anyone says one fucking word to you about it, I'll introduce them to my fists.”

Mike's tender smile appears. “Awwww. You loooove meeee.” He teases me exaggeratedly and proceeds to give me one of the bear hugs he's famous for.

“Of course I love you, you asshole,” I mumble against his shoulder. At six feet four, I'm the only one who reaches his shoulders, and even though George and Adam are only an inch shorter, it's something I won't ever stop holding over their heads.

I step back and stare at him until he does as I said and takes off his shirt.

Adam steps out just in time to see him throw the shirt on one of the loungers.

I wonder where Clive is hiding? We threatened him yesterday afternoon, suggesting he model for the sportswear company as well, and I've never seen a whiter man in my life.

He's probably hiding in his office. I smirk as I take the last sip in my cup.

I turn to tell Adam—see if we can stir up some more trouble with his grandfather—when I see a figure appear from the side of the house.

I go on alert immediately, my whole body tensing, since this person isn't wearing what the others are and doesn't have any bags with him, but I relax when I recognize the man.

What the hell is he doing here?

“Hey.” He waves awkwardly at us when he sees us.

“What's up, Jules?” I ask, as I walk down the steps to the bit of lawn next to the pool, where I meet him and give him a quick greeting handshake. Jules greets the rest of the guys as well.

“You were roped into doing this too?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Jules looks as uncomfortable as I did the first time we did a campaign.

“You’ll get through it,” I say, and pat him on the back.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Adam says. I look at him, confused, and see he’s talking to Jules. “My aunt told me you just became a father again.”

Gab Darnell just so happens to own the hockey team Jules plays for, so she’d know.

The smile that takes over Jules’ face has something inside me twisting painfully. He looks so fucking happy.

“Yeah, we had a son. Adam Michel Sterling,” he says, with the smile intact.

“I like that name.” Adam smirks and bounces on his toes a little.

Jules shifts in his feet. “I—we actually named him after you.” I freeze at his words. My mouth hangs open as I look at the hockey star who should never look unsure or insecure, and still, he does.

“You changed a lot of lives the day you stood on that podium and told the world your truth. One of those lives was mine.” He shrugs as if this isn’t shocking information, but we all still gape at him. “Also, since all the parent’s names start with a J, and we already have little Ava, we thought we’d name all our babies something with an A, and I thought of you. So, yeah ... ”

Mike is the first to react, shoving me out of the way and enveloping Jules in a bear hug. Jules takes the brunt of the force and awkwardly pats him on the back. After a long, silent moment from everyone, he steps back and wipes his eyes.

“I’ve been trying to explain to the world that he’s a much better man than he is a football player.” He gestures at Adam. “But nobody believes me.”

He breaks the tension with his long-suffering sigh and has us chuckling. Adam snaps out of his daze at the sound. He reaches back to rub his neck like he does every single time he’s uncomfortable.

“Uhh, thanks?” He looks at Jules then quickly away.

Lord, are there two more humble, legendary athletes? I look up to the sky as if asking for answers, and patience.

Jules laughs, more relaxed now, and he slaps Adam's left shoulder.

"No, thank you, Adam." Then he turns to me. "Now, I know you won't mince your words. Tell me what to expect from today."

I don't like being ordered to do anything, but since I'm feeling generous, I lead him down to the beach as I explain—in excruciating detail—the torture that awaits us.

FOUR

Hawk

GOING SIX MONTHS WITHOUT TALKING TO OUR BEST FRIEND has been hard for both of us, I know that, but in truth, I haven't been up to focusing on my brother. That's a bit harsh, I'm aware, but working on taking care of myself first has been necessary, and I finally managed it after years of Al-Anon meetings for family members of addicts and therapy sessions. It's been hard enough to keep up with both those things while on different timelines. It's been hard keeping myself in check while feeling like I fucked up my whole life. And Wolf's. All of it has been *hard*.

Losing Derek because of such a simple oversight would be devastating. It's that thought that's kept me up at night, and made me pass out for more than fifteen hours every three days. Of course, I've noticed that Wolf's been coping by drinking himself stupid. It would be pretty hard *not* to notice when I'm living with him.

Rich and Tate probably saved our lives this year, by not letting us starve instead of by not letting any of our stalkers kill us. Their job has only gotten harder, and I feel for them. I have to ask Cindy if maybe we should get two more guys so they can have more breaks. Especially Rich, who's assigned to Wolf. The poor dude has worked harder than he did when he was a Navy SEAL, I imagine.

And with me checking out on Wolf—at least emotionally—it's only gotten worse. We *have* to make things right with

Dee. I'm pretty sure Wolfie hasn't talked to him either and I don't know why. If he'd only explained how everything happened—which, yeah, would piss Dee off royally—over text, then maybe everything would be fine by now.

I have a plan, though. One I started working on a couple of months ago, when I happened to be counting days on the calendar to figure out exactly how many more hours were left until I could see and talk to Dee again. A date caught my eye, and that's when my grand groveling plan began to take shape.

I'll put it all into motion tomorrow morning, when I go to Derek's house to try and apologize correctly. I've rehearsed it a million more times than our set and Wolfie's helped me, of course, since this whole mess is more than half his fault.

He may not show it, but I know he feels like shit for not making sure I heard him correctly. I have ADHD, and my brother—despite knowing this—didn't make sure I wasn't hyper fixated on something else when he talked to me about Derek's crush on me.

There's no way of knowing if the crush still exists. Not after the way Derek looked at me when I said the worst possible thing. I also haven't figured out exactly what to do about how I feel. From the moment we touched down in Europe, I've thought of little else besides what I want from Derek—with Derek.

I know I'm attracted to him—if all the times I came from thinking about him in the shower while I jacked off are anything to go by—and I know I love him as my best friend. But can that love grow or transform into real love? And if it can, if it already has, am I going to risk everything to do something about it?

Wolf says no.

Maybe I would already know what the fuck I'm supposed to do with all these *feelings*.

I did a lot of research whenever I had time on tour—hyper focusing on something can be good sometimes—and I found out a lot about sexuality. Things I probably should've

researched after my brother came out to me by grinding against a dude in some club a decade ago. While I learned all the technicalities, the internet can't tell you if you're bi, pan, demi, or whatever, you have to figure that out on your own.

So I did a lot of thinking. Spent less time talking these last few months than in all my life. Freaked Wolf out a lot by being so quiet. But when I explained what I was thinking about, he gave me one of his rare, caring expressions and simply nodded.

I know I'm not demi, because I've gotten horny over lots of women who I've never met before. I know I am bi, because I haven't been able to stop thinking about Dee's lips since I kissed him.

The thing that stumped me for the longest time was that Derek is the only man I've ever wanted to kiss. So, maybe I'm bi and demiromantic? But I have a bigger tendency to feel attraction toward women, like Wolf has toward men. It just so happens, I found the one man who is the perfect horny bomb for my libido, and who I already have a strong emotional connection to, so...yeah. Like a needle in a haystack, it seems to me.

There's also the possibility that my subconscious heard Wolfie's warning even when I didn't, and that was the trigger. That would mean I'm reciprosexual, and only started having thoughts about kissing Dee after Wolf told me—even if I didn't *hear*—that Derek had a crush on me.

It's all so fucking complicated, and I'm so sick of trying to figure it out. I just want to move on from this and get back to the way things were before. I have no idea if that's possible.

I'm going to see my therapist tomorrow morning and ask what she thinks should be my next step. I've talked about this with her, of course. We've had bi-weekly meetings for almost four years now—I'm pretty much funding her retirement—so she's seen me through meeting Derek, having this hope that me and Wolf found our person, watching Wolf spiral, Derek helping and supporting me, me kissing Dee... she's been with me for all of it.

Whatever. I'll figure it out tomorrow. I have to, because Derek's one of the most—if not *the* most—important people in our lives.

I jump out of my seat, and hear Wolfie's sigh when the door opens and Sterling, Tristan, Bruce, and Cindy come into the private room at the fancy restaurant Tristan insisted we meet at.

"Cindy!" I exclaim, as I run to her with my arms open and ready for one of her awesome hugs.

"You saw me yesterday, sweetheart." But she coos when I hug her anyway. It's true, she came to the house yesterday when we got in from Europe, from the last leg of the tour that would never end. She takes her job as our manager *very* seriously.

"But I didn't hug you enough," I mumble against her shoulder, where I dropped my head.

I was barely conscious by the time we got home, and she only made sure we ate a big dinner before going back home for the night. That was at ten p.m. and I only woke up at four in the afternoon today, just in time to take a long shower and choose what to wear for dinner tonight. The alarm Cindy had set on my phone is the only reason I remembered we had this planned in the first place. When it blared, I raced into Wolfie's room to wake him so he'd get ready too. Alarms are my best friend, I have them for everything, to take my meds, for appointments, reminders to tell someone something, everything, and anything. It makes me function better and helps me feel like I'm reaching my goals and not wasting my time or anyone else's.

Touring is exhausting, and doing it for so many months without any real break even more so, but the unresolved issue with Derek is what's really kept me from resting. When I'm not rested, I'm not very efficient and that makes me spiral into negative thoughts and self-hatred. So, resting before I see Dee is very important. I want to be at my best when I apologize and explain.

I say hi to Tristan, our PR manager, Bruce, our business manager, and Sterling, one of the world's most famous rockstars and our mentor.

“Where’s Zoe?” I ask Tristan about his twin sister.

“She couldn’t fly over, since she’s dealing with a client who’s finalizing a contract with Lyval Beauty.” Tristan squeezes my arm before he goes around the table to give Wolf a slap on the back as well.

“Is aunt Lyla not going to use herself for marketing anymore?” I ask, confused.

My aunt is the most prolific model of all time, and has been called the most beautiful woman in the world for decades. The state of her face at fifty should be enough of an incentive for people to buy her products, that’s why I’m confused. She’s always said you shouldn’t tell anyone to do anything you’re not willing to do yourself, and that’s why she advertises her products herself. People don’t believe her when she says she hasn’t had any cosmetic surgery on her face. On her body, sure, but not on her face.

“She is,” Tristan assures me once we’re all sitting down. “But she told me she wanted some young people for her new line as well, to appeal to the younger crowd if you will.”

“Ah,” I nod. “That makes sense, I suppose.”

Her brand has been mostly targeted toward women over thirty-five because that’s the age she was when she started it, but I think it’s smart of her to try and broaden her audience. We try to do the same with every record we put out. Staying true to our country-rock roots, but always adding a hint of other genres.

Mom used to say, variety is the spice of life. Though I now know she didn’t mean it in the sense that other people do ... *Not that Dad believed her.*

Anywaaaaay, I shake off those thoughts. No room for them here and now. I’m going to enjoy having dinner with some of my favorite people, and stop thinking so damn much. I’ve missed them.

I throw an arm over Sterling's shoulder, thankful that he's sitting next to me, otherwise the move would've been awkward. "So how's little Adam?" I can't help my dopey grin, and even see Wolf's lips tip up in a barely-there smile.

Sterling immediately pulls his phone out and shows everyone pictures of him this morning. His son looks cute as hell—like always—in the adorable giraffe pajamas we sent him from ... somewhere. I can't remember what country we were in at the start of July, when Adam Michel was born.

Cindy hogs the phone, swiping through the pictures in Adam's folder—Sterling's smart like that—for an eternity. When she finally passes it over, we've all placed orders for dinner.

We talk about life rather than business, which is nice, because these people are more like family than business acquaintances. But Tristan kinda spoils it by placing his hand on Wolf's arm, and looking concerned, he asks, "How've you been?"

A hush falls over the room. Like we suddenly lost all our oxygen. I look down at my empty plate and bite my tongue to keep from saying anything—positive or negative—it'll help in no way, shape, or form.

If I say he's been doing good, like I wish I *could*, it'd be a lie, and I never lie to Tristan. If I say he's been worse, it'd be interfering, and that's not good for me or for Wolfie. He has to be the one to tell the truth, or not, and I just have to accept it.

I take a deep, deep breath, bracing myself for the disa—

"Still on that downward spiral, I'm afraid." Wolf shrugs in a way that's as careless as his words sound, when I know, I just fucking know, he cares very much.

"When you decide you want our help, we'll be here," Tristan answers simply. I look up at him, admiration and honest incredulousness in my gaze, I'm sure.

How can he do that? Has he loved someone with an addiction problem too, and learned how to cope with

codependency? Or is he simply well versed in how to deal with them?

I suppose being PR manager to the stars would give you some experience. That's probably all.

For fuck's sake, I had to tattoo "live and let live" on my forearm to remember. To keep myself in check, and not fall off my own wagon every fucking hour.

Wolfie cried when he saw it. I hated myself for feeling righteous indignation when I saw tears filling his eyes.

"I will," Wolf assures him, though I doubt it's true since my brother has needed help for a very long time and hasn't asked. He should've done it eight years ago when Mom died, or four years ago, when an unstable movie star decided she'd ruin his life by blaming him for her suicide. That ... no, I won't insult her, she had her own demons.

That whole situation was the only time when Tristan was wrong. In my experience at least. He believed the woman and Wolfie spending time together would be good for them. Instead, she fell in love with him, but he didn't fall in love with her, and she decided to let her addiction take her from this world.

She was unstable beforehand—to say the fucking least—had a turbulent past and a lot of bad decisions behind her. Simply put, they should've never been allowed to be friends, let alone fuck buddies.

But her representatives didn't let Tristan know just how bad she was doing—on purpose I'm sure, since they were doing shit-all to help her—so Tristan honestly believed he was doing a good thing for Wolf.

He was giving him—and by extension me—positive exposure.

It all went to hell after that.

Like Wolf said, a downward spiral.

I realize I've spaced out again when everyone looks at me expectantly. They all probably know I was in my head. I feel

my cheeks burn with humiliation.

They think I'm stupid and can't handle the tough things in life. They think I don't care about Wolfie, they—

Stop the negative thoughts from getting traction. I hear my therapist's voice in my head. *They're all lies.*

I look around to check. Everyone has smiles on their faces—genuine ones—as they wait for me to say something. *They're all lies*, I think with indescribable relief.

“Sorry, I spaced out,” I say with a wince.

“No problem, Hawk,” Bruce tells me. “I was just saying that the numbers from the tour look great, and that there's no rush for the next album or tour. You should take some time away from everything, maybe go up to the house in Carmel-by-the-sea.”

“I think we should figure out how to give Rich and Tate a vacation.” Wolf's comment stops me short.

“That's a good idea, and yeah, absolutely we should. Poor guys, we should also probably get more bodyguards, so they're not run ragged.”

“I'll talk to them about vacations, and accommodations for when that happens. If you guys stay in LA, it'll be harder though.” Bruce does that thing with his eyebrow that makes me feel like a little kid again, lifting just the left one. I've never been able to do it, no matter how hard I try. “You two need some rest.” The stern voice makes me grimace.

“We do,” Wolf agrees, surprising me. He never wants to go to Mom's house in Carmel.

“Then leave it all to me.”

That's what we've been doing for more than fifteen years. When we decided we wanted to be musicians, Mom told us it was only going to happen if Bruce was our business manager, if she was with us all the time, and if we both graduated high school while doing it. The man is very close to being like family to us, and has made sure we're protected, just like he did with Mom.

We catch up a while longer, but soon enough the bill is paid and we're saying our goodbyes.

"Give a big hug to Jules, Jamie, Ava, and Adam from me please," I tell Sterling after our hug. He nods happily and goes to give Wolf his customary bro-hug.

I see Wolf whisper something in his ear, and Sterling looks confused, but before I can investigate, Cindy intercepts me.

"Now, you two better sleep a lot this whole week, okay sweetie?" I nod like the good little soldier under her command that I am.

"I will," I tell her, as I once more go all in for one of her precious hugs. It's totally a mom hug, and I don't get nearly enough of those, since Aunt Lyla moved to New York after she remarried. Our youngest cousin, Alexei went with her, but her oldest son, Ivan is still near, in Vegas, and one of Sterling's husband's teammates actually. Uncle Hulk is still here too, of course, and I see him whenever our schedules allow.

That reminds me. "Hey Sterling," I call out. "Tell Ivan he's a dumbass, okay?" Sterling once more looks confused, until he remembers. Then he laughs. "You mean Eagle. Hah, I'll tell him while I'm hiding behind Jules ... and Bear."

"Chicken," I taunt with a smirk.

"Have you seen your cousin lately? He's a beast of a man. I'm not insulting him without some protection in front of me."

"I haven't, actually, but maybe we'll go visit since we're on our break, and go bother him."

"That sounds like a good time." Wolfie's drawl makes me tense. I hate that it does, but then again, I'm not supposed to move my life around his addiction. I'm supposed to focus on what I need and only offer my opinion when asked.

What bullshit.

"Yeah," I croak out, and clear my throat, then try to smile as naturally as possible.

FIVE

Derek

WE SPEND TWELVE HOURS DOWN AT THE BEACH UNDER THE scorching August sun. They don't need to keep putting that glittery shit on our chests since we're all shining with sweat.

The photographer and everyone else helping bring this thing to life are suffering just as much, I think, so I try not to glower at them too much.

Still, every time we take a five-minute break to drink some water, George tells me to stop looking at everyone with murder in my eyes.

I try, I do my very fucking best, but there's only so much I can change my face.

No one utters a word to Mike, thank God, Clive is absent the whole day, of course he is, and we all snicker when we think of him hiding from the big bad camera.

We discuss football and hockey on our breaks, and the topic of Frankie and Kevin—George and Adam's little brothers—both starting their freshman year at Cavendish next month, is discussed at length.

"They're already best friends," George says, shaking his head. "I can only imagine the way Frankie's gonna corrupt poor Kevin." He slaps a hand on Adam's back as if in sympathy.

"They're both gonna be starters by the time the first game of the season comes around," I pipe up. "Are they going to

stay receivers?" I ask them, since a lot of the time, the position they play in high school changes in college.

"Frankie's thinking they're gonna develop him to be a tight end, he's been putting up even more muscle, little shit's almost as big as me already." George scowls at nothing and I can only smirk.

"Yeah, and the new coach told Kev he thinks he'd be a great cornerback." Adam shrugs, but he looks just as unhappy as George.

"The first Darnell to ever play defense," Mike muses. "That's gonna be something."

"I can only imagine what Clive will have to say about that," Jules says, surprising me.

"I wanna be there when they tell him." George raises his arm like a little kid. I love these ridiculous idiots.

On that note, I steer the conversation to when we're going to see each other again. The Warriors are playing against both the Boston Sharks and the New York Kings this year, which means I'm gonna see them all. We're also playing Las Vegas the first week of the regular season, which means the meeting plans include Jules, too.

Taking out our phones on those breaks, we check schedules and make sure we get to hang out with Jules on occasion. We all want to meet Johnathan Stevens, his goalie who came out of the closet recently. We'll make it happen, even if we have to wait until the off-season. In any case, it'll happen.

Later that night, after a wonderful dinner Clive ordered for us, we say goodbye to Jules on the front porch.

The buzzer sounded a few minutes ago, which means we can already see the headlights of a sleek black SUV coming into view.

To my surprise, Jules' partner, Sterling—*the Sterling*—climbs out and greets us all.

We keep it cool. None of us lets out our inner fanboy the way we probably want to. I mean, I know he's a good friend of Hawk and Wolf, Lee used to work for him for fuck's sake, but I've never met him.

The Storm brothers and I, we kept our worlds separate until the Super Bowl, for the most part. I've met and talked to their aunt and uncle a bunch of times, as well as Cindy, their manager, but no one else.

When Jules and Sterling turn back and walk to the car where the driver is holding the door open for them, Sterling looks back, directly at me, and his words leave me cold as ice.

“Hawk told me to say hi to you.”

What. The. Fuck.



THE THREE OF THEM ARE STAYING THE NIGHT AGAIN, BEFORE they all fly back to the East Coast. They gush over meeting Sterling, and marvel over how cool a guy Jules is. I tune most of it out, since I'm fucking fuming on the inside.

How dare he?

How dare he send me that nice little message, when I specifically asked him to tell me when he got back to LA?

After a while, I get out of my head long enough to say goodnight to Clive.

“You better not make a mess like last night,” he warns, pointing to each of us. We promise we won't but say nothing else, because he's the one who picked after us while he stayed as far away as possible from the photoshoot.

The second the click of his door comes through the hallway, all eyes turn to me.

I've never been a squirmer, never been one to avoid contact, in fact I'm normally the one who makes other people uncomfortable with my direct gaze.

But now, today, after what just happened, I squirm and look anywhere but at my friends. I pray to whatever deity exists that they don't ask me what I know they want to.

I expect they will no matter what—

“Are you okay?” Mike asks, tentatively. His delicate, soft voice makes me flinch and look up. I'm confused and I'm pretty sure I look like a deer in headlights.

I expected a demand for answers, not the care and concern Mike's showing me. He's such a good man.

“I—yes. Of course I'm okay.”

“Don't lie to us, Derek.” George speaks softly. “If you don't want to tell us, that's fine, but don't lie to us.”

I sigh and rub a hand down my face, so fucking tired of feeling like this, of missing them. Still not looking at any of them, I speak. “I'm not okay. You're right I—well I'm fucking pissed off, if I'm honest.”

“You don't look pissed off,” Adam says conversationally, and with a slight tilt of his head. “You look scared,” he whispers, as the realization hits him.

Another long-suffering sigh from me and then the whole story comes out. I never did give them my version of how I met The Storm, so I start there. For what feels like an eternity, I spill my guts about my stupid crush on Hawk. How it started, how Wolf figured it out because I couldn't hide it, while Hawk was adorably clueless. I tell them how Hawk always identified as straight, and that made me happy because it meant I never had a chance in the first place. I tell them how important both of them became in my life, and how I've been feeling lost the past six months not talking to them.

By the time I get to the Super Bowl weekend, I'm already tired of speaking. “I know Wolf told Hawk about my crush, or at least made it clear enough, and told him he better not hurt me.”

I then explain what happened after we left Sebas and Adam's suite in New Orleans. “We were basically carrying Wolf the whole time, and we'd both already spent so much

time worrying about him. So I hugged him.” I lift my hands in a “what can you do?” kind of gesture. “Because Hawk loves hugs.” I feel a knot start to form in my throat. *No, I won't fucking cry.* “And then he kissed me. He kissed me and it was fucking amazing and out of the blue, and everything I swore I'd never let myself feel.”

I take a deep breath and swallow hard. “He told me it didn't have to mean anything,” I whisper, well aware I'm leaving a lot out. They don't need the details. I hear a couple of gasps coming from them but don't look up to check from who. I can, however, see Adam clench his fists on top of the table, and I feel Mike tense, before he launches himself at me and envelops me in a hug so hard it's the only thing that stops me from bawling.

I don't bawl, dammit.

“That's an asshole move,” George mutters. “But he didn't seem like an asshole when we met him,” he says in a louder voice. “He actually gave me the impression of being someone kinda ... innocent. Is there any way he didn't know?”

I take another deep breath as I move Mike's arms from around me. I fish my phone out of my pants and play them the audio. I still don't fucking understand why Wolf thought it was a good idea to have this conversation with Hawk after I've had this crush for years, let alone why he decided to record it *and* send it to me.

“You better not hurt him,” Wolf says in his serious voice. *“Don't play with his feelings, you got me?”*

“I'd never do that,” Hawk mutters. *“I'd never hurt Dee. Never.”* There's a reverence in the last word, like he's making a vow, and as always it has goosebumps spreading all over my body. He broke that vow, didn't he? The certainty I always hear in his voice when I replay it only makes it hurt worse.

“Okay,” Adam sighs. “That's pretty damning, but we don't know if Wolf actually told him you have a crush on him.”

“True,” Mike pipes up. “You say this was the night before the NFL Honors?” I can finally look up at them, and see only

anger, curiosity, distress in their eyes—not pity.

Thank the fucking Lord.

“Yeah,” I reply, my throat scratchy from all this damn talking.

“They were probably super busy that day, and tired. I think you should talk to Wolf and find out exactly what he said before that happened.” Mike points at my phone on the table. “Word for word. Because maybe Hawk understood it as his brother wanting their friendship with you to stay intact no matter what happened at the game?”

“Fuck,” I growl. I rub my hand back and forth over my closed cropped hair. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. I just ran out of there. Two weeks later, Hawk reached out. Finally. They were in Singapore or Tokyo or who the hell knows where, and he texted. Said he was sorry, and he wanted to talk. I couldn’t deal with him taking two fucking weeks to speak to me, and Wolf not reaching out at all, so I told him to let me know the second they got back to LA. And now, thanks to *fucking Sterling*, I know they’re here but neither of them reached out.”

“What if he just talked to them on the phone?” Adam asks.

“He said he’d had dinner with some friends, didn’t he?” I demand. “I know for a fact Wolf and Hawk are very good friends of his, and they see each other every time they can. It fucking stings.” I go on with my rant. “And I can’t help but think Wolf blames me for whatever Hawk told him happened that night.” That train of thought only enrages me more. Because I know Hawk would never do that. I wish I had something to punch.

The three of them stay silent, and I need a second to compose myself, so I go to the bathroom and splash some water on my face while I hear their murmurs. I can’t make out exactly what they’re saying, but I have a pretty good idea. I let the water drip from my face as I stare unseeingly at the perfectly white sink.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I'm going home tomorrow, saying goodbye for now to the men waiting for me in the other room. I'll be all alone once again, so that's when I'll deal with this.

For now, I'll do my best to enjoy our "slumber party" as Clive called it.

I paste on my most neutral expression and open the door, ready to convince them there's nothing more to talk about when it comes to Wolf and Hawk.

As expected, they abruptly stop whispering when I step into the room. I smirk at them.

"C'mon, who wants to lose in Mario Kart." They look at each other as if deciding on whether they're gonna let me get away with the avoidance tactic.

They reach a consensus, and George looks at me with a challenge in his eyes.

"You're going down," he says threateningly.

"Well,"—I clap my hands—"it's true what they say. You become more like your spouse the longer you're married, and you just sounded like your husband."

My quip breaks the tension, and I feel my shoulders relax.

I'll just enjoy my time with them. Tomorrow will come soon enough.

SIX

Hawk

I WAKE UP LATE IN THE MORNING THIS TIME—GOING BY THE way the sun comes through the gaps in my blinds—and roll over to find out if I can go back to sleep.

It's gonna take more than two, twelve-hour sleeps for me to recover from the last six months.

Soon enough, I realize my grumbling stomach will be a problem, so I get up, grab my phone, and go to the kitchen.

It's empty of course, and by the five—no six—bottles of beer, empty bottle of rum, and empty tumbler I see on the coffee table in the living room, Wolf's probably not going to wake up for a few hours.

I wake up my phone after I take the first sip of coffee, and it immediately goes down the wrong pipe after I read the new name they gave to the group chat: "*What the flying fuck, Hawk!?*"

I cough violently, and I only give reading the texts a shot once I'm breathing normally again.

George: Seriously dude, what the hell? We know what you did and you're still going through with this?

Adam: Yeah, Hawk. Derek's fucking pissed.

Mike: We're pissed too.

Adam: When are you going to fix it?

George: How are you going to fix it?

There's a bunch more from Derek's best friends, and I can see all caps and lots of exclamation points in the messages at the bottom. Fuck, so Derek told them?

I unconsciously rub my neck.

Of course he told them, they're his best friends.

Yeah, and I'm his best friend, too. They should know I wouldn't hurt Derek on purpose. Even though all evidence points to the contrary.

I put my cup down, and spend the next twenty minutes writing and deleting a message to explain that I have a plan, that I didn't know, and that I'm sorry, but before I can get the words just right, my reminder to leave for my therapy appointment dings. I block my phone and go in search of Tate. He has access to my calendar, as well as Lee, so I'm hoping he's already waiting for me in the car.

They're both leaning against the SUV in the garage, thank God, so I climb into the back seat. Tate's silent except for the quick "good morning" we exchange. Lee didn't go on tour with us, but we caught up yesterday, so I don't feel bad about spending the whole drive focused on my phone. I perfect my apology text to Derek's friends, and hit send only when the car stops in the parking garage. It's then that I realize I'm in sweats and a ratty T-shirt with no shoes on.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I groan at Tate who steps out from the front passenger seat.

He gives me the closest thing he has to a smile, and shrugs as he herds me to the elevator. "We had to leave, and you have more important things to think about than what you're wearing."

He's got that right, but still ... "You better make sure there are no paps around," I mumble.

"I already did." He steps inside with me.



"DOES IT MATTER?" DR. LULU'S QUESTION MAKES ME PAUSE. I've been obsessing over exactly what label I wanna slap on myself for so long that the thoughts don't compute for a full minute.

"I-I-I want to understand why him, why now, and why it feels like the most important thing in the world. That's why it matters."

"I understand *you* want to figure out all those things, but for today, since you're going to go talk to him later, I think it's more pressing to take your feelings for Derek as fact and go on from there. Do you want to do anything about them? Would it be a relationship? Just physical? Does he want any of that with you? When it comes to why it feels like the most important thing in the world, well ... it's probably because you've never had such strong feelings for anyone. At least not that you've told me."

"Yeah, no, I haven't."

"So let's focus on your conversation with Derek today."

An hour and a half later I step into the kitchen in a daze. Nothing's different. The same bottles are everywhere, and my coffee cup is still on the counter. I checked my messages in the car and sure enough, there were about fifty from the group chat with all of Dee's friends. I skimmed over them, honestly having no energy to deal with that after my session with Dr. Lulu.

I'm saving mental space to remember everything we talked about, and everything I want to say and accomplish when I talk to Derek in a few.

First things first, though. I have to take a shower, put on some actual clothes and shoes, finish my coffee, then I'll head over and start the groveling process.

Before I can make myself move away from the counter, the door leading to the garage bursts open, and I almost spill all my coffee *again*. The huge, hulking figure of my best friend appears.

Oh, he's pissed all right. I try to straighten up, to pull in enough air to launch into my apology and explanation, but he starts growling at me before I get the chance.

"Really, Hawk?" he starts in a louder voice than I anticipated, making me jump again. "*Hawk says hi?! You thought sending that little message would be cute? Or even funny? Because it wasn't. It was just another fucking slap in the face, to know you were already in LA and hadn't called me. What the hell is wrong with you?*" he shouts the last part, and though I don't know what he's talking about, or how he knew I was already in LA, his words hurt.

More than they should, since I'm the one to blame for everything. Well, Wolf too. Still, tears fill my eyes at his words, and I breathe through my mouth to keep them from falling.

"Dee, I—"

"No, don't 'Dee' me." He interrupts before I can try to wing it with an apology—no way of remembering everything I prepared when I'm focusing on not crying. "You don't get to do that, Hawk. You don't get to hurt me, then say you're sorry, and then lie to me again. Seriously, are we even friends? Do you even give a shit about me?"

"That's enough!" Wolfie's hard words stop Derek's, thank God. I turn to tell my brother it's okay, that he shouldn't have to defend me from Dee. Because he's clearly hurting, and I know I would be too if I were in his shoes, but he speaks again before I can. "Go to the patio, Birdie," he says without looking at me.

"No," I say with as much conviction as I can. "I need to talk to Derek. I need to explain and—"

"I'll explain, and then you can apologize and explain again if you want to." His voice is softer now, as is his gaze when he

looks at me. Dammit I don't want to feel safer knowing my brother's got my back, but I do. "I need to explain it to him, Birdie, so you can too before his head explodes from that vein popping in his temple."

I try to smile at his words. We always tease Derek about that vein, or at least we used to. It feels like it's been a lifetime since I saw him. I search for any signs of Wolf being drunk and don't find any. He looks like he hasn't slept much, or well, and yeah, there's a hangover there, but he doesn't look drunk.

Wolf knows about my master plan. He's even helped out a lot because he feels so shitty for his mistake, but also because he always helps me however he can, and looking at him now, I know that that's what he's doing. I trust Wolfie.

So I turn to look at Derek, and the same strange feeling in my belly appears. It's the one that made me kiss him after the Super Bowl. It's the feeling that got me into this mess in the first place, so I ignore it, and I turn to the patio doors without another word.

Through the window, I can see them walk out of the kitchen, to the living room probably. I sigh, as I stand on the lawn and tilt my head back to feel the sun on my skin. Only then do the tears fall.

Fuck, I have to make this right. I have to make Derek not hate me. I can't keep going like I have since February. I need my best friend back.

Derek

"WAIT," WOLF GROWLS AT ME AS HE HOLDS UP A HAND. "NOT here, come with me."

I do as he says, because I know why he's saying it. He doesn't want Hawk seeing or hearing us. I don't fucking understand the dynamic between these two, not even after all these years. It's like they both think Hawk can't exist without Wolf, when I know he's a perfectly capable adult.

But Wolf always shelters him, and Hawk always lets him.

I know all about codependency, because Hawk's told me everything he's learned in his Al-Anon support group and

from his therapist, but this seems like it's more than that. It's like they actually believe they can't function without each other.

"Deedee." Wolf's soft whisper takes me out of my thoughts. We're in the room that's supposed to be an office, off to the side of the living room. It's mostly used as storage for all the shit people send them.

"Don't," I choke out a warning.

"Okay." He keeps whispering. "Derek." I nod for no fucking reason and swallow hard at the devastated look on his face. "It's all my fault. He didn't know."

"What?" I demand, not understanding shit.

"I—okay, well you know we were very busy the whole week before the Super Bowl. We were barely sleeping five hours every night and working eighteen-hour days, so when I had the conversation with Hawk, I may have started it while he was looking at his phone."

I tense, because we both know what that means. Hawk didn't hear one word, or probably didn't register would be a better way to say it.

"What?" I say louder this time.

"I'd had a few beers, but I was very clear on everything I told him. You know, Derek cares a lot about you and blah blah blah, and you better not play with his feelings. You heard that part." Wolf's speaking so much faster than his normal drawl, it just brings home the fact that he's desperate. That makes me feel marginally better, because if I'm understanding this right ...

"I did," I say, my voice clipped.

"But I may have forgotten that I need to get Hawk to look at me to listen to me sometimes. It's not always like that, you know. Sometimes he can multitask like nobody's business, but other times ..."

"Other times, especially when he's *tired*, he can hyperfocus on something and not see or hear anything that's

happening around him. Fuck, Wolf.” I throw my hands up and rub them over my head and face.

“Are you telling me . . . are you actually saying I got my heart basically shat on because *you were drunk?!*” I shout the last words at him as I fling my arms out. So loud that I feel my throat protest. I don’t give a fuck about that right now though. “I got my heart broken. I thought my best fucking friend was a heartless asshole because you’re an alcoholic?!”

“Yes.” Wolf hangs his head and keeps fucking whispering.

“And why the fuck did you think it was okay to not talk to me for six fucking months, instead of saving me all this fucking pain?” There’s a hitch in my breath on the last word, and then the fucking tears come. I’ve held them back for this long, it seems the time for bottling this up is done.

“I—I don’t—”

“That’s all you have to say? I, I, I?” I explode now.

“I’m sorry, okay?!” he shouts just as loud. “I’m so fucking sorry, Derek, but I didn’t know how to say all of this over the phone. Because I know you, so I know you needed to *see* how much I regret not making sure Hawk heard me for you to understand. For you to forgive me. So last night, I told Sterling to say what he did to you, because he told us Jules was with you guys. I thought it was about time we talked to you, and Hawk was dragging his feet.”

I can’t even think about Sterling’s words anymore, they’re the least important thing. “I thought I’d lost you, fucker. I thought I’d lost two of my best friends over these fucking feelings I don’t even want to have.”

He rushes to me and envelops me in a strong hug. He’s never hugged me before, so it takes me out of my rage for a long second, long enough to hear his sob. I hug him back, of course I do.

I also hear him mumble, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” over and over again.

“Looks like Hawk’s not the only codependent one,” I say against his temple.

His breath hitches and then he only hugs me harder.

Well ... what the fuck am I supposed to do now?

SEVEN

Hawk

“So ...” I MOVE THE TIP OF MY TOES OVER THE BLADES OF grass—can’t help myself since I’m so nervous. “Did Wolfie tell you?”

Dee only grunts, so I’ll take that as a yes. He’s been standing two feet away from me, stock still with his arms crossed, hands under his armpits, and not looking away from me for a few minutes now.

“You know we both feel awful and I, well, I didn’t know what to think at first you know, when he told me about your ...” I motion to him in a way that explains absolutely nothing, but he grunts again and looks away, so he understood me perfectly well.

Crush.

Such a juvenile word, and still, saying it feels way too adult for me right now.

A man in his thirties should be able to talk about another man having feelings for him, right? But I’ve never been like other men ... and as it turns out, I’m not as straight as I thought either, so there’s *that*.

My foot starts to move faster. I don’t know what to say, and I say all kinds of dangerous and stupid shit when I don’t know what to say.

Oh God.

“Crush. You have a crush on me, or had, well I wouldn’t know, would I? Since me and Wolf didn’t speak to you for so long. But we thought it’s what you wanted? At the very least with me. I was sure you didn’t want to even see my name, let alone say it. And Wolf was sure you were gonna hate him and never wanna see him again when you found out he fucked up, you know? Don’t blame him, please. He didn’t mean to cause all of this, he—”

“Don’t fucking defend him.” He’s speaking the same way he did when he came into the kitchen. I swallow hard and look at my foot. It must be reaching lightspeed now. “He’s the one who won’t ask for help even though he knows damn well he needs it. He’s the one who thought it’d be a good idea to tell you in the first place. Without speaking to me about it.” I look up then. He nods when he sees my surprise. I didn’t know that. “And he sent me a fucking recording of only a snippet of the conversation. He chose to do all those things and be reckless with my feelings when I was more than happy to let you keep living in blissful ignorance. I don’t want to have these feelings, and yet I do.” The intensity in his gaze has me trapped. I can’t look away, and I’m finally not moving so I’m not gonna complain.

“Why?” I ask in a whisper.

“Why, what?” he demands, in the same hard tone.

“Why don’t you want to have feelings for me?”

“I don’t want to have feelings for anyone, but in this case because you’re my friend, and I care a lot about keeping my friends, and because—fucking *duh*—you’re straight.”

“Not so much, apparently?”

He snorts, but not in a happy way. “Yes, you fucking are, Hawk. You’re straight.”

“And yet I kissed you.” I don’t know where I find the courage to say that, but it’s out there now. Doubt creeps into his eyes, and it makes me feel even braver. “I kissed you because I wanted to do it.” I shrug.

“You kissed me because you were tired as fuck after a week of almost no sleep, and emotionally drained because your brother is killing himself one bottle at a time. You were sad, you were emotional, and you turned to the one person who was there and who understood what you were going through. The fact that I had feelings for you means the whole situation got twisted and out of hand, but that doesn’t mean you’re not straight. I mean, for fuck’s sake, you don’t want to kiss me now, do you?” He throws his arms in the air.

I wish I had the balls to tell him the truth, I truly do, but the desperation I see in his eyes for me to confirm his words stops me. I don’t like that he doesn’t take me seriously when I tell him what I know about *myself*, but I let it go for now.

“In any case, what’s so bad about having feelings for someone? In all the time we’ve known each other you’ve never dated anyone ... ”

“So?” he demands, looking confused.

“So ... don’t you want to? Find someone to share your life with? Eventually?”

“No,” he says in a clipped tone.

“No? Just, no? Why the hell not?” My other leg starts to bounce now—I must really look ridiculous. The movement drags his gaze down, and I see his eyes twitch. I smirk. He hates it when I can’t stop moving because he knows it means I feel restless and uncomfortable. Fuck yeah, I’m uncomfortable, but I also need to act like an adult and talk this out so we can be *us* again.

It’s the one thing Wolf and I completely agree on. We want Derek to be in our lives, always, and to do that, we have to make him not feel embarrassed by having feelings for me. And I can’t fuck up again, even though I now know about those feelings.

“Because I know what a relationship going wrong, ending in disaster, looks like. I’ve seen the aftermath, and it’s not pretty.” There are so many emotions passing through his face, I can’t really make any of them out. I’ve never been good at

focusing on other people's feelings and reactions, but I've always been pretty attuned to Dee's moods, so I know this isn't a subject I should push on if I want to get anywhere with this conversation.

"Okay." I breathe out the word then inhale sharply. "So, do you think there's any way we can go back to being friends? Like before? I didn't mean to hurt you, Dee. I swear I never would. You're too important, and I never want to lose you. And defending him or not, fact is, Wolf doesn't want to lose you either, and that's why he did all those things without talking to you. He was trying to protect you."

He looks away for a long moment, and then *finally*, he drops his arms and runs a hand over his head. When he turns to look back at me, I can see the toll the past six months have had on him, and I feel like shit all over again.

"We can try," he says, after staring at me for an eternity. "But you can't make it weird, Hawk." He points a finger at my face, and I let a huge, relieved smile take over.

"I won't make it weird, I promise." I jump a little on my feet, and barely manage to tamp down my instinct to run to him and jump in his arms for a hug. He probably wouldn't like that, because of his ... feelings.

I manage to keep the smile on my face though, so hopefully he doesn't notice.

He only nods once, keeping his face in that impassive expression that always used to soften when he looked at me. Guess some things *have* changed.

I try to not let that bother me.

"I gotta go," he says.

"Why? Where?" I follow him as he walks back inside.

"Got practice then gym time with the defense guys."

"Oh man, you're gonna be all whiny tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I don't whine," he defends himself. That's more like how we used to be.

“You absolutely whine, you big baby.”

“Shut up, brat.”

I do, but only because it’s hard to talk when I’m so happy my cheeks hurt. We stop as we come into the kitchen and see Wolf leaning against the counter, coffee cup in his hands, and the kitchen is spotless. At least he cleaned up. The two of them stare at each other for a long moment, and then they nod at the same time. They’re so weird.

“I’ll expect you both at my place tomorrow, we’ve got to finish *The Good Place*.” He turns to look at me seriously. “Unless you watched it without me.”

The quirked eyebrow has my knees buckling a little—*weird*—but I manage to shake my head, with eyes wide and innocent, while I rest my hips against the island in case my legs do give out.

“Of course we didn’t.”

“Good. I’ll be home at four. Don’t be late.” He’s walking through the garage door before he’s done with his instructions.

I look at Wolf, and I can’t deny seeing him look so ashamed brings me some small satisfaction. *Serves him right*.

“That little stunt with Sterling,” I start, as I walk to the coffee machine to get another cup. “It’s the last time you do something like that, understood?” I very rarely speak like this to my brother, so I hope he understands the gravity.

“Yes, I’m sorry about that.”

“You’re forgiven, since everything with Dee’s kinda fixed now.”

“I won’t do it ever again, but you gotta admit, you were dragging your feet on finally going to talk to him.”

I stay silent for a second. He’s right, in a sense, but ... “I have a plan, Wolfie, you know this.”

“Your plan wouldn’t have gotten us to even see Deedee for another week and a half. Now everything’s fixed before the big day.”

I just sigh. You can only be a smartass if you're right most of the time, and my brother is the most annoying smartass in the world.

In any case, my plan is still going to go without a hitch, I just know it.



“YOU'RE MAKING IT WEIRD.” DEREK'S RUMBLE MAKES ME jump. Jesus, why am I such a scaredy cat all of a sudden?

“Am not,” I protest.

“You are,” Wolf drawls from the other corner of the couch. The skinny corner, I call it.

The other corner, the “well-built” one, is where I used to always lay and snuggle with Derek. But since I now know that would only make his feelings for me ... surface, I decided to sit in the middle. The boring part of the couch where you can only sit and not lie down.

“Just come over here already.” Derek's sharp order snaps me out of my thoughts. I look at him, all comfortable in the fat—no, we don't call it fat, we call it well-built—corner. He looks as cuddly as ever, and I happen to know all those muscles in his arm and shoulder make amazing pillows.

I can't resist the possibility of a god-tier power nap once we've watched a couple of episodes and Wolfie and Dee inevitably put on an action movie, so I scoot my ass over and lie down with an inch of space between us.

Derek lets out a huge, put-off sigh, and shoves his arm under my neck, then moves my body closer to him. “Stop making it fucking weird,” he tells me again.

“Okay,” I squeak out without breathing.

“And breathe for fuck's sake.” I take a huge breath, and when I feel him relax, I do the same. It feels so different to all the previous times we snuggled like this, but so much the same too. How is that possible? We've done this dozens of times, maybe hundreds, and still, it's like a brand-new experience.

“Can we watch this thing now?” Wolf asks, all out of patience. I’m surprised he lasted the whole two minutes.

“Yes,” I answer. And really, the whiny baby has been crying over not watching the last season of the show for so long now, I think he’s gonna be disappointed no matter how it ends.

Something weird happens as the first episode of the fourth season starts, though. My mind wanders away from the story unveiling right in front of me. Normally I can focus really well on TV series and movies, especially those with awesome plots that keep me engrossed, but tonight, all I can think about is how Dee’s body feels against mine.

He’s so fucking strong, built to take down men one hundred pounds heavier and at lightning speed. His arm wrapped around me makes me feel secure, like no matter how much I wiggle or twitch, I won’t fall off the side of the couch. The flutter in my stomach appears again, and I have to swallow hard to stop my hand from moving to my belly to press down in hopes of making it disappear.

I have to control this ... impulse I have, to snuggle closer, to press my face into his neck and close my eyes for just ... one ... moment.



I WAKE UP IN THE DARK, NOT KNOWING WHERE I AM. BUT there’s two things that have me clueing in quickly.

First, it’s the absence of the warmth that wrapped me up while I was falling asleep, and second, Wolfie’s snores.

Having slept in the same room as him for my whole childhood, and still sharing a tight space on the rare occasion that we tour on a bus, I could make out his snores in milliseconds.

I can also tell I’m on Dee’s couch because it’s so damn comfortable.

I can’t figure out how I’m going to go back to how things were before I kissed Derek. I don’t think it’s possible for me.

Sure, Dee's apparently having no problem acting like the whole thing didn't happen, but how can I?

I don't want to hurt him again, and I have no idea if something I used to do unconsciously could hurt him now.

I'd never play with his feelings, I swear I wouldn't ... but what about *my* feelings?

Because if the last thirty-six hours and my actions after the Super Bowl are anything to go by, I clearly can't simply get over this. Also, I don't want to get over this. Dr. Lulu was right. I have to accept my attraction for him as fact and take action.

What do I *want*?

I want to kiss Dee again. That's the cold hard truth. I wanna kiss him, and have him hold me, and cuddle. I want to show him he shouldn't be so against relationships and prove him wrong. I want to know every single thing he hides from the rest of the world. I want to make him smile. A lot. I want to make him happy. I kinda wanna lick his abs too.

That desire comes out of fucking nowhere and has me holding my breath, afraid that Dee somehow read my mind all the way from his bedroom and is coming down to tell me to stop it.

But nothing happens.

Wolf keeps snoring. I take a much-needed deep breath and think it over some more.

What I've discovered in the last few months, is that it's not just fondness and a friendship kind of love that I feel for him. I'm attracted to him too. I have no issues thinking of Derek in a sexual way—*weird to think about that with my brother less than ten feet away from me but, oh well, he's asleep and it's not like I'm gonna do anything.*

Every time I picture Derek naked, my dick likes it.

I picture *his* dick. Not that I've seen it, but he exudes big-dick energy so ... yeah, I like that too.

I swallow hard since I'm fucking salivating way too much.

Before my mind starts spiraling from that thought, I shift to practical matters like Dr. Lulu recommends. Will I do something about this? Should I? Is Derek like *the one*?

Well if someone will be, it'll be him. He's my brother's best friend too, and Wolfie's the most important person in my life. Derek will always be my friend first, and then—hopefully—my lover. He has his own fame and wouldn't use me for mine.

So I won't worry about labels anymore. To me, all that matters is that I'm not straight and I want Derek. I want him to be mine, and I want to belong to him.

And with that thought, a new master plan starts to form in my mind.

Project “Get Derek to be my boyfriend”—because nothing less will do with him—starts now.

EIGHT

Derek

I WALK OUT OF THE PRACTICE FACILITY OF THE WARRIORS exhausted and ready for my bed. There's nothing standing in my way except a trip to the kitchen where my personal chef has left a week's worth of pre-made meals. I'll heat something up quickly and take it up to my room, where I'll strip down and get myself into bed for dinner. With a tray, of course. There's no way I'm sleeping in a bed full of crumbs.

I can already feel my clean, cool sheets around me as I start the drive back home.

The last two weeks have been brutal, with the exception of our first preseason game last Sunday, which we all treated as our off day even though we were technically working. We lost, of course, but I had a hell of a lot of fun calling ridiculous plays on defense, just to make sure the rookies know the plays and follow orders even when they know it's the wrong play.

I got a healthy amount of side-eye and just smiled hugely at them. Most of my teammates only see me smile this big after I sack a quarterback or make an interception, so I always get a kick out of it.

Since Monday morning, though, the tone in the facility has been more military and less party. We've been put through the wringer, and I can't say I think it's an exaggeration from our coaches to push us so much.

We lost the fucking Super Bowl in February, and yeah, I was and am happy for George, but losing the big one isn't something you forget quickly. It's not something you get over, not when it's been less than a year.

The disappointment fell to the background of my mind after the whole Hawk situation, but since that's been dealt with and things are back to normal—kinda—my mind's been reliving the last seconds of the game on repeat.

I've been more focused the last two weeks than I was all off-season, and that's a good thing. It means that patching things up with the Storms has brought my balance back, and I need to make sure things stay like this.

No more changes. It doesn't matter if I still suffer from the stupid crush, or that any time Hawk hugs me, my blood heats. The dreams about us, the sexual ones and the romantic ones, are irrelevant. I can live like this perfectly well.

My mom has been perfectly happy—a lot happier—since my father fucked off. She doesn't need anyone and neither do I.

I love my balance and I love my work, so there's no way I'm ever putting them at risk again. My work was never *really* at risk ... except for the fact that I did slack off a bit in summer camp, and I could see the weird, confused looks coach Savage was throwing at me. I could practically see him thinking, "*Is he getting old? Is he losing his drive?*"

Bullshit. It's all bullshit, because I'm the same man I was six months ago.

With the determination that thought brings me, I open the car's door and walk confidently to my home, but there's something ... weird inside.

I can't explain it, but I feel like there's someone in my house. Fuck, am I being robbed?

I think quickly. *What do I have on me that I can use to defend myself?* My steel spikes are the only things that come to mind, so without making a noise, I open my duffel—the one I was going to empty out in the laundry room—and take out

one shoe. Then, very slowly, I inch to the wall and search for the light switch.

I push it, and the explosion of sound and light has me throwing my spike at the first shape I see.

“SURPRISE!”

“Ow, Jesus, FUCK!”

“What the fuck?” I say, bewildered.

There are so many people, balloons, a cake, and ... Mike leaning against the couch, clutching his chest.

“Happy birthday!” Hawk shouts from the other side of the room, smiling maniacally with a cone shaped party hat sitting crookedly on his head.

Well, there goes my restful afternoon. It looks like I’ll be celebrating my twenty-seventh birthday instead.

I paste the friendliest expression I’m capable of on my face and go to Mom first.

“Happy birthday, baby,” she tells me, smiling a lot wider than I am with her arms outstretched to me.

“Thanks, Mom.” I close my eyes and breathe in her mom’s scent for our quick hug. The way home smells to me. Gracie’s there, butting into my hug like the annoying little sister she is, a second later. I bring her in after grumbling at her for hogging Mom.

“I’ve missed you,” I murmur when we all step back at the same time.

“We’ve missed you, too, bro,” Gracie tells me. Even though it’s only been a little more than two months, I always miss them, and I never tire of telling them. I never will.

“Okay, honey, you make sure you apologize to Mike now,” Mom tells me. I wince when I see Mike lifting his shirt and looking like a kicked puppy at the slight redness on his chest.

“I’ll go do that now. But in my defense, I thought I was being robbed.”

“You got good instincts, bro.”

“Thanks,” I ruffle her hair and walk away before she finishes squawking at me.

With every bone and muscle protesting inside me, I go to my friends, and after apologizing to Mike, let them all congratulate me.

Every single one of them tells me how Hawk has been planning this for more than a month, and how he wanted to make it a perfect night for me.

I throw that piece of information to the back of my mind. I’ll deal with it when I get to him. In the meantime, I go through the teammates who I didn’t realize had left practice before me, and Hugh, who I’m sure helped make all of this possible. Cindy, Hawk and Wolf’s manager is here too, and I let her hug me for thirty seconds—she pats my cheek and thanks me for it.

I like her, a lot actually, but I only hug certain people.

When I get to Wolf, I see he’s holding a water bottle tightly in his hand. I raise my eyebrows at the sight “Is that Vodka?” I ask softly. He shoves me, hard.

“Birdie told me to behave tonight, so that’s what I’m doing. You can take a sip to check if you want.”

I see the hurt behind the mock outrage, and I feel like shit. Seriously, though, I have good reason to suspect him.

“No need,” I say instead. “I trust you’re telling the truth. Thanks for helping Hawk in whatever way you did to plan this.”

“You owe me something for listening to him ramble on and on about it for months, Deedee. Months.”

“I’ll make it up to you, somehow.”

“I’ll make sure you do.”

And then I’m in front of him. God, he looks cute. Always cute.

Of course he's also handsome, and sexy, and gorgeous, but always cuter than any of those things. I've never been one to like cute things, so this infatuation took me by surprise. It still surprises me if I'm honest.

And I get paid very well to never be surprised.

"You knew I'd have practice today," I tell him, standing a foot away so I don't fall into his arms. Not yet at least. I want to tease him first. "And that I'd be exhausted." I raise an eyebrow at him, waiting silently for him to see why this surprise party could've been met with a different response from me if I didn't miss my mom so much.

His eyes open wide, and he takes a tiny step back. I can see the panic starting to set in when he squints at me. After a moment, he slaps his hands on his hips. "Are you actually *exhausted*?" He exaggerates the word. "Or just trying to make me feel bad?"

I keep staring at him, holding my laugh in for as long as I can. I'm surprised he doesn't shout at me to speak already, and imagining that is what breaks me after a minute. I bark out a laugh, and he launches himself at me. Climbing me and latching on like the cutest Koala in the world, he wraps his arms around my neck, mock strangling me until I take hold of his hips and throw him over my shoulder and down on the edge of the sofa.

Thank Christ Cindy is sitting in the middle, I'll check next time.

Hawk turns and stands back up in less than four seconds. He looks around, trying to look cool and like nothing happened as he straightens his button-down, then walks slowly back to me.

"That was mean," he mumbles, with his lips fixed in a smile.

"I could've done worse." I smirk and cross my arms.

His eyes shift down to my arms and when I see his tongue slip out and graze his lower lip, I have the urge to tell him to stop it. But that would bring attention to his actions, and it

would tell him I'm aware of how he's been looking at me when he gets distracted.

And I can't let that happen because that would make things *weird* again. No, avoidance and pretending nothing is different is the only way forward. The only way to keep our friendship intact.

So, I wait until he snaps out of it ... but he doesn't. He drives me fucking crazy and has my pants tightening slightly when he murmurs, "I just bet you could've."

I cough forcibly and that does the trick.

"But," he says brightly, eyes on mine again. "I know you. And I know no matter how tired you are, the people here are important to you and you always want to hang out with them. I also told them everyone has to leave by nine thirty, and you'll have a late lunch with your mom and sister tomorrow before they head back to Portland. They'll spend the night at the Certon, on me, and have a nice brunch and a spa morning."

His bright smile short-circuits something in my brain, so it takes me a full minute to be able to form any kind of response. Which is to hug him hard. I try to ignore the way his body fits perfectly against mine, the way his warm hands send chills up my back when he holds me just as fiercely.

But I can't.

"Thank you," I whisper against his head.

"No problem," he says just as quietly, not letting go of me. "You can hang out with your friends for now. They all had to get special permission from their coaches to come here and are leaving tonight, but I knew you'd want them here, and they wanted to celebrate you."

Thanking him again isn't enough, but it's all I've got. "Thank you."

"I'm happy it turned out so well." The brilliant smile is back. "Now, come on. It's time for presents."

Like a kid on Christmas morning, he exudes happiness as he leads me to the center of the couch. He corrals all the guests

around me and I dutifully open present after present. They're all . . . organization bins. For kitchen drawers, for my closet, for anything imaginable. Mom's is a tiny vacuum for cleaning up the tight spaces in the car.

"And for vacuuming the big vacuum cleaner!" Mike teases from the other side of the table. Everyone cracks up since they know about my need for a clean house, but it's all in good fun.

I laugh along with everyone since they all know I don't need anything, but this, well . . . my mild OCD fucking loves this, and I'll actually use it all.

I find myself looking for Hawk every time I lose him in the crowd. And every time I have to force myself to *stop that*.

In front of me are the friends I rarely see, even if I did spend a long weekend with them a few weeks ago, and my family.

At the end of the night, I make a valiant effort to convince Mom and Gracie to move here.

"There are so many nursing jobs here, Gracie, and I just bet a lot of executives are looking for sharp assistants, Mom. Please, just look at your options, see what you find."

They both look at me with resignation in their eyes. I still don't know why they keep refusing. Sure, they both have jobs in Portland, but it's not like we have any family there or a big group of friends who are like family.

I'm their family, and I fucking miss them.

"Just think about it," I murmur, as I bring them both in for a goodbye hug. Lee's waiting to take them to the Certon a couple of blocks away.

"We'll think about it. Happy birthday, baby."

"Thanks, Mom." The words sound like a sigh of relief. It's more than I've ever gotten out of these talks.

I close the door behind them to see Hawk picking up plates and glasses from the coffee table. I stop in my tracks. I thought he'd left. I search for Wolf, hoping for a buffer if I'm honest with myself. I don't see him anywhere. Fuck.

Okay, I can do this. We have to hang out, just the two of us, at some point.

“You don’t have to pick up after everyone.”

He smiles back at me as he bends down to get two more glasses.

“I organized a surprise party at your house, Dee. Of course I’m gonna help clean up. You can go upstairs and sleep, I know you’re tired.”

Like hell. I pick up the rest of the things on the coffee table and follow him to the kitchen, where he’s already rinsing everything and filling up the dishwasher.

I walk up to him and hand him one thing at a time so he can place them ... yeah, he knows exactly how to fill my dishwasher so my eye doesn’t twitch.

He turns and steps up to me once he’s closed it and started the cleaning cycle. Before I can take a step back, so there’s a safe distance between us, he places one hand on my waist and freezes me on the spot.

“Dee,” he says, very seriously. “Will you go on a date with me?”

I wish I could say his words don’t turn me into a mute fish out of water, but they do.

I mean, *what the actual fuck?*

“Hawk—”

“Sunshine,” he interrupts my floundering. “You call me sunshine, every time. I want you, Dee.” He takes another step toward me. “I want you to call me sunshine, to hug me, to kiss me. I want you to touch me all the damn time. I can’t forget, I’m sorry, but I can’t.” He’s standing so close to me I can feel his breath on my lips. “So, will you please let me take you out on a date?”

“Seriously, what the fuck? We agreed we’d forget you ever kissed me or that I—”

“You have a crush on me,” he says with determination. “You do, I know you still do, even though we’ve both been pretending you don’t. Guess what?” He leans in even more.

“What?” I can’t help but ask, my voice sounding strangled even to me.

“I have a crush on you, too, Dee.”

“I . . . I . . .” I don’t know what to fucking say. I can’t do this. He’s confused, he doesn’t know what being queer is like in the outside world. He’s absolutely just playing around, trying to experiment. But I don’t say any of that, because there’s a panicked, doubtful part of me that’s pretty sure Hawk knows exactly what he’s doing. “I’m going to bed, and you’re going to your house and we’re going to pretend this never happened.”

“No, we’re not,” Hawk sing-songs from the kitchen while I run away from him. “You can think about it, and we’ll talk tomorrow. Sleep well, Dee, and happy birthday!” The shouts sound cheerier the longer he talks, and I slam my bedroom door in case he decides to keep going.

My breaths are labored, and I feel like there’s something crawling under my skin. How the hell am I going to convince Hawk this isn’t a good idea? I know how stubborn he can get when he sets his mind on something.

Apparently, that something is now me.

NINE

Hawk

“I SWEAR TO GOD, BIRDIE, IF THIS ENDS WITH DEEDEE NEVER wanting to talk to us again ...” my brother says ominously.

“I’ll remind you,” I say, as primly as I’m able while I check out how my ass looks in these jeans. “This whole mess is your fault. I’m doing the best I can with what’s left after you blew everything up.”

He sighs heavily and I instantly feel bad. I wanna take the words back and apologize, but again, I hold my tongue. I feel a sadistic sense of victory when I manage to keep the apology back. One day at a time.

“I’ve told you I’m sorry.” The way he speaks, so fucking contrite and mournful, grates on my nerves. Mostly because, all I want is to soothe him.

“And I’ve told you I accept your apology. So stop telling me what you think I’m doing wrong, and tell me which pants make my ass look better.”

“I’m not gonna stare at your ass, Birdie. I hate your ass, it’s a blob of nothingness to me.” With that he stands and walks away. Maybe exactly as I wanted him to.

I smirk at my reflection. I do look good. Hopefully good enough to shove Dee over the edge and help him take the plunge with me. God, I want him to say yes. I want him to trust me not to hurt him.

Yes, of course I wanna kiss him and snuggle and do a hell of a lot more, but more than anything, I want him to want me as much as I want him. If he ever risks it all for a chance to build something real with me ... I know that's all he needs to do to make me happy. And I'll do all I possibly can to make him happy too.

Looking back on our years of friendship, I can see that's what I've been trying to do—just repay him for all the happiness he's brought me.

The thought brings determination, and the man in the mirror shows it, so with that in mind, I walk out of my bedroom, and our house. I can't walk the two blocks to Dee's house because it's still sunny outside, and I don't want a mob of fans slowing me down.

“Going to Dee's, Lee. Call me if you need anything,” I tell our driver, when I pass through his “office” in the room next to the garage door and grab the Rover's keys. We both know what I mean, is “call me if Wolf starts doing stupid, dangerous shit”.

I also let Tate know, and he grunts. “Don't leave the house unless I'm there, and park inside the garage.”

“Yes, sir, yes.” I salute him and go on my way. He always says the exact same thing, but it's his job, so I do all I can not to make it harder on him.

I shake my head to get Wolf out of my mind. At least for tonight, I don't want to worry about my brother at all. I'm going to be very selfish.

Which is exactly what this whole thing is—selfish. You're not thinking about how your brother doesn't have any friends, and you could possibly be taking away the one he has by doing this.

Yes, I have thought about that, annoying-voice-in-my-head, and the way I see it, I'm ensuring Derek stays my brother's best friend by eventually making him his brother-in-law.

Yes, I'm that confident that Dee's the one for me.

No, I'm not going to stop unless he swears to me he doesn't want me at all.

Of course I'm not gonna force Dee to do anything. I'm gonna show him how right I am if he keeps putting up resistance.

The past two weeks, I've been crafting a twenty-step plan to put a ring on that man's finger, and I have a reminder to read it over every day. That way, I can always think of something new to keep things going according to plan.

Step one is simple—get Derek to go out on a date with me. Once that's been dealt with, it'll be time to plan the perfect progression of dates until we get to step five—give Derek lots and lots of orgasms.

I'm gonna have to do some research for that, so I'll call Sterling more than likely. If he's not willing to help because “we're like family” or whatever, then I can call Aunt Lyla. She's not shy about anything, much to her sons' dismay, and she's had two men beg her to marry them, so she must know a thing or two.

Last on the list of people available is Cindy. Now, that'd be very awkward for me, but I'll get through it if it means I don't have to watch hours of over-the-top, unrealistic gay porn to learn how to give a good blowjob.

I get the mechanics, and the things that make *me* feel good, but those can't be universal, right?

The time for answers will have to be another one, because right then, I see Dee's SUV in front of mine. I follow him to his garage and smirk when he doesn't immediately close the door after he parks.

He's so nice, even when he doesn't want to be.

I find him in the kitchen, putting a plate full of yummy food in the oven—because *microwaves are for lazy people who don't want their food to actually taste good*. I hear the lecture Derek's doled out multiple times in my head, and it makes me snicker.

“How did you know I'd be home at this hour?”

“Because, I made you panicky, and even though you’d already worked out after practice this morning, when you’re panicky, you work out twice a day. Also, I arranged your lunch with Mia and Gracie so I knew the timeline.”

I smile smugly at him, and let out a quick laugh when his eye twitches and the vein in his forehead starts to swell.

“You think you know me so well,” he says darkly and shakes his head. When he crosses his arms, making his biceps bulge in the most distracting way, I have to make sure my mouth’s closed and I’m not drooling. I swallow hard and force my eyes back to his. I see a lot of annoyance, and despite Derek probably hating it, I see heat and want as well.

“I do know you very well. Better than most, I’d say.”

“Really?” he asks, still in a mocking tone.

“I do. Like, I know you’ll do your best to convince me that us going out on a date will be the worst thing that’s ever happened in the history of the world.”

“It would be, Hawk.” Him still not calling me sunshine grates on my nerves, but I let it slide for now. “Friendships are all I want, all I need or trust. You know my—”

“Father left your family. Yes, I know.” He looks surprised. It makes me laugh lightly. He still doesn’t get it. “I know you’re content, even happy, not in a relationship, just like your mom. But I’ve thought over how this conversation would go close to a million times, Dee. I only decided I’d actually take a chance a few weeks ago, but I’ve been thinking about it since I kissed you.”

He only stares at me, with his mouth slightly parted and eyes wide open.

“I’m confident I know which arguments you’re going to make, so let’s debate.” I walk to the counter and sit opposite to where Derek’s standing. I rest my elbows on the wood and interlace my fingers. Once my chin’s resting on them, the oven beeps. “Get your dinner, Dee, and let’s get this debate going.”

He shakes his head, frowning now, and does as I ask. Once he’s taken the first bite of his lasagna, I gesture for him to

start.

“I don’t want a relationship,” he says, looking down at his plate.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t need it. I have my friends for all the companionship I could ever want, and I can find hookups to take care of my horniness.”

The sharp, sudden, irrational, and red-hot urge to forbid him from ever kissing another man is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it down. “That’s all true, but tell me this—are you aromantic?”

The frown lines between his eyebrows get deeper. “No.”

“That means you do crave romance.”

He stays quiet for a few minutes, and I have to sit on my hands to stop myself from speaking first. I need him to realize I’m right.

“I still don’t think a long-lasting relationship, like a fifty-year-long marriage, is possible. I’ve seen too many people fuck up.”

“And you have the personal experience from your parents, but then again, you’ve seen your best friends find love and some even get married. They’re all happy, aren’t they?”

He throws his fork on his plate, making me jump from the sound, then throws his hands in the air.

“Okay then, I don’t think it’s possible for *me* to have that.” He jabs a finger in his chest.

“Why the hell not?” I demand. He stays stubbornly silent though and goes back to his meal. I stare at him, trying to find the answers in a face I can’t really see. Then it hits me.

Could it be? Could Derek fear the exact same thing my brother does? I didn’t see *this* coming.

“Dee,” I whisper. “You’re not like your father. You could never be like him.” He stills. Completely and suddenly. I’m sure he stops breathing too, and then he explodes in emotion.

“How the fuck would you know?”

“Because you care.”

“I ran away after you kissed me,” he snaps, like he just presented the best kind of evidence.

“Because you were hurting.” He only shakes his head and looks away again. “And you didn’t disappear without a word.” I keep going, my voice getting louder with the urgency of making him believe me. “You answered when I texted, and you faced me, us, when it probably would’ve been easier not to. You gave me a chance to be your friend. You don’t give up on the people who matter, Derek Johnson, and I won’t give up on you.”

He presses his lips harder, still shaking his head.

“Let me try, Dee. Let me try to show you that it’s possible, and that you can have whatever you want no matter where you came from.” When he still doesn’t speak or look at me, I realize I need to switch tactics. “You know what happened with my parents. Hell, the whole fucking world can know with a Google search. Their relationship was the definition of fucked up. I’m not trying to diminish the fucked-up-ness of your dad leaving, but if this was a competition, I’m pretty sure I’d win.” That gets a reaction out of him. He turns to me with outrage on his face. I go on before he can yell at me for being an insensitive brat. “So why is it that *I* can have some faith in us—an almost already established relationship if you really think about it—and you can’t, huh?”

His mouth opens and closes a handful of times, and I can’t help smiling. I love flustering him.

“I believe we can make it work. For the long haul.”

“*Fine*,” he grits through his teeth and stands. He walks around the counter to me. “You wanna find out exactly how we fuck up our friendship? *Fine*,” he yells. “Let’s go then.” He grabs my hand and pulls me up.

When he starts dragging me to the garage, I pull him back though. “No.” I raise my hands in surrender when he whirls on me, no doubt ready to let me have it now. “If we’re doing this,

then you gotta give us a fair shot. If you go into this thinking we'll fail, then of course we will. You gotta let us feel the *romance*, Dee."

"*Feel the romance?*," he quotes back at me, truly bewildered now. "Really, sunshine?" He chuckles, even though he clearly tried to hold it in, I can tell. I feel fucking euphoria course through my brain at him calling me sunshine again. I take his hand, hoping he can feel it too, the excitement, the expectations building.

I take another step and hug him from the side, laying my cheek on his shoulder and whispering against his neck. "Will you try, Dee? For me?"

He takes forever to answer, but I know what he'll say when he hugs me back, bringing me into full contact with his body.

"Okay," he whispers. "What do we do now, then?"

I lean back and give him a smile that will tell him all he needs to know.

"Oh no," he groans when he sees it.

"Oh, very much yes. You, Derek, are gonna let me plan our first date."

"I know I'm gonna regret this."

"No, you won't." I kiss him on the lips. Quick and light, but he stumbles back as if I'd thrown my whole weight into it.

I laugh again, fucking delighted.

TEN

Derek

“SO REALLY, HOW IS THIS GOING TO WORK?” HAWK LAUGHS AT my serious question. That melodic, beautiful laugh that always has me fucking *longing*.

“You’re such a control freak.” He shifts up to me, laying his head on my shoulder again. Why has that always felt so good?

“Yeah, well, I’m just trying to ... help.” I decide on the spot, that’s what I’m calling it.

“You can help by planning our second date. The first one is all planned out, we only need to find a day where we both have at least fourteen hours free.”

“You’re sure we’re gonna have a second date already, huh? And also, a fourteen-hour first date, sunshine? Really?”

“I am, and yes, fourteen hours.” He nods against me as he slides his hand from my waist to my abs and starts ... is he fucking petting me?

“Hawk,” I warn, when his hand starts to get dangerously low. “Stop.”

“Why?” he whines.

“Because I have a condition.” Man, I sure hope coming up with things on the spot won’t blow up in my face.

“What condition?” He leans back and his pretty blue eyes narrow with suspicion.

“We won’t be doing anything more than kissing until we’ve had at least ten dates and we’re both sure about this.” I wag a finger between our bodies, to show the fucking obvious.

“You’re still not having any faith,” he pouts. “I wanna see your dick, Dee.”

God, he makes me laugh like no one else. “Are you always so forward with your dates?” I tease, but regret it about a millisecond after the words leave my mouth. I really don’t want to know about his previous dates.

“The only date I’ve ever gone on was in eighth grade, when I took Anne Marie Lindsey to the movies then for milkshakes, in a very eighties-vibe date her mom and mine planned for us.” The matter-of-fact way he says it, and the already bored glaze in his eyes tells me all I need to know, but I still press. Because I’m a masochist—a lot of people have said this.

“That’s the only date you’ve ever been on?”

“Yes. All the other ‘dates’ I’ve been on weren’t real. I’ve never asked anyone to carve out a whole day to spend with me before, and I only ever wanna do it again with you.”

“Okay, sunshine,” I whisper, because I’m not capable of speaking any louder. I hug him closer to me and rock us slowly from side to side.

“So, when can we make this happen?”

I think silently over my schedule for the next week, then the week after, and I wince when I realize. “I won’t be able to carve out that much time until the Tuesday after our last preseason game.”

“But that’s almost three weeks away.” Hawk goes back to whining. Which I shouldn’t find adorable and endearing, but I’m willing to do anything for this man for a reason. I’m even willing to do something I swore I never would. “Come on, sit with me while I finish my dinner.” Maybe I can pry the plan for this fourteen-hour date out of him.

“We have to keep debating,” Hawk says suddenly, after I reheat my lasagna again.

“But I already agreed—”

“Not that.” He waves his hand in a careless way. “I think only waiting three dates to get each other naked is the right thing to do. It’s the three date rule, a classic, a cliché for a reason.”

“No. I said ten dates. That’s my rule.”

“But Dee, I need orgasms and we’re dating exclusively, just FYI.” He gives me a threatening look and I nod and go back to eating. No reason to let him know I was thinking about how to broach that very subject with him.

“Ten dates, sunshine.”

“Four,” he counters.

I look at him thoughtfully, as if actually considering it, while I chew. I let him believe he’s got me when I take a sip of water. “Ten,” I say in a tone as dry as the sand in the Sahara.

“Come on! Okay, five. Five dates, and then we *bow chicka bow wow*.” He wiggles as he sings the last part.

“You’re ridiculous,” I laugh, “but nope. Ten dates.”

“Six?” he asks and keeps going when I only shake my head. “Seven?” he pleads.

“No.”

“Eight. Please, please, Dee. Eight dates.” I can see he’s only being annoying for the sake of annoying me and doesn’t expect me to give in.

“Okay, eight dates.” I relent and go back to my last bite of dinner.

“Jesus you’re so stubborn, you ... You said yes? To eight dates? Awesome!” He looks genuinely delighted, and that’s all the reward I need for putting up with his debate.



TWO DAYS LATER, WOLF, HAWK, AND I ARE BACK ON MY couch watching *The Good Place*. As always, Hawk and I are

cuddling on one corner, and Wolf is sipping a beer on the other one.

“Pause, please,” Hawk says, when there’s a dramatic pause in the scene.

I do as he says, and he races away to the bathroom.

The man’s been putting away cokes just like his brother does beers, so I’m not surprised he’s hyper and needs a pee break. I should probably buy caffeine-free cokes, otherwise he’ll never sleep, and he’s always grumpy in the mornings when he goes to bed late and gets up early.

“Derek,” Wolf says in a serious tone. And seriously, my name coming out of his mouth sounds so fucking weird to me after years of hearing him call me Deedee. But I bet he wants me to pay attention, because he’s absolutely about to give me the “hurt my brother and I’ll hurt your face” speech. No one can sound threatening if they’re calling you Deedee, it’s just not physically possible.

I sit up and turn, so he can see my expression clearly and know I won’t lie to him. He mirrors my actions, then rubs a hand down his face.

“You know he’s gonna come out any second, so say what you gotta say, man,” I urge him.

“This is awkward as fuck,” he mutters.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve said the same thing I’m about to say to you to Birdie like fifty different times and always in a different way. I’m scared that you’re gonna hurt each other and I’m gonna be left without my best friend and with a useless, sad blob of a brother.”

“Wow, so this is all about you, huh?” I say in the most sarcastic tone I can muster. He opens his mouth, but I stop him with a raised palm. “I’m going to do my very best not to hurt him. I don’t want to hurt him, would never want to hurt him, no matter what. And against my better judgment, I won’t stop being your best friend no matter how much of a selfish asshole

you are.” He sighs in relief because he knows I mean it, since I still love him like a brother despite him being this way.

“Okay,” is all he says, and lays back down.

“Did you finish your talk already?” Hawk’s shout comes from the bathroom.

“Yes,” I shout back, and he’s running to the couch at full speed a second later. He gets comfortable on my shoulder again as I press play ... and it feels like nothing’s changed even though everything has.



“YOU GUYS ALMOST WON THAT ONE,” HAWK TELLS ME excitedly over the phone. I hide my smile from my teammates by looking out the window of the bus taking us back to the training facility in LA. We just arrived from Houston where we had our third and final pre-season game, and yeah, they were so, so, so very bad that we almost won even while actively trying to lose.

“I know, we were all getting worried that our losing streak was coming to an end. Where did you watch it?”

I listen to Hawk tell me all about his afternoon with Cindy and her family.

He and Wolf spend one day a week with them whenever they can. Cindy insists that they do whenever they’re home because she wants them to feel a family’s love.

Since their aunt and uncle got divorced, and then she remarried a few years ago and moved to New York, they’ve really only had their Uncle Hulk in LA. Ruko “the Hulk” Jankowski is a legendary retired hockey player, and legends are always busy. Or, well, he’s busy a lot of the time. He does make time for them when they remember to schedule it with his assistant. He works for the NHL, training referees, and also has a talk show with his best friend Paul Wayne where they talk about all things hockey. A lot like Clive’s show, but for hockey.

I can't wait for the day after tomorrow, my official off-day and also my first date with Hawk. Despite my common sense, I'm too excited and—ugh giddy—about our relationship actually starting.

We've kissed here and there, but any time Hawk or I start to get a little too enthusiastic I've stopped us. Hawk won't stop whining for a while and then I'll threaten to make him go to the gym with me, and he shuts up.

I've managed.

Wolf's managed as well. After our conversation a few weeks ago, he's been acting as normal as we have. None of us comment on how his brother and I now kiss when we say hello or goodnight, or when Hawk says something especially cute, or when I'm acting particularly grumpy.

It's just ... our new normal, and that's what scares me the most.

Because getting used to this is dangerous as fuck for future me, who'll have to deal with missing this new normal.

I fucking hate feeling this foreboding.

"You just have to be ready tomorrow at six. In the morning. And I mean *ready*, ready, okay? I want you standing on the sidewalk, holding a bag with all the things on the list I sent you inside it, and a Yeti with your coffee in your hand, understood?"

"Yes, sunshine," I answer dutifully. I may have packed that bag before we left LA three days ago, and I may have three alarms already set to make sure I wake up with enough time to shower and have one coffee before we leave my place. "Do you want me to call you when I wake up?" I ask the question like it's to assure Hawk I'm awake and will be ready in the morning, but we both know it's for the opposite.

Out of the two of us, he's the one more likely to oversleep and have to scramble in the early morning.

"Yes, and thank you."

“No problem. Listen, we’re about there and I’m gonna start driving, so I have to go.”

“That’s okay, drive safe please, and send me a text when you get home.”

“You can see my location all the time, sunshine.”

“I know, but still.”

“I will,” I assure him, and though I have this sudden impulse to say just one more thing—one dangerous thing—I sign off in a simpler way. “Talk later.”

“Bye.”

I clench my teeth to forget about that impulse. That’s not happening. It’s just not.



EVEN THOUGH I STEP OUT OF THE HOUSE AND LOCK THE FRONT door at five before six, Hawk’s already there. Leaning against the passenger door of his white Rover and twirling the keyring in his finger like he’s been waiting *ages* for me.

“Morning,” he says, way more brightly than I expected. I take a good long look at his face.

“Hey, sunshine.” I give him a quick kiss ... another thing I’ll have to untrain myself to do at some point in the future. *No, I gotta give us a real shot. No more thinking this will go up in flames.* “Did you sleep at all?” It’s not only the dark bags under his eyes, but he also has a crazed look in his eyes.

“Nope, which means you’re driving. The place where we’re going is already programmed into the GPS, but you gotta promise not to look at the destination. Also you gotta wake me up when we’re about to get off the highway, okay? Okay, awesome!” He throws his arms around me and kisses me with an audible smooch then jumps back to get into the passenger seat.

“Okay,” I murmur, a bit dazed if I’m honest. I throw my duffel on the back seat, place my big Yeti in the cupholder, connect my phone to the car’s Bluetooth, and by the time I’m

pulling away from the curb, Hawk's already snoring. I take a quick look in the rearview mirror and see the black Mercedes following us. That must be Tate. I take a quick glance at the plates when I can just to make sure.

The start of our date is not what I was expecting, to say the least, but also, even though I don't look at the destination, I see that the time of the drive is a little more than five hours. It worries me, only because that means spending at least ten hours in the car today, and half of that will be basically by myself. It means way too much time to think, which is something I've been actively avoiding doing for weeks now.

I put some music on, not too loudly, though I know waking Hawk up is going to be a challenge.

I spend the drive distracting myself by wondering what Hawk would want to do so much that we'd have to drive so far away to make it happen. I come up blank no matter how many options I go through. After calling Tate, to let him know we're stopping but not getting out of the car, I park in a gas station right at our exit and start the process of waking Hawk.

I lower the volume of the music first, then start speaking to him, louder and louder after every word until eventually, his eyes open.

"Are we there yet?" He groans and rubs his eyes.

"No, we just got off the highway."

"I wish we'd get off," he mutters, then opens his eyes wide. "We're almost there." And then it's as if the grogginess had never been there. "Okay, start the car, start the car." I can't help but smile at his enthusiasm.

"Are you finally going to tell me where we're going?" I know we're about to enter Carmel-by-the-Sea because of the signs on the highway, but I have no idea what we're gonna do here.

"Nope, you need to trust me." We stop at a red light, just in time for me to see him pick up a water bottle from the floor and drink a few huge gulps.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t trust you, sunshine,” I say very seriously, despite not wanting to. This should be light and breezy, no pressure, but I can’t help how I feel.

“I know that.” He leans over the armrest and gives me a sweet, slow kiss. When he leans back, he deliberately takes my hand and interlaces our fingers. He brings my knuckles to his lips and murmurs against them. “Keep driving.”

I do as he says, and ten minutes later, when I park the car in front of a huge mansion on a slight hill with a big sign that reads “Carmel Shell Spa,” I know this isn’t going to go the way Hawk wants it to.

Oh no it won’t.

ELEVEN

Hawk

I SEE THE HORROR, THE AVERSION, THE ABSOLUTE REPULSION come into Derek's eyes and I can't contain my snort.

"What did I just say, Dee?" I ask between bouts of laughter. He turns to look at me, and though he tries to hide it—bless him—the grimace and sneer are still very much present. "I just told you to trust me." I reach out to grab his hand again. "I gave you clear and irrefutable evidence that I know you better than almost anyone just a few weeks ago, so please, keep trusting me."

I see his Adam's apple bob on a hard swallow, but he nods.

Who knew a simple nod would ever make me feel like I'm invincible?

"Thank you," I say solemnly. I wish I had the words to express how thankful I am for his trust, and I mean, I'm a songwriter, I do have the words, but not right at this moment. I hope they come to me later though. He'd be super embarrassed at me writing a song about him, but I'd love to make him blush. That can be another step in my master plan.

I coax him through the empty parking lot to the reception area, where Lexy is waiting for us.

"You're right on time," she says, in her serene massage therapist tone. It always makes me happy to hear it. "Follow me, please." She leads us through the warm beige hallway that has lots of plants lined up on the floor and even hanging from

the ceiling like chandeliers. “Here we are.” She stops at the door to the changing room. “You know where to go when you’re ready.”

“Thanks Lexy,” I tell her, as I bend down to kiss her cheek.

“No problem. Hope you enjoy your day here.”

I feel Derek tense, but he manages a quick and low, “Thank you.” I squeeze his hand, hoping it tells him how much I appreciate him being kind to Lexy even though he’s freaking out.

The door bangs closed behind us after I drag him into the room that’s almost completely made out of wood. I turn to him and hope he’s ready for some *re-lax-ation*.

“Dee, I know you hate being touched by most people, even people you know well.” He takes a huge breath at that. “I’d never put you in such an uncomfortable situation, okay?”

“I know that. I just ... ”

“You get very tense in unknown environments. I got you, boo.”

“Don’t call me boo,” he says, so seriously that I bark out a laugh.

“You’re right, it doesn’t fit you. Anyway, today, *I’m* going to be giving you a massage.” I hold my arms open and make jazz hands.

“What?” he asks, unimpressed.

“You heard me,” I say cheerfully. “We gotta change now. When I planned all this, I didn’t know there wouldn’t be a happy ending at the end of the date.” I ignore his choking sound, take off my T-shirt, and start unbuttoning my jeans as I keep talking. “But since that’s now out of the question, I guess you can keep your briefs on, and I’ll put on the massage therapist’s robe Lexy left for me.”

I’m pulling it over my head when I realize Derek hasn’t moved an inch. “Come on, Dee, strip. It’s not like I’ve never seen you in a pair of shorts at the pool before.”

“This is different,” he growls.

“But it’s really not.” That’s the point I’m trying to make with all of this actually. “You and I have been in a sadly celibate relationship for years without even realizing it, and don’t bother denying it because I have proof.” I walk to him and start working on undressing him myself. There’s no rule against *that*. “You let me hug you and cuddle with you like two days after we met. You’ve let me come and go from your house like it’s mine for years, and don’t say that it’s because we’re friends because it’s not. You don’t give Appleton or AJ that kind of access to your personal space, and they’re really close friends. You don’t let Wolf do half the things you let me get away with.”

“I also let Mike hug me,” he says, like that doesn’t prove my point.

I pull his Henley off his hands and kneel in front of him—hoping it looks sexy and not like I’m nervous as hell—to take off his shoes. I roll my eyes, looking up so he can see me do it. “You and Mike were friends with benefits for more than a year, and you’ve said before that he’s the closest you’ve come to wanting to have a relationship with someone. You also told me . . .” I go on, looking down now because I’m not brave enough to see his eyes when I say this next bit. “That you were still sometimes uncomfortable with how much Mike likes to hug and snuggle and just touch in general. But you’ve never told me no when it comes to touching, and I know you would’ve if you’d been really uncomfortable. So.” I stand and hold my palms up. “You see? We’ve already been in the most intimate of relationships—at least by our standards—all this time.”

“I really hate it when you make so much sense, sunshine. You should stop. Don’t,” he snaps when I smirk and go for his pants. “I can undress myself, goddammit.”

“Then get on with it.”

His cheeks darken when I only stare at him—*adorable*. I don’t want to push my luck. “The room right on the other side

of the hallway is where I'll give you your massage. Don't be long."

I prepare the table with the sheets folded exactly like Lexy's been teaching me, connect my phone to the speakers to play the songs I know Derek won't hate—soft classical music—and choose the oils I'll use that won't make him sneeze every two seconds.

He's wearing a robe when he comes in, and I smile in the hopes that his shoulders will unglue themselves from his ears. It works a little. I do the whole routine of turning up the sheet and then staring at the wall to give him a sense of privacy.

"Ready," he whispers a moment later.

I decide staying quiet is the best way to make him relax more and more. It's gonna be hard, since being silent has never been my strong suit. I rub my hands together to warm them up and make sure my whole palms are slippery thanks to the oils, then I start pressing lightly on the center of his back.

Well, this is something I can distract myself with to keep my mouth shut. Derek has a very muscular back. Like, rippling mountains of muscle cover the top half. His lower back is slender, and the dip of his spine is so pronounced my index finger fits there and there's room for more.

After doing a soft pass over the whole area, I start at the shoulders. The muscles that are between the shoulders and neck—I forget what they're called, though Lexy told me—they're pretty big, and when I rub them in the direction of each arm, I find a few tension spots, but nothing too major.

I move strategically down, and at one point I swear I hear Derek snore, but when I stop all movement and he asks me if everything's okay, I don't know if stopping the massage woke him or if he was just breathing really loudly.

In any case, tracing every inch of his back gives me an incredible thrill and an uncomfortable boner, so when I'm done, I cover him with a thin sheet, press it into his warm skin, and take two steps back. "Now you can relax for a while, and I'll come back in fifteen minutes for the next part of our day."

My voice sounds scratchy from lack of use, so I go search for some water in hopes that it will cool me down.

Damn, if touching his back for half an hour did this to me what is the whirlpool gonna do?

Derek

MY MIND IS TOO FULL AND TOO EMPTY AT THE SAME TIME. None of the thoughts flashing through make any sense, because Hawk liquified my brain. How the fuck did he learn to give such amazing massages? How long has he been training?

When did he have time for it?

Why did I like it so damn much?

I've never had a massage in my life, the thought alone made me cringe. The closest I've come is with the Warrior's PT, Felix. He's the only one I go to whenever I need it. I don't hate it when he touches me, it doesn't make my skin crawl—like it does with most people—but I don't like it or enjoy it either. With Hawk, though ... I'm pretty sure I fell asleep at one point. I've never hated his touch. Even when I'd only known him for a few months I was fine with him hugging me for minutes. I figured it had something to do with my dumb infatuation for him, but my reaction to the massage is extreme.

The most surprising thing about the whole thing though, was the fact that he stayed silent for half an hour, and I'm worried. The scene in the changing room must've upset him. I don't want to upset him, but I'm not ready to get naked with Hawk. That would probably bring the “not-straight” thing home for him, and the more I delay that, the better. Right?

I mean, he's gotten used to kissing me at every chance pretty quickly.

That's true, and that's something I should probably ask him. I don't know any man who's thought he's straight all his life, who would be absolutely fine with kissing another man constantly. It all seems to have happened like the flick of a switch.

I sit up, dangling my feet from the table, and scrub my hand down my face. I've never felt so uncertain in my life. I

don't know if what we're doing—dating, trying “us” out—is the right thing or the stupidest thing ever. And I hate myself for not having even close to any intentions of stopping it.

I want it more than I can handle. There's no use in lying to myself. I want Hawk. And this, having him want me just as much, knowing he's thinking about me the same way I am about him, it's all I've wanted since I realized I had feelings for him.

I've been using my iron will to stop myself from making a move, and now, in the aftermath of Hawk making a surprising one, I'm floundering.

Why?

Because I'm scared shitless, and I have no recent memory of anything scaring me this much.

Not even when I decided to declare as eligible for the draft as a Black gay man. I wasn't scared when I told my classmates I'm gay in high school, or when I told Mom and Gracie. I wasn't scared about being away from them for the first time when I moved to Cavendish for College.

But Hawk scares me.

The door opens slightly, and he peeks in, smiling nervously when he sees I'm sitting up. He opens the door wider, and I can see he's wearing nothing but flip flops, and fuck-up-your-retinas-green swimming trunks. I smile at the sight. How is it that a person as discreet as humanly possible outside the football field, ended up being down bad for the flashiest man alive?

I move the sheet from my lap so he can see I'm wearing my trunks too. They're shorter and black. He smiles, and I stand and go to him without him having to ask.

No more resistance.

I mean, I'm gonna stand firm on the no-sex-till-date-eight rule. Or for as long as I can manage—which won't be long if the state of my dick at the sight of his torso is any indication. But I'm going to truly, wholeheartedly give “us” a chance.

Hawk leads me to a room that looks like a sauna, all wooden panels, though not nearly as warm and dry. In the middle there's a huge whirlpool tub, with the jets already on and making bubbles float on the surface.

There are eight carved out places for people to sit, but only two of them have cushions where the heads would rest on the edge. Not next to each other—another surprise—but opposite each other.

My sunshine makes deliberate moves like that, sneaky, smart moves that remind me he's brilliant whenever I'm stupid enough to forget.

This will be the “get to know each other” part of our date, I just know it. And as I settle down in my seat, and Hawk hands me an ice water with slices of lemon and cucumber in it, I'm proven right. The jets feel nice against my back and on my calves.

“So what's your earliest memory?”

I smile wide. “Where did you get the questions from?” I ask, instead of answering.

“A girl at my Al-Anon meeting sent me the list.” He looks bashful and shy as he says it. Always. So. Fucking. Cute. He's gonna kill me with those blue eyes, looking at me from under his lashes with all the hope in the world.

“Playing with Gracie at the beach in the winter. We had a kite shaped like a plane.”

“In Portland?” he demands, and I nod, smiling at his grimace. “Wasn't it freezing?”

“It was. But Mom would let us go out to play after school, while she went around town dropping off her resume everywhere to get another part-time job.” I shrug when his expression immediately turns sympathetic. “We didn't know how bad things were at the time,” I confess, putting my best foot forward, if you will. I know these questions are probably meant to make us open up. “She'd explained that Dad had left and wouldn't be coming back, but we didn't understand the consequences of that, beyond being sad.”

“And did you have fun with the kite?”

“Oh yeah.” I let out a soft laugh, remembering the good times with Gracie. “We flew that thing until it was about to fall apart, but then one day it got tangled with a hat that was flying away in the wind, and the owner of the hat, well, he was pissed because he cut his hand with the string. He was yelling at us, and Gracie was crying over the loss of our kite since it broke on its way down, when Mom came running down to us and gave that man the tongue-lashing of his life.” Hawk laughs, loudly, and starts skimming his fingers on the surface of the water, watching intently, listening. Really *seeing* me.

“That sounds like Mia,” he says, still smiling.

The way his biceps and shoulders shift with the movement distracts me for a second, but I quickly look back into his eyes and continue the story.

“Yeah, but anyway, that’s all I remember. But that man hired Mom right then and there. He was stressed, couldn’t get his life together. He worked in investments and was burning out fast. He thought he’d take a stroll on the beach to clear his head, when his cap flew away and then he cut his hand on a string. He was impressed with Mom and her ability to put him in his place. She still laughs when she tells us the story, that when she was done, he stared at her for a few moments, then asked if she was as good at organizing as she was at making a man feel smaller than a thumbnail.”

“Wow,” Hawk murmurs. “My earliest memory is of Wolf screaming ‘Birdie’ when I couldn’t figure out how to play Mario Kart.”

The sudden bark of my laughter startles him, and when he jumps on his seat it just makes me laugh more. “Sorry if I got too deep,” I tell him, as I wipe away the water that splashed on my face with all the ruckus.

“No, don’t be sorry. I want to know those kinds of things about you.” He brings one leg closer to himself, bending it and resting his chin on his knee after hugging his shin with his forearms. “I’m sorry mine was so boring, though.” He mock-pouts.

The urge to make that damned pout disappear, even when I know it's fake, has me trying to make him feel better. "It's not boring, but it's cool that both our memories are with our siblings."

"That's a good point," he says brightly. "Now the next question—"

"Wait," I interrupt. "Can I ask a question?" It seems to be the best thing that I could've possibly said, because he smiles so brightly it almost blinds me. There's a reason I call him sunshine. "How are you—I mean, why are you so okay with kissing a man, and being so affectionate, and why are you not even a bit weirded out about wanting to see my dick? You thought you were straight only weeks ago, Hawk. Or at least I think you did ... just, please explain to me why you're not freaking out," I'm begging by the time I get to the end, because *I am freaking out*.

His smile is way dimmer by then, and my heart travels to my throat when he looks away. "I don't know, honestly. That's the best I can do. I have no idea why I'm not freaking out." He lets out a long sigh but at least his arms start moving again, and not in an erratic way that would worry me. "I guess, the first moment I thought about you in a more-than-a-friend kind of way, was when you introduced us to all your friends."

"What happened at that moment?"

"I just saw them all coupled up." He looks back at me then. "And then I saw you, and something inside me said I could have what they have. I don't think I understood or processed it like that. I thought nothing of the strange new feeling until you were hugging me in my room, and then I just kissed you."

"It was a good kiss," I croak out after a hard swallow.

"It was," he whispers. "I wish I hadn't hurt you, but it was still amazing." He lets out a big sigh. "After ... all that mess, I couldn't stop thinking about you, about that kiss, how your chest felt against mine. All of it was constantly on my mind whenever I wasn't on stage with Wolfie. I obsessed over labels for a while, tried them all on to see if any one of them fit.

Bisexual seems to be the winner, if that makes any difference to you. But when it comes to us, I tried to tell myself it was nothing after we talked and you said you wanted to forget it, to pretend it never happened, but it didn't work."

"So you decided you wanted to date me."

"Well, that was after I took my bisexuality as fact, and also, I love you."

I stop breathing. But Hawk looks unbothered, calm, serene. *How in the fuck?*

"That's also a fact," he says with laughter in his eyes. "In case that wasn't clear."

"Sunshine," I whisper.

"Breathe, Dee." I do as he says, and then just keep on breathing.

I have zero idea what to say. Zilch. Nada.

"You'll say it back to me eventually," Hawk says easily, after watching me freak the fuck out for a few minutes. Then, still calm as ever, he reaches behind him and turns off the jets. I actually forgot they'd been massaging me since we started speaking. "Now we're gonna have some lunch, keep going through the list of questions, and then chill by the pool until it's time to head back."

I let him pull me up, wrap me in a towel, put on my flip flops, and drag me outside to what most people probably picture when they think of paradise. Damn this place is amazing. And that's what finally takes me out of my mind haze.

"How did you find this place?" I ask, bewildered.

"Oh, that's right, I didn't mention that. Mom opened this place a year after ... after, and now it's mine."

"You own a Spa?" I turn to look at him so fast I stumble a bit—*so* not like me. I'm probably dehydrated, yeah, that's it. "Oh, I didn't put it together, Carmel *Shell* Spa. That's clever." I chuckle lightly, more myself.

“I do, she left it to me and left the house here to Wolf.” The smile is back. He walks to a small table full of plates, shaded by a big blue umbrella, and sits. I follow him. Of course I do. I’m afraid I’m doomed—or blessed?—to follow him forever. “Lexy taught me how to give a massage over the last month.”

“You’ve been coming here?”

“Sometimes.” He shrugs. “Lee would drive us, Wolf would get a massage and a facial—don’t tell him I told you that, it’s a secret—and I’d get a few hours of lessons, but also over Zoom.”

He uncovers the plates and starts dishing everything out for us. I don’t see what the food is, I honestly can’t even taste it, but I eat what he gives me.

Hoping I don’t sound ungrateful, I ask what’s been bugging me since we left home. “How long are we going to stay here?”

“You have practice in the morning, so there’s two options. One, we get a helicopter ride back, and can leave whenever we want. I can come pick up my car any day.”

“What’s the other option?” I ask, already overwhelmed with the possibility of getting to ride in a helicopter. It’d be a first for me. Sometimes I forget just how rich Hawk is. Little comments like that one bring it home. It’s not only his actual wealth, but also how used to it he is. I’m still very new to a life of luxury and financial freedom.

“The other option is, we only spend one more hour here after eating, lounging under the sun I hope, and then drive back. I’d drive, of course, it’s my turn, and you can sleep a little when it gets too late.”

“Let’s do that,” I blurt.

Hawk looks at me with a knowing glint in his eyes but thankfully doesn’t comment on it.

“Okay then. Next question is ... Back in first grade, what did you want to be when you grew up?”

TWELVE

Hawk

WE WALK OUT OF THE SPA IN A COMFORTABLE SILENCE—A brand new feeling for me—and hand in hand to my car. I saw all kinds of sides to Dee today. Some I already knew, like his need for order and cleanliness, and how his mom is the same way but Gracie isn't.

I learned that the real reason why he wants them to move to LA is purely selfish. “I know it, and they know it,” he said with his eyes closed, while he was baking on a lounge. I stared at him from the pool, mesmerized by the way his skin looked, all glowy and a little damp. How his abs stayed defined, even when he was as relaxed as could be. “But I also know it could be a great move for them.”

I did my best to listen and focus on every word he said, but with that much glorious skin for me to feast on, it was a challenge.

Now, as I open the passenger door for him—a move that surprises him, but he lets me enjoy it—he's still glowing, and looking more relaxed than I've ever seen him.

I throw our bags on the back seats and start the long drive home. Tate is in the car behind us a few seconds later. I don't think Dee realized he followed us all the way here, or maybe he's grown used to my bodyguard as much as I have.

He and Rich, Wolf's bodyguard, are very unobtrusive, and aside from checking out the house before we go inside, they

don't hang out unless we're going somewhere else. I wanted to be friendlier to them when we first hired them, but they explained how maintaining emotional distance is a very important part of their job. They also let us drive our own cars most of the time, which is something both Wolf and I appreciate a lot.

I grab Derek's hand as soon as we hit the highway, and turn down the volume using the wheel controls. "So ..." I start, way more nervous than I expected to be. "Did you have fun on our first date?"

He brings my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "I did, sunshine. How about you?"

"Mm-hmm." I nod, but bite my lip to stop myself from babbling all over him. I've been doing so well all day.

"Let it rip, sunshine." There's laughter and affection in Derek's words, and my heart warms. He knows me just as well as I know him.

"I had a lot of fun, though touching you so much and seeing your abs all afternoon made me super horny, so I really want us to revisit the no-sex rule. Because seriously Dee, you're ripped, and so fucking hot, with your flawless skin all over and your supernatural-looking nose and your lips ... *unghh*," I groan. "I wanna do bad, bad things to your lips."

There's a beat of silence where I think that I might've screwed up with my over-sexed thoughts, but he reassures me by focusing on the one thing I said that's not sex related.

"Supernatural-looking nose?" He sputters and laughs. "What does that even mean?"

"You know!" I slap his thigh. His huge, hard-like-cement thigh. "In all the movies where there are vampires or werewolves or superheroes, they always have this straight nose that looks flawless and unbreakable."

"What?" He's still laughing which makes me chuckle just because I love his laugh and I hear it so rarely. I can't look at him though—*keep your eyes on the road*.

"It's a compliment," I clarify.

“I know.” He grabs my hand again. “So you had a good time, then?” he asks, with a teasing voice.

“I did, and I can’t wait for the next one.” I wish I could look at him to gauge his reaction. “We *are* having a next one, right?”

“Yes,” he whispers, and squeezes my hand. I sigh in relief and decide to save the revisiting of the no-sex rule for another moment. I want to get to the bottom of why he wants to wait. I’ll respect him implicitly, always, but I wanna know why.

“Awesome.” I can’t help my enthusiasm. “So when do you think you’ll have time again?”

“I’m pretty sure we don’t need all of our dates to be fourteen hours long, sunshine,” he teases me.

“I *know* that. And you’re supposed to plan the next one so ...” I prod.

“Okay, let me think. Next Tuesday we’re supposed to be off, but we have our first game on Thursday in Vegas for the season kickoff, and we’re flying that day. We get back on Friday, so the Saturday after this week.”

“Hmm,” is all I say, because I just had a thought. “That Friday is Wolf’s birthday.”

“That’s true.”

“We talked the other day about visiting Sterling and Jules, and Ivan, too. We haven’t seen him in forever, so maybe Wolf would want to go to your game for a kind of pre-birthday celebration? Do you think you could stay in Vegas after the game?”

“You think Wolf celebrating his birthday in Vegas is a good idea?” His voice drips with skepticism.

“Yeah. He’s turning thirty-two, not twenty-one. And he can do the same things he does in LA, but in Vegas we’d have our cousin there, and I just bet we could get my Uncle Hulk to go with us, too. Ooh, I could ask Aunt Lyla if she and Alexei could come. And Bruce!” Getting excited now, I bounce a little on my seat. “Cindy could come too, I bet, and Tristan and

Zoe. Maybe, I don't know about them, but they're all the people who care about Wolf. I bet he'd be happy with that." I realize then that I put a lot more thought into Derek's birthday, planning months in advance, than my own brother's. I feel like shit instantly.

"I think he'd like that, even though he'll pretend to be indifferent."

I snort. "Ain't that the truth. Sorry, I'm kinda bulldozing on your turn to plan a date."

"It's fine, I'll plan the next two." My heart soars at his words. *He's sure we'll have two after that.*

"Yay," I can't help but shout.

"Settle down, sunshine. Don't drive us off the highway." There's still the same amusement and warmth in his voice, though.

"I won't, though I wish I could look at you right now. Doesn't matter." I shake my head to myself. "I'll kiss your face off when we get home."

"I bet you will."

"So, you think you can stay in Vegas?"

"I'll ask Coach Rodriguez tomorrow."

"If he says yes, then it's a go. But I really should start asking Tristan, Zoe, and my aunt, so they can make arrangements. Do you mind if I call them now?"

"Go ahead."

I use the controls on the wheel to make the calls, and though Zoe tells me they can't make it—so does Bruce since he has too much work—Aunt Lyla squeals with excitement and tells me she'll make it happen. "Michael won't be able to make it, he has a gala thing he was going to make me go to, but I'll see if I can get Eli to skip school," she muses out loud, talking about her new stepson. "But I'll get Alexei to skip a few days for sure, he won't have a problem with that. He'll be a little miffed at skipping two practices, but he'll get over it."

I snort. “He’ll probably squeal as loudly as you did.”

“Ha! He’s far too dignified to act like his boring mother.”

“You don’t have a boring atom on your body, Aunt Lyla.”

“Thank you for appreciating my kind of awesome, Hawk,” she tells me as if we’re talking about the most serious of things.

“That’s my job.” I hear her sigh, and not in a happy way, so of course I ask. “What’s wrong?”

“He wants to go to the hockey school Ivan went to.” I can hear the pout over the speakers.

“Well, of course he does. He wants to be just like his dad and his brother.”

“But he only turned sixteen a few months ago.”

“And Ivan went to that school the summer after he turned sixteen, and got drafted a year later.”

“Ugh, I know. My babies want to grow up so fast.”

“They have to start young if they want to have a long career in the NHL, Aunt Lyla,” I say as gently as I can manage, and cringe when I hear her snuffle. I fucking hate hearing her cry ... Seeing her cry is impossible, I have to close my eyes when that happens.

“I know,” she whispers. “And Hulk told me he’s got just as good a shot at being drafted that young as Ivan had.”

“Of course he did. It’s just a year, and who knows? Maybe he gets drafted to New York and he can move back in.” I laugh at that. My little cousin would never move back in, not because he doesn’t love his mom, but because he likes his space. Always has, the little weirdo.

I hear her laugh, and it brings another smile to my face. We catch up on all things Wolf and me for a little while longer.

“She’s awesome.” I sigh when the call disconnects.

“She is, you’re lucky to have her.” I hear only honesty in Dee’s voice, and that has contentment filling up my whole

body. Most people think I'm lucky to have a supermodel as an aunt for literally every reason except how awesome, loving, and kind she is. But not Dee. He knows how much Wolf and I cherish our loved ones.

"So, our second date is going to be your brother's birthday?"

"It could, or ... we could go out to dinner, just you and me on Saturday, lunch on Friday?" I consider it as I speak.

"Let me talk to Coach, and if he gives the all clear and lets me stay, then we'll see how long I can actually stay. He's probably going to have us practicing on Sunday."

"That man is a dictator," I grumble.

"He can be, but he's taken us to the Super Bowl three times in the last five years and we've won one. That's not easy to do."

"I know, I know. Okay, the next question ... " Dee half groans and half laughs.



THE NEXT DAY, I'M HANGING OUT WITH WOLF IN THE POOL, and run the plan past him.

"What do you think about going to Vegas for Dee's game next weekend? And then staying for your birthday?"

He lowers his glasses and looks at me with suspicious eyes as he lays on his floating bed. The man may be a disaster walking, but he can keep his balance in the pool. I've always been the clumsy one, no matter how sober.

"You're planning to take me to Vegas ... for my birthday?"

I shrug and tell him the same thing I told Dee. "You can do the same things in Vegas that you can do here if you really want to. I mean, you've never been a gambler, so I don't think you'd want to do that anyway, but that's the only real difference I can think of."

"Uh-huh," he says, and keeps staring at me.

“I thought we could go see Sterling and Ivan, bring Uncle Hulk with us. I asked Aunt Lyla, and she said she’d come with Alexei. We could have a cool family dinner and celebrate you.”

His eyes open wide and a slow-spreading smile lights up his face. “I’d like that. Thanks for thinking about it, Birdie,” he tells me seriously. I shrug and don’t say anything because I still feel bad for not putting enough thought into his birthday.

“We gotta wait for Derek’s coach to tell him if he can stay the weekend after the game, but I think he will since they’re playing Thursday and have a longer week. In any case, if you’re into the plan, then we only have to call Uncle Hulk and ask if he can make it. Then on Saturday, I guess you can entertain yourself with them, and Dee and I will go on our second date.”

“So you’re inviting our family to keep me away from your date, huh?” He laughs. “You sneaky little shit.” He says it with love, I can tell. “In any case, I’m sure there won’t be any problems there, since the hockey season hasn’t started and he’s probably done with the referee training camp thingy. Are you finally going to tell me how your date was yesterday?” He paddles his floating bed to the edge of the pool.

I got home very late, since I stayed at Dee’s for a while after we got there, and I couldn’t let go of his face for at least an hour. To my surprise, Wolf was asleep and the house was spotless when I got here. I texted Rich to ask if Wolf had gone out—which I know I shouldn’t have, dammit, but I couldn’t help myself—and he told me Wolf had been at home the whole day.

I resisted the urge to check the trash, to look for any beer or hard liquor bottles, and went to sleep. When I woke up today, Wolf was already in the pool, so we haven’t had a chance to talk about yesterday—for him to interrogate me, more like.

When he very carefully puts one leg at a time on the edge of the pool, I have this thought of the bed sliding back to the

middle of the pool and him falling. I laugh out loud, and he looks at me like I'm insane once he's standing up.

What did he ask me? Oh right, the date. My mouth stretches into an even wider smile just thinking about it.

"That good, huh?"

"Yeah." I sigh like a lovesick puppy, because I am.

"Oh my God, did you convince him to put out on the first date or something?"

"What? No!" I knew it was a mistake to tell him about Dee's condition of waiting till date eight. "It was just a really good date."

"Did he like the spa?"

"Yes, he said it looked like paradise. And he loved the massage so much he even fell asleep for like a minute," I tell him, excited.

Wolf nods with zero traces of humor. "Good."

I roll my eyes at him. "You're such a protective bear, Wolfie."

"No, I'm a protective wolf." He smirks at me.

"Ugh, that's bad, even for you." We laugh together, and I save a mental picture of this second on the "happiest moments" file in my memories.

I'm dating the only person who's ever made me feel butterflies, and like I'm special. I'm laughing with my brother while lounging by the pool on a gorgeous day, and I'm going to see my family soon.

Things are perfect.

"Let me call Uncle Hulk," he says, and reaches for his phone.

"No, let me. Otherwise you're gonna convince him to be all overprotective too." Another smirk tells me I'm right. "Besides, I've been thinking of the perfect words to invite him *forever*."

“Oh, Lord,” he mutters, as I bring the phone to my ear.

The call connects after two beeps. “Hawk, my boy, how are you?”

“I’m good Uncle Hulk, how are you?”

“Everything’s fine, as always. Just got back to LA a few hours ago. Glad you called.”

“Glad I caught you at a good time. So hey ... How’d you like to go on a date with me?” Wolf’s laugh rumbles out, and I bet our uncle hears him because he chuckles too.

“What the hell are you up to?”



IT’S SUNDAY, AND AFTER A GRUELING PRACTICE, DEREK decided he’d better come over here for our hangout time instead of going home and waiting for us to get there.

I tackle him to the couch—taking advantage of his tiredness—and attack his mouth the next second. I’m horny as fuck and I haven’t seen him since Tuesday. Who knew almost five full days could feel like an eternity?

His strong body feels perfect under me, and my swelling cock fits perfectly in the dip of his abs. God, I love that he’s taller than me, and bigger than me. His arms come around me the second I thrust my tongue into his mouth, and they lock me in like steel. *So fucking strong.* I feel a tremble go through my body when I feel his erection harden against my thigh.

I’m turning him on. Fuck yes. My hips start moving without any prompting, and when his hands travel down my back and to my ass, squeezing harder, I suddenly wish he was the one pinning me down so I could do the same. I picture his perfect, juicy ass in those ridiculously sexy gray and blue Warrior’s sweats.

“Derek,” I whimper, then my need to keep tasting him takes over. I start on his cheeks, move to his jaw, leaving tiny licks and soft bites on his neck. When I get to the collar of his

T-shirt, I groan at the offending fabric. I fist the shirt over his abs and start to push it up, I need it *off*.

“MY EYES! MY EYES!” Wolf’s scream of terror has me springing away from Derek and landing on my ass. Oh shit, I’d forgotten about him. At least the hard floor takes care of deflating my dick. His impersonation of Phoebe is spot on, dammit.

“Ugh.” Dee groans and turns onto his belly on the couch. I can’t stop the cackle that comes out of me.

“Sorry, Wolfie.” I stand and bend down to kiss Derek’s cheek. “What do you want to drink?”

“Just water.” His voice is still a groan. “Thanks for stopping us,” I hear him tell Wolf on my way to the kitchen.

So *he* wouldn’t have stopped us? Hmm ... that’s something to consider.

But no, I have to respect Dee’s wishes. I will.

I grab a bag of chips, and a bag of the cardboard thingies impersonating chips that Dee likes, and join them on the couch. I’ll take all the cuddles with Derek until he has enough trust in us to *go all the way*. We’ll get there, I know we will.

“So if you win you can stay till Sunday?” Wolf asks Derek as I walk into the living room.

“That’s what Coach said.” Derek shrugs and takes the bag of chips I offer. I take a bowl to Wolf and dump half of the real chips in.

“Then you better win, because I want a weekend with you in Vegas.” Wolf’s voice sounds more excited than it’s been for a long time. I’m so glad I made it happen in a roundabout way.

“That’s the plan,” Derek confirms, with a predatory look in his eyes.

THIRTEEN

Derek

THE ENERGY POURING FROM THE STANDS IN THE LAS VEGAS stadium is like oxygen for my blood.

I've missed this.

I'm always happiest when I have someone to beat to the ground, prey to chase, and a game to win.

There are more people wearing Warrior's blue than you'd normally see at an away game. Playing so close to home has its advantages, and having your fans chanting in the stands is one of them.

I hear the boos and the cheers as we run out of the tunnel and to our sideline, but the only thing in my head is the fact that Hawk is somewhere in the stadium. In one of the suites, with his family and Sterling and Jules. Or maybe they're in Gab's box? They could be, since Jules and Sterling are good friends of hers, but they didn't tell me.

I see on the jumbotron it's still fifteen minutes before kickoff, so I let myself think about him for a moment. The way his smile gets bigger and brighter whenever I kiss him, like me taking the initiative is all he needs to be happy. The way he melts into me when I hold him close.

Everything about Hawk makes me want him more and more. But the fear that this won't end well, that I'll fuck it up somehow, hasn't left me. I walk to the middle of the field with

AJ and Devon, and greet Luke Riggs, the QB of the Las Vegas Rogues and his two captains.

Everyone shakes hands with everyone, and when Luke stands in front of me, waiting for the refs to come over and do the coin toss, I smirk at him.

“It’s been three years since you’ve beaten us at the kickoff,” I tell him, letting my shit-talking-self take control.

“Aw, you’re worried about us? Don’t be, we’ll beat you this time.”

I can’t say anything back since the refs come over then.

“See you in a few,” I murmur to Luke, when I give him another bro hug. “I’ll be the one in your face all game long.”

“You’ll be the one trying to catch me.” He winks at me, and we go to our benches to hear the national anthem.

The game starts, and as expected, Luke signals a motion right before the snap, two tight ends block first then start running, but I know they’re not going for the middle of the field, since they pass by me without stopping and with our cornerbacks hot on their heels.

Two wide receivers run on my other side, and I know they’re covered too, that leaves ...

The Las Vegas running back is covered by Appleton, so I know Riggs doesn’t have any opening. So it’s up to me.

I see the moment Luke realizes it and hauls ass to the left, where I just bet ... yup, he’s running it. I’m two feet away when he feints right, and I fall for it, dammit, but he makes a mistake. Instead of following through, he looks downfield and takes two steps back. That’s all I need. I charge, and he flees back—three steps, six steps, ten steps. Gotcha.

I sack him with ten yards of loss. Fuck yes.

The crowd goes wild with shouts of outrage and chants for the Warriors. I smirk as I leave the field. Rory, our other starting safety, can take this one. It’s gonna be a pass for sure and he knows it.

I sit on the bench and get a bottle of Gatorade. I look up to see if they're replaying my sack on the big screens. Instead, I see Hawk holding a small sign that says "Derek," then the image moves to Wolf who's also holding one up, "Johnson." this one says. Hulk is next with "Real" on his sign, then there's not-little-at-all Alexei with a wide, excited, innocent smile. His sign says "Life". And lastly, there's Ivan, better known as Eagle. His says "Warrior." I smile as the crowd cheers, and then let out a bark of laughter when Ivan flips his sign and it says, "Sorry Gab." The camera pans to the owner of the Las Vegas Rogues, and she gifts the world with her epic eye roll.

Our defense shuts them down and they punt. I give AJ a pat of encouragement before he runs out to the field. It's time for him to do what I know he can.

But Las Vegas' defense is just as good as ours, and after seven plays, the ball is theirs again. That's pretty much how the whole first half goes, with the defenses dominating the game. With ten seconds to go in the second quarter, I see Luke's getting desperate and he's about to do something reckless. It's something he really should work on—not that I'll ever tell him—because he makes a lot of mistakes when he's feeling pressured. Our D line does a great job of making him so, and just like that, he throws a beautiful pass to his tight end over the middle, but it's tipped off by one of our guys—I have no idea who—and that means it basically lands on my chest.

I run for my life, going wide left and praying I can make the seventy yard run to the end zone—there's no time for AJ to come out here and close this thing.

With a few great blocks from my guys, I get there, and since I see a part of the stands filled with Warriors fans in the front row, I jump up and throw my arms up to the sky.

We're up seven to three, and now it's time to keep working.

Hawk

"DEREK FUCKING JOHNSON," GAB MUTTERS, AS SHE STANDS and goes to the back wall of her suite where no cameras will

see her. She bangs her head a couple of times against a panel that opens up to a refrigerator, then takes out a beer.

“He’s really good,” I say proudly. “Can I have one too?” I ask, as sweetly as I can since I’m enemy number one at the moment. I almost flinch from the seething look she gives me as she closes the fridge without saying anything.

Since she didn’t say no, I grab one myself. “Your defense is killing it just as much as LA’s, Gab. It’s just halftime, and the game’s super close. Don’t worry so much.” I walk to her and give her half a hug. I know she’s not happy about our signs. It was a great idea, though. Wolf asked us to do it after the first sack Derek got, and we all agreed. I mean, even Tate and Rich smirked. They’re hanging out by the door, so no cameras catch them either.

Gab nods seriously and goes back to sitting with Aunt Lyla. I go with her because I’ve been sitting with Sterling, Hulk, and my cousins the whole time.

“Is my baby Ivan in trouble?” Lyla asks with a teasing smile.

“Of course he’s not,” Gab scoffs. “He’s getting close to Jules’ numbers, so he gets a pass. This time.” She says the last part louder, and I see Ivan wince. He comes over and sits next to his mom, looking more like the twenty-year-old young man he is when he lays his head on her shoulder.

Aunt Lyla smiles serenely and runs her fingers through his blonde hair. “I won’t let them coerce me into rooting for the enemy ever again, Gab. I promise.”

“Good. I gotta check my goodies bag since we have time now.”

“Oh yes,” Lyla says excitedly. “I brought the new skin care line for you, and some of your girls’ favorites. We saw them a week ago at some Columbia alumni thing Michael dragged me to.” She rolls her eyes, but I can see the man can’t exasperate her, no matter how many events he has to go to. “And they told me how much they liked these.” She points them out and I

tune out of the conversation approximately three milliseconds later.

Ivan and I share a look and escape to our seats. I grab Alexei in a bear hug and wrestle him a little. He overpowers me easily since he's already three inches taller than me, and has way too much muscle for a sixteen year old.

I just bet he'll be a carbon copy of his dad, though he has his mother's face.

"Why didn't Eli come?" I ask when I settle down, defeated and winded after the quick wrestle. Alexei was worried about living with his new stepdad and stepbrother after the wedding a few years ago, but he became fast friends with Eli, and even likes Michael. Hell, we all like Michael, Hulk especially.

"He's taking some special course on programming or something and didn't want to miss it. Also," he whispers conspiratorially, "I know he and Michael wanted to give us this time as a family, even though they're family too. But it's been months since I've seen Dad or Ivan. They didn't want Mom to know, but Eli told me."

"You're happy there then?" I ask just to make sure.

"I am but ..."

"You want to play in the NHL, and you won't have the best chances of that happening if you don't move to bumfuck nowhere for that hockey school." I gathered.

"Yes," he whispers, and lowers his head.

"Hey, don't feel bad about that. It's your dream, and you don't get that specific dream unless you work for it when you're young. Your mom knows it, you just gotta make the choice."

He swallows hard and speaks in a tone that reminds me how young he is. "You don't think Mom will be mad?"

"She'll be sad," I correct, and quickly continue because I see that's not what he wants to hear. "She'll be sad whether you fly the coop at sixteen or at twenty-six Lex. She's your mom. She wants to see you a lot, but she also knows the deal

with the NHL. She's been through it before. So I say, go for what you want. The people you love will be there either way, okay?"

"Okay," he whispers, and I hug him. He lets me for once, not complaining about disliking hugs.

The game starts up again, and we all straighten and get ready to cheer ... for both teams, which is weird, but whatever.

The second half is as entertaining as the first, which isn't a lot, but the last two minutes are insane.

The minute and a half remaining in the game crawls by as LA tries to move the ball downfield. They get to the fifteen-yard line but are stopped, so they prepare to kick. Instead, keeping the ball upright on the turf, the holder stands, lightning quick, and throws to an LA player who's all alone in the far-left corner of the end zone.

The place erupts. The Warriors win in the literal last second, and with a trick play.

Gab looks gobsmacked, and thank God I didn't celebrate because that would've been mean. "Oh-kay," she says after a few minutes of silence. "That's football for you." She shrugs. "And it's only the first game of the season. So you're all coming over for dinner, right?" We all just stare at her.

"I had planned for us to go out to a restaurant or something," I tell her.

"You can't just go out in Vegas, Hawk. Come on!" She throws up her arms and gestures to Sterling and my uncle, aunt, cousins. "You all out together would cause a damn mob on the Strip. Like my father, brother, and nephew going out," she grumbles. "No matter how much security you have, that's not a good idea, no. You're coming to my place and you'll eat whatever I give you." She points at me threateningly. I raise my arms in surrender.

"What did I do?"

She just growls and walks away.



I WAIT WITH TATE IN THE FAMILY WAITING AREA FOR VISITING teams. We're the only people here, and I feel restless because my bodyguard is standing behind me silently. It makes me feel so damn awkward every time.

Finally, Derek opens the door with a huge smile.

"You won," I screech, and feel blood flood my face a second later when I see Derek's good friend, Fred Appleton, and AJ appear behind him. "Sorry." I wince.

"It's okay, sunshine." Derek walks to me but doesn't touch me, which is unacceptable. I'm about to protest when he keeps going. "I didn't kiss you because I don't know if you want people to know you're ... " He seems unsure on how to finish the sentence. So I help out.

"Bi?"

"Mmhm," is all he says.

Instead of talking and talking some more, I throw myself in his arms and give him the congratulatory kiss he deserves.

"Oh." I hear a new voice. I lean my forehead on Derek's and keep my eyes closed. I don't want the moment to end yet. "I didn't know this was a thing ..."

"Yeah, it's news to us too," Appleton says, and when I open my eyes, I see the pair along with Luke Riggs smiling at us. I sigh in relief.

"Nice to meet you, Luke." I walk over to him with my hand extended. "That last pass for the touchdown was really amazing. You played well against a formidable defense."

"Thanks." He chuckles and shakes my hand.

"How you doin' little Hawk?" Appleton asks me with a teasing smile. I haven't hung out with Derek's teammates much, but I've met them before.

"I'm doin' just dandy, Fred." I imitate his southern accent and call him by his first name—which he hates—because he's

calling me little Hawk.

I fist bump with AJ, knowing he doesn't need any more words.

"Gab told me to bring whoever I wanted over," Derek says, hugging me from behind. "Apparently, Appleton and AJ were thinking of staying one more night in Vegas, and my offer convinced them." He looks at me with what most people would assume is an angry scowl, but on Derek it means he's worried.

"That's cool. They can come to Wolf's dinner tomorrow night too if you want?" I ask the room in general. "But Saturday is mine."

"You got it, sunshine." He kisses my temple, and we walk out of the stadium.

FOURTEEN

Hawk

DEREK AND I GET INTO MY RENTED SUV WITH TATE AT THE wheel and the rest of the guys go with Luke.

I have no issues staying silent on the forty-minute drive to Gab's place, since half the time Derek's tongue is inspecting my tonsils, and the other half I'm comfortably lying over his lap while he gets out all the impressions of the game.

It's the only time that Dee really babbles—after a hard-fought win. I can tell playing football is his favorite thing. He loves everything about it and could talk for hours.

Everyone's already there when we walk into the dining room with a huge table that could probably seat thirty people.

I'm sure there are interesting conversations happening all around us, but I couldn't say about what. This time, I'm not distracted because of one thought I can't help but follow down the rabbit hole of my brain, well not exactly.

It's just that ... Dee's distracting. Not only having his arm wrapped around me throughout the night, and how safe and protected it makes me feel, but also how I didn't think twice about his teammates seeing us together.

I know, I really do, that coming out is a hard thing for most queer people. What does it mean that it was so easy for me? That all of it—accepting my feelings for Dee, kissing, cuddling, showing and saying how I feel about him—has been like second nature? Like an inevitable thing?

I'm sure a big part of it is because my brother's bi, so I don't think twice about it, never have. There's also the fact that I have the most amazing people around me.

Is that all it takes?

Maybe it's also my ADHD ... but no, that should actually be making it worse, right? Ugh, I don't know. I'm gonna have to talk to my therapist about this, and she's gonna make me answer my own question.

I hate it when she does that.

"You okay?" Dee's voice startles me. I look at him questioningly. "You were ... growling, sunshine."

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, I'm fine." I smile at him, and he nods once and brings me even closer to him.

"So, how are Alex and Lucy settling in at Harvard?" he asks Gab. I realize then that all the other football players, plus Jules and Sterling, left already, and we're in the living room. Damn, how long have I been lost in my head?

I hope no one got mad because I was so spaced out. I look around the room and see Wolf talking to Hulk and Lyla. He's got a half-full glass of ... I'm guessing rum and coke in his hands, but he doesn't look drunk.

I know he *is* though. He's just gotten a lot better at hiding it, or maybe I've gotten too used to it. I put it out of my mind, not thinking about that tonight. I try to pay more attention to what everyone is saying, Wolf talking about how we haven't really started writing the next album, Ivan saying how happy he is in Vegas and with his teammates, Alexei and Aunt Lyla talking about New York and their little blended family, Uncle Hulk about his job. All of them are catching up, and I can't seem to put two words together.

"Hey," Derek says. I look at him and he looks really worried now. I wish I could tell him everything is fine, but I don't know why I'm not feeling like myself. I'm so tired.

"Hey, are we going back to the hotel now?"

“Yeah, sunshine. Everyone’s saying goodnight. I, uh.” He coughs and clears his throat. “I didn’t make any reservations.” He pauses for a long moment, looking intently at me as if he’s waiting for me to understand whatever he’s saying.

“Derek,” I say as patiently as I can. “I’m falling asleep here, you gotta just spit it out.”

He gives me a tiny understanding smile. “Can I stay with you? Until we go back home?”

His words perk me right up. “Yes. I need a chaperone,” I say, with what I intend to be a sexy leer but I’m probably too tired to pull it off. “I might”—I break off to yawn—“fall asleep in the elevator otherwise.”

He lets out a measured breath. “I love your smile.” Some would say he sounds annoyed, but in the Derek scale, he looks like a lovesick puppy. Which makes me happier than is probably healthy.

I kiss him, how can I not? And only the loud clearing of a throat makes me pull away. I see my family standing and hovering, so with a snort, I stand and say goodnight to Gab.

“Thank you for having us, and for the amazing dinner, Gab.”

“No problem. Don’t be strangers, okay? Come see a game when the hockey season starts. I know Sterling would love the company.”

Derek snorts from behind me. “You just love it when rock stars are there because it drives the ratings up.”

“I do love that,” she says, while shimmying her shoulders. “But I like their company too.” She winks at Wolf.

“See you soon, in LA,” Gab tells Derek.

“Week ten, right?”

“Yes, right before Thanksgiving. We’ll get you back, don’t you worry about that.”

“Looking forward to seeing you try.”

Once the shit talking is over, we climb into the rented SUVs and drive to the Winner Resort. Hulk and Lyla climb into one with Wolf—which I don't think is an accident. I'm sure they want to have a few words with him. I hope he listens to them.

Just like at dinner, I hear Ivan, Alexei, and Derek chat softly, but I can't seem to focus on the words. I close my eyes, unable to keep them open any longer, and the next thing I know, we're in the underground garage of the hotel.

I let Derek pull me out of the car and we all troop into the elevator, with Tate and Rich as well, so it's a little bit crowded. It gives me the perfect excuse to cuddle up close to Dee in the corner. Since I made all the reservations, we all get out on the same floor.

I realize then that Ivan is with us. "You're staying here?" He has a house or an apartment of his own I'm sure.

He smiles sheepishly. "Yeah, having a sleepover with Dad and Lex."

"And I have twelve hours by myself," Aunt Lyla declares, like she just won the lottery.

"Good night, everyone," I say when we reach my door, which is the first one on the way. I hug Wolf for a long moment. "Happy last day as a thirty-one-year-old," I murmur.

"Thanks, Birdie. Love you."

"Love you, too."

"Night, Deedee. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he sing-songs as he spins on his heel.

Dee snorts. "We're gonna do a lot less," he tells me, with a teasing glint.

"Ugh." I groan as I open the door. "You enjoy teasing me way too much."

"I do." He looks so damn pleased, I wish I had the energy to tease him back, but as tired as I am I doubt I can even get hard.

Derek

“COME ON, SUNSHINE. TIME FOR BED.” HAWK POUTS, BUT HIS eyes are almost closed as I walk him to the bedroom.

“Too tired to try and seduce you,” he mumbles.

“I know,” I tell him, with zero sympathy.

“Not even a handjob.” I have no idea what he’s saying, and I doubt he does either.

“Sunshine, if you want to rub one out you can do it in the shower,” I tell him, when we stop by the foot of the comfortable-looking bed. “I’ll even stand by the door and make sure you don’t fall asleep.”

He groans again and even rubs his eyes like a little kid. “No. I’m so tired I doubt I can get hard anyway.”

With that said, the little minx takes off his pants and briefs in one swoop, and way faster than I thought he was capable of in this state.

I see him smirk at me when I can finally tear my gaze away from the perfect, long—

“Doesn’t mean I can’t tease you.” He takes off his shirt, then jumps on the bed face down, legs and arms spread. “You have to cuddle me.” His words are muffled by the pillow under his face, but I can hear the demand loud and clear. “Because I’m so tired and I always fall asleep faster when you’re holding me.”

“Yeah, I know.” I run a hand over my head and unbutton my slacks. “Okay, but I’m keeping my boxers. Almost-naked cuddling isn’t sex,” I warn, like I somehow won an argument.

We both know I didn’t.

“Whatever.” He shifts so I can get him under the covers. When I settle in next to him, he shifts so we’re lying like we always do on the couch—his head on my shoulder, my arm around him, and his hand over my chest. I feel at peace the second his fingers start to shift over my chest hair. That’s something new.

“It was nice today,” he whispers. “Not only watching you play, and hanging out with Sterling, my family, and Gab, but also ... ” He trails off to take a deep breath, like he’s gathering the courage to say what’s on his mind. “Barely noticing Wolf. Oh, God. I feel like shit for being relieved and so happy to basically not care—”

“No, sunshine. It’s that you weren’t worrying, not that you don’t care. Of course you care about Wolf, you always do, and you always will. But it’s been years now, of you always having to make sure he stays alive, that he doesn’t make a spectacle of himself, and everything in between. You’ve had some ‘off’ days, but never one where he’s been surrounded by family, and not since it’s gotten this bad.

“Tonight, you didn’t have to think about him every second, sunshine, and that’s a first. So yeah, you’re probably tired because you’re just now feeling all the weight you’ve been carrying and always pretending you’re not.”

“*Ugh*. Why do you sound so wise when I’m too tired to understand what you’re saying?” He keeps moving his fingers, from side to side, and when they pass over my nipple, goosebumps erupt all over my skin. Damn, he drives me insane.

“Grab my butt,” he says sleepily. I snort, but do as he says, reaching out with my free hand. “Feels nice,” he whispers. Then just as his breath is evening out says, “I love you, Derek.”

Fuck, I love him too. So fucking much, it’s the scariest thing in the world. How can I ever accept the power he has over me?

How can I ever trust that this is real? That this can last?

He sleeps peacefully in my arms, while my mind goes fucking haywire.

FIFTEEN

Hawk

I COME FULLY AWAKE WHEN DEREK GROANS AND HIS ARMS tighten around me. I don't understand what's happening until he shifts and his morning wood presses against the inside of the thigh I have thrown over him.

“Fuck,” I say, in a voice growly with sleep. My own erection is also wide awake against Dee's hip, and there's nothing I want more than to grind against his hard abs to find some release. But I can't. I—Derek's dark eyes squint at me and all thoughts leave my head.

He's so damn handsome, so intense all the time, but right now, he looks relaxed and content. I lean over, and seal my mouth over his the next instant. I don't give a thought to morning breath until I taste his, and really, it's not that bad.

I've woken up next to a lover less than a handful of times, and it's never been like this. I've never *needed* to kiss someone except for Derek.

His hands travel down my back once I'm lying completely over him, and when he squeezes my cheeks hard, I remember my show last night about not wearing any underwear to bed. The fact that Derek is, makes me whine when I unglue our mouths.

“Please, Derek.” I'm not even a little ashamed of my begging moan, I also don't know what I'm begging *for*, but I find out real fast that it's the wrong thing to do.

“No. I’m sorry. I can’t.” His clipped words sting, but his gentle shove so I slide to the side fucking *burns*.

“I—” I start, trying to salvage my dignity somehow. But how can I possibly do that? “I’m sorry, Derek.” My words come out robotic. “I want to respect your wishes and not be pushy. I was half asleep and just got carried away. It won’t happen again.” I turn around and see my pants with my briefs bunched up on top of my shoes, so I reach down and put them on quickly. I’m about to run away to the bathroom, to try and get my breathing under control, when it dawns on me that he hasn’t said anything. I turn back and see him with his head thrown back, arm over his eyes.

I take a deep breath and prepare to be dismissed, but I have to ask this, I’ve been waiting for weeks.

“I don’t understand, though, why you want to wait.” He doesn’t move his arm. I only see his lips tighten. “I mean, it’s not like we’re virgins and we have to make our first time special, right?” I crawl back onto the bed, needing to be closer to him, and move his arm away so I can look into his eyes again. “Can you please explain it to me, Dee?” I ask in a soft tone.

He stares at me for a long moment, looking unsure, then he sits up and scoots back to lean his back against the headboard. “The only person I’ve fucked who I actually knew and liked before is Mike, and that, even though everything is normal now, changed things about our friendship for a time. I’m not ready for anything to change about *our* friendship.”

Well what goes around comes around, doesn’t it? Derek told me I broke his heart when I said us kissing didn’t have to mean anything back in February, and now he’s broken mine by doing the same.

Does it mean he doesn’t want to date anymore? Is that what he’s saying? I’m too afraid to ask, but I wait for him to say it outright.

Once more though, he stays silent. Fuck, he’s not really *in* this, is he? Derek doesn’t believe in me. Or maybe I should’ve

listened to him when he said he doesn't want to be in a relationship.

I should've believed him and not pushed.

What do I know, anyway?

I feel tears gathering in my eyes, so I go ahead with my plan to flee to the bathroom. Today isn't the day for this. We have lots of plans and it's already ten in the morning. We need to be ready in half an hour.

"We need to get ready," I tell him, without looking back. "We're waking Wolfie up and then heading out right after. No time for breakfast, unless you call for room service."



DEREK IS MORE SUBDUED THAN NORMAL WHEN I COME OUT OF the shower, but he's ready and he fakes cheer really well when we wake up Wolf, singing way too loudly.

When my brother goes into his own bathroom though, his smile drops so fast it gives me whiplash. But I say nothing.

Because I have no idea what I'm supposed to say, and until I do, I'll just keep going along. He hasn't kicked me to the curb, hasn't officially broken things off, so there's still hope. Right? Right.

We meet back up with Wolfie, and with Alexei, Ivan, Hulk, and Lyla in front of the elevator at eleven on the dot. They all make a big production of showering my brother with love, and it makes me happy to see it. He needs it more than most, and I'm only one man. Derek's also not the hugging type—clearly—and we have Cindy, of course, but Wolf needs more love.

Derek takes my hand and interlaces our fingers on the short ride to the roof of the building. What does that mean? He never used to hold my hand when we weren't dating, so this is an obvious change. Does he not see that? Is it only because he's about to get on a helicopter for the first time?

Ugh, I can't keep thinking about this. I'll have to wait until later ... probably tomorrow. No matter how much I dread it. It's not even about the sex, not really. I just want to feel safe in our relationship. I want to give him that safety too.

Why won't he let me, dammit?

The luxurious helicopter I chartered is waiting for us, shut off for now so we can walk comfortably to it. We greet our pilot—a serious-looking woman named Carolina—then pile in, and soon after, are flying over the strip and to the desert.

Man, I can't wait to get to the Grand Canyon. Wolf and I went with Mom like a million years ago, and the way he smiled when I suggested we go back this weekend, to have a not-at-all-rustic picnic in the desert, told me I'd hit the jackpot with that idea.

The second the big opening in the earth comes into view, we all fall completely silent. Not that we were talking much before, but it's noticeable. It's fucking majestic. That's the only word I can think of to describe it.

Like all nature, it brings home just how tiny I am compared to what surrounds me. The feeling brings me peace. Because I'll never be enough on my own to damage it in any way. My actions alone are not powerful compared to this. I'm only a man, doing my best.

It settles me, but it very clearly *unsettles* Dee.

After we wander for an hour, just walking from one huge drop-off to another, he pulls me further away from everyone else and whispers frantically.

"I'm sorry, okay? I don't know exactly what for, though. I don't know how to explain anything, but I clearly fucked up somehow and I'm sorry. Please say something."

"I would if you'd let me speak," I say, reluctantly amused by his panic. Why is he so perfect? Why do I have so many questions and no answers?

I sigh, letting it all out, and rest my forehead on his shoulder looking at the incredible miracle in front of us.

“You’re an idiot if you think our friendship hasn’t changed already. It changed the second I kissed you, so I guess I was an idiot, too, saying it didn’t have to mean anything. We’re dating Derek, of course it’s fucking changed. We’re more than friends now, but that doesn’t mean we’re *not* friends. You hurt me by treating me like someone who doesn’t know his own mind. You hurt me when you said you don’t want anything about our friendship to change, because that makes me feel like you’ll never actually want more. That you don’t and never will have the big feelings for me that I already have for you. Most of that’s not your fault. It wouldn’t be your fault if you didn’t feel like that. Love is simple. It either is, or it isn’t.” I step back and look him in the eyes then, as serious and steady as my breaking heart allows me to be. “You are, however, responsible for your words and your actions, and it feels like you’re just leading me on. I’m already at the point of no return, so you better figure out fast if you’re in this or not.”

He opens his mouth, but I stop his words with a shake of my head. “Not here, and not today. We’ll talk tomorrow, on our date.” I try not to say the last word sarcastically. I really do, but I don’t manage it. It seems like a big fat joke now. It’s all a joke.



OUR PICNIC IS IDYLLIC. IF IT WEREN’T FOR MY CONSTANT watering eyes and my closed throat, that is. Otherwise, yeah, as close to a perfect day as it can get in my life.

Wolf laughs and smiles the whole time. I haven’t seen him smile this much in years. It gives me hope that things *can* get better. I didn’t ask for there to be no alcohol—as much as I wanted to—at our picnic, but Wolf asks for a soda. I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from saying *anything*.

It’s not in my control. It’s not in my control. It’s not in my control.

“Hey, Ma? Do you remember that picture of you and Aunt Shell here? When you were both young?”

Hulk cuffs Ivan over the head. “Your Mom’s still young.” I snicker as I watch my cousin rub his head, and smile at the uniqueness of my Uncle and Aunt’s relationship as he leans over and kisses her cheek. “She’s the most beautiful woman in the world and always will be.”

“You know millions of people think the same, Hulk,” I tell him. “You’re not so special.”

“Don’t think you’re old enough not to get a good smack in the head, Birdie.”

I smirk at him. “You’d have to catch me first, old man.”

“Old my ass. But I’m enjoying this thing”—he gestures at the foie gras on top of a slice of baguette—“too much to move. Also, yeah. I know millions of people think the same, but only two of those have had the pleasure of being her husband, so my opinion counts more.”

“It absolutely does, Ruko,” Aunt Lyla tells him, as if talking to a small child. “But yes, baby, I remember the picture. It was taken when we moved to LA. Or right before, I should say. We drove all the way from Chicago, and Vegas was on the way.” She laughs, and the memory of my mother laughing in the same carefree way squeezes my heart. “We were so broke, but we saw a sign for the Grand Canyon and we detoured to come and see it.” She gets a little misty-eyed, which makes one of the tears lurking in the corner of my eye finally fall. “We had nothing to lose, and big dreams to work for.”

“We should recreate the picture,” Wolf declares, and gestures to me, Ivan, and Alexei. “The four of us. It can go in a frame right next to that one over your mantle.” Just like Hulk, he leans in and kisses her cheek.

So that’s what we do. Lyla pulls up the picture on her phone. They had arms thrown over each other’s shoulders and huge smiles. “The most beautiful sisters in Hollywood history.” That’s what they were known as when they were “discovered” more than thirty years ago, and I’ve always agreed. But I’d replace Hollywood with the world.

We take photos of the four of us, in pairs, and some improvised shots with our cousins—the muscly giants—carrying us. Except for Alexei’s face, and our eyes, we all look a lot more like our fathers, so it’s only logical. Alexei is a baby Hulk in the making though, no matter what his face looks like.

I take another mental photo, storing it away for hard times, just like Mom taught me to.



ON THE FLIGHT BACK TO VEGAS, I GET THE SHOCK OF MY LIFE when Wolf starts humming. At first I’m sure I can’t be hearing him correctly because of all the noise of the engine, but when I press my hands against the headset, I realize he is ... He’s humming the lullaby Mom wrote for us.

I also hear a distinct snuffle, and then a second later, Aunt Lyla starts singing. “Run, run, run, you will run, my strong wolf. Fight, fight, fight, you will fight for what is right. You will love forever, my loyal wolf. Strength lives in you, you will prevail, my knight.”

“Oh Jesus,” I whisper, before my throat closes completely. I hang my head as my shoulders shake. It’s been so long since I’ve heard it. Eight years.

“Fly, fly, fly, you will fly, my fearless hawk. Search and find, you will search and find your dream. You will love forever, my loyal hawk. You’ve always been made of light, my sunbeam.” Dee’s arm comes around me when Lyla finishes my part of the song. I can’t help but lean on him. No matter what’s going on, I know I can. And that just makes me cry more.

I let it out. I don’t wail or anything, but when I feel her absence so keenly, I have to let it out in the moment. When I finally look up, I see Wolf’s got his little notebook out and is writing frantically. I leave the comfort of Derek’s embrace to read the words, and a melody starts shaping in the back of my brain. I don’t disturb it, but I let it all whirl around inside me.

Just like Mom taught me to.

When Wolf stops writing, looking lost, I gently take the pen and notebook from him, and let it all out.

I look up, surprised and startled when the helicopter bumps as it lands on top of the Winner Resort. Wolf and I don't waste any time. Our family knows what we need to do, they know where to find us if they want to, but Wolf and I need to go do one of our favorite things now. We're writing a song.



“THAT’S IT,” WOLF WHISPERS, WIDE-EYED AND LOOKING exhausted. I have no idea how long it’s been since we stumbled into my hotel room, but I realize it’s dark outside the floor-to-ceiling windows and all the lights of the room are lit, so ... a lot.

A bottle of water appears in front of me, and I see Derek hand one to my brother, too.

“You two are amazing,” he says, as he sits on the couch behind me. I only remember all the shit from this morning after I settle between his spread legs, my back resting on the couch. I’m too tired to move, and I don’t want to, so I don’t.

“It’s just the beginning.” My whisper seems to snap Wolf out of a trance.

He smiles at me. “It is.”

We both know now, somehow, without having to talk about it, what our new album is going to be. The processing and work and hurting that we haven’t been able to put into a song since Mom died.

Our last collaboration with her.

We have at least fifty songs she wrote stored away, and it’s finally time to let them go, to release them to the world exactly like she would want. The one we just wrote will only be the first.

“Okay, you guys are doing that freaky mind-reading thing again, and I have no idea what you’re saying to each other, but we gotta go to dinner now. Your aunt ordered a bunch of

things to her suite. We all figured you wouldn't be up for going out again."

"Thanks," I whisper, and look up at him, but quickly bring my eyes back down. Wolf catches my eyes and what I see in them fucking tears me apart. He pleads with his eyes for this to be the last grieving album we ever write. He's asking me not to make Derek leave us.

Shit, fucking dammit. I don't want that either, but I can't let Derek keep playing with my feelings like this. And maybe it's for the best that we end things now? We haven't even been on our second date. Lots of people go on one date and move on when it doesn't work out. I'm sure I can do the same. Okay, no. No, I fucking can't.

"Let's go then." Wolf stands, moving the guitar to his back by the strap, and letting it hang while he grabs all the scattered papers with our drafts. I take the final sheet and walk to the door without looking back at Derek. Without having to discuss it, we know we'll play the song for our family. It's what Mom would've wanted.

I don't think I can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, after dinner, we'll talk and figure this out. Because I don't want to lose Derek, ever.

SIXTEEN

Derek

ALTHOUGH THEY LOOK MORE PRESENT THAN THEY HAVE SINCE the helicopter took off from the Grand Canyon helipad, I still have to herd Wolf and Hawk down the hallway.

The way they work when they get in the zone never ceases to amaze me. Because of my schedule, I haven't seen it too often. It really is like they speak telepathically. Muttering words only and finishing each other's sentences. Each of them working on their own sheet, but looking at what the other is writing and nodding or shaking their heads.

I know they have a once-in-a-generation talent, but seeing it always leaves me awed. They write songs for dozens of artists, or give away the ones they don't use. As The Storm they have fifteen Grammys, but as Hawk and Wolf Storm they must have at least a dozen more, just from songs they wrote that have won awards too. Their mom still holds the record for a non-singer with the most awards ever, and she's considered one of the best songwriters in history. I think she even wrote opera and some scores for movies. The woman was impressive, to say the least.

I've thought more than once that I wish I'd met her, and not for her prestige, but for the loving woman Wolf and Hawk remember her as. You can feel the still-alive adoration for her in the rare instances that they talk about her.

If I'd met her, I know for sure she'd be ready to hand me my ass right about now. Fuck, I was a total asshole to Hawk

this morning. I said the wrong thing, didn't think about my words, and now I've hurt him. I've been thinking and worrying about hurting Hawk, and now that I have, I wish I'd focused more on being honest with myself. On accepting the gift that life, fate, the universe, whatever it is, has given me with this chance.

I'm going to fix it. I'm going to make things right. I have a few ideas for how, and I'll use them all tomorrow if I have to. I already put things into motion for our date, during the hours they spent writing and perfecting the new song. I don't know why saying those three little words to Hawk has been impossible, but I'll do it. Because they're true.

I gotta do better. I will. Because what I just spent hours doing? Making sure they're hydrated and left alone to do what they do best? I want the privilege of witnessing and being a part of that for the rest of my life.

What I said this morning is possibly the stupidest thing that's ever come out of my mouth, and I'm a master bullshitter. I can trash-talk like no one's business, but seriously, *I don't want anything about our friendship to change?! What kind of fucked up asshole says that to the gorgeous—and naked I must add—man he loves?*

Me. I'm that fucked up asshole. But I'm gonna stop acting like it. I have to. Otherwise I'll lose them both, and I don't want to find out what would become of me then.

The door is half-open when we get to the end of the hall, so I push it open and keep them moving along until they're sitting at the round table in the living room of Lyla's suite.

Dinner is simple and cozy, even though I feel like I'm intruding on family time. I don't know if anyone notices my discomfort, I know Hawk doesn't. Or maybe he doesn't care right now. He shouldn't. The way I'm feeling is strictly a *me* problem.

Every time he reaches for my hand or shifts to sit closer to me on the couch though, I feel equal parts elated and shitty. I wish I could go back in time and smack myself over the head,

before I fucked things up. I wish I could've just felt happiness spread through me when he touched me.

"You gonna play for us?" Ivan asks from across the coffee table after we've all enjoyed dessert.

"Yeah," Hawk confirms with a nod. He balances the sheet on his knee next to Wolf, as he gets the guitar from where it was leaning against the back of the couch.

Then Wolf starts singing and we all listen intently.

"The pain of remembering is why I live these days.

The ghost of your laugh is the reason for my quirked lips.

Now all I have left from you is what runs through my veins.

Now all I want is to live in that moment that still rips, me to shreds.

When you said.

Run, run, run, you will run, my strong wolf.

Fight, fight, fight, you will fight for what is right.

You will love forever, my loyal wolf.

Strength lives in you, you will prevail, my knight.

And I do I do I do.

I run with you, fight with you.

I love with you always with me."

The saddest notes of the verse change to the happy, simple ones I heard Lyla sing, so the lullaby their mom wrote for them sounds the same. The first tear slips down my cheek as Hawk takes over.

"The whisper in the night when you said you'd come back.

The loud crack in the sky when we danced in the rain.

Is all I have left of you like a long-lost soundtrack.

Is all I can hear when I remember the pain, of that day.

When you said.

*Fly, fly, fly, you will fly, my fearless hawk.
Search and find, you will search and find your dream.
You will love forever, my loyal hawk.
You've always been made of light, my sunbeam.
And I do I do I do.
I fly with you, search with you.
I live with you always with me."*

And then they sing together, the harmony of their voices beautiful in its simplicity.

*"Always with me but forever missing you.
Always with me but forever in my mind.
Always with me but forever a memory.
Always with me but never here.
And I do I do I do.
I remember you said.
Run.
Fly.
I remember you said.
Fight.
Search.
Always with me."*

The different words, sung at the same time, are like a punch to the gut. Then, in spoken words, Wolf starts the outro while still strumming the guitar.

*"I remember how you loved us with everything in you."
And Hawk finishes it. "And you taught us to do the same."
On the last note, they both sing in a whisper.
"Always with me."*

When the last note rings out, no one speaks. I don't think I could form words even if I tried. It's like they put my heart in a fucking shredder.

Looking around, I see everyone's just as much of a mess as I am. When I turn to look at Hawk again, I see he has silent tears streaming down his face, too. I'm about to say ... something, when Wolf hunches over and covers his face with his hands.

His aunt and uncle rush to hug him, as his sobs fill the room like the song did moments ago. I scoot closer to Hawk, hug him to me and do my best to love him through this moment. He stares at Wolf, never making a sound.



WHEN WE WALK BACK TO THEIR ROOMS, IT'S IN COMPLETE silence until we reach Wolf's door. "Do you want us to stay with you?" Hawk asks him, as he swipes his phone over the scanner with his virtual key.

Wolf doesn't look back at his brother, but I know the expression he has on his face without having to look at it. "I'm not gonna go out and get shitfaced in Vegas, Hawk." Yup, he's pissed. If it wasn't for the hard tone in his words, calling his brother by his name would've been a dead giveaway.

Hawk steps back like Wolf hit him.

With a tight expression, he straightens. "It's not about stopping you from drinking Wolfie. It's about being with you because what we just did was hard as fuck."

"I know, I'm sorry, Birdie, I didn't mean ..." Wolf does look back when Hawk interrupts him with a hurt voice.

"Yes, you did." There's a moment of silence where the brothers only stare at each other.

"Yes, I did," Wolf whispers. Then they hug like nothing happened, and Wolf steps into his room.

I walk next to Hawk, shoulders brushing every few steps. I stop on the threshold, not going in, take a deep, deep breath,

and look Hawk straight in his eyes. Those perfect, ocean-blue eyes.

“I made arrangements for our date tomorrow and have a way better apology prepared, but for tonight, and tomorrow morning, I think it’s best if you just think. Without me around.” Another deep breath. “I want to give you the space to think of absolutely every single way in which I fucked up, so we can have a good conversation and discussion and fix what I broke.” I feel as awkward as I ever have when he only stares at me. “Enjoy your morning with your family. Who knows when you’ll all be together again. I’ll pick you up, right here, at four o’clock.

Looking dazed and confused, Hawk whispers, “Okay.”

I lean in and when Hawk doesn’t shift away, give him a soft, slow kiss. Kinda like the one I should’ve given him this morning.

“Good night, sunshine,” I whisper against his lips.

“Night, Dee.”



AT THREE FIFTY-SEVEN, I KNOCK ON HAWK’S DOOR. I HEAR A squawk on the other side, a loud, “Just a second,” then frantic whispers that are impossible to understand.

They stop suddenly and I shift on my feet, my hand getting clammy around the arrangement of sunflowers. I resist the urge to wipe my free hand on my slacks. They’re the same ones I used on game day, but they’re all I had.

I knew I should’ve just bought new ones. But these look perfect after the cleaning service at the hotel brought them back to my room.

A second later, Wolf opens the door, throwing me even more off balance.

“Uhhh,” I say, panic clawing up my chest.

“You didn’t see me, I wasn’t here, and this never happened,” he growls, and walks past me to his room after

closing the door firmly behind him. I have no idea what that was about, but I settle on waiting until Hawk's ready to come out.

It takes him less than a minute to open the door, and I let my smile bloom free at the sight of him. He looks like he's ready to burst. Lips twitching, legs bouncing, I can almost hear his frantic thoughts. Then I look at him properly, and my pants immediately start to tighten. He's so fucking hot. He put on a black, silky button-down with the sleeves rolled up to just below his elbow, and is wearing dark gray jeans that hug his thighs in the most delicious of ways.

Before I can give them to him, he takes the bouquet. "Are these for me?" he asks excitedly. "They're sunflowers."

His bright smile finally makes me react.

"They are," I manage. "You can leave them here or bring them with us." I hope I don't sound as nervous as I feel, but from the coy smile Hawk gives me, I think I might.

"I'll leave them here. Let me just look for a glass or something." I take one step into the room and wait there as Hawk finds a vase, adds a little water, and then dumps the bouquet in. "I have no idea how to take care of flowers," he says, as he watches the vase. Maybe he's expecting something to happen, who knows, but he looks fucking adorable chewing his bottom lip.

"It's not hard at all, but we can figure it out." I hold my hand out to him and leave it lifted as he walks to me. When he finally takes it, I get a good grip on it and raise it to kiss his knuckles.

"Dee," he whispers. "I don't understand." I cut him off with a quick kiss.

"I hope we'll both understand everything in a little while, but for now, let me take you to where we'll have our date."

"Okay."

I lead him to the elevator and scan my phone on the sensor, so it lets me press the button a few floors up from ours labeled S. Hawk gasps when the door opens. The elevator is in the

center of the room, but right away it's obvious that the whole floor is one big open space.

I clear my throat. "Sterling recommended it. Said it was a great spot for privacy and watching the sunset." Hawk turns, and he sees it provides a three hundred and sixty degree view of the Strip and the Vegas desert beyond.

"It's amazing."

"I'm glad you like it." I sigh in relief. I know there's no way this is enough to make up for the way I've been treating our relationship, because I didn't just fuck up yesterday morning, but ever since he asked me to go on a date with him.

"I love it." I don't feel worthy of the smile he sends my way, but I'll take it. I can see he's about to burst with everything he needs to say, so I lead him to the couch I'd asked to be brought here. Next to the bar, that's placed close to the elevator, there's a kind of living-room setup. A round table, with two chairs close to each other and aimed to look at where the sun will be going down in a few hours.

I knew we'd need time to talk before our actual date began, so the couch and TV are a few feet away.

We'll talk, then have a romantic, traditional dinner date. Then we'll keep up the tradition and watch a movie, cuddled together.

"I thought it'd be good if we talk first," I tell him once we're sitting. "I have a lot of things I want to say, but I'm pretty sure you do too, so do you want to go first?"

He nods so fast, I'm scared he's gonna get whiplash, then launches into his speech.

"You said you're not ready for our friendship to change, but I don't understand. We're dating, Derek. That's supposed to change things. I'm not even talking about having sex now. I'll wait until you're ready, and even if you never are, I'll still be here, but it feels like you're stalling, like you think I'll change my mind, and I won't. Not because I'm stubborn or because I have to get my way, but because I love you like I've

never loved anyone else before. So, if you really don't want anything about our friendship to change then ...”

“Sunshine,” I sigh. He leaves me speechless. He's so fucking brave, so much more put together than anyone—including me—gives him credit for, so mature. I have to be brave and tell him everything inside my head, even if it makes my skin crawl with how vulnerable it'll make me. Because my head's a mess. I have no idea what I really think or feel or what I'm actually afraid of. So I just word vomit all over him.

“I'm scared of how fast you seem to have accepted you're bi. I'm afraid you're gonna turn around tomorrow and decide I'm not worth being a queer celebrity. When the bigots come out, and your fans start hating on you for being with another man. And I hate myself for wanting to give you an out to protect you. To give you the chance to decide you don't want that. Because it would crush me, sunshine. Simply thinking about waking up tomorrow and not being able to kiss you whenever I want is painful. I want you forever dammit, and I'm scared to wish and hope for that because I've never believed I'd actually get to have this. There's also the fact that I have to keep you. I have to make you happy, to support you. I have to, not because someone else is telling me to, but because if I don't do those things then I'll *hate* myself. I want to give you the world, and I'm scared that at some point, I'll forget, like so many people seem to forget down the road. I don't ever want to be like my father, who suddenly decided he didn't want to be a father or a husband anymore, and I'm scared of becoming that. Accepting that this is happening, that I have a shot at everything I never let myself dream of having is just fucking hard, sunshine. I don't know what to tell you other than that. It's hard, and I'll try, because I know I haven't been trying.” I take his hand.

“But from now on, I'll try. What I said yesterday morning, that was wrong, and it's not even how I feel. I honestly didn't even think about the words that were coming out of my mouth, but I know they hurt you and I'm sorry. I was panicking and I didn't use my fucking brain. I'm sorry, sunshine, and I'll do better. I'll keep trying to do better, and I'm thankful that you called me out on it. I want you to keep that up because I'm

pretty sure I'm gonna fuck up with words again at some point. I'm not the poet in this relationship."

He listens intently to my monologue and even laughs a little at the last part, but he's silent for a few, eternal minutes after I finish. I resist the urge to say any more.

He doesn't stop holding my hand, and the contact keeps me calmer than I have any right to be, especially when he looks at the windows and the amazing view in front of us with a pensive frown.

His face shows no emotion when he turns back to me an eternity later. It's a shocking sight, he normally wears all his emotions on his sleeve and is never too scared to show he cares. Which makes me think that what he's about to say is probably one of the hardest things he's ever had to say.

"Promise me, Dee." His voice sounds scratchy, like he's already about to cry. I want to promise him the world right then and there just so I don't have to see him cry, but he keeps talking before I can. "Promise me you're in this, that you're not playing with me, just waiting for me to decide I'm straight after all. Being bi isn't only about sex. It's attraction, emotion, love. So, if you need me to be here, for whatever amount of time, before you believe and trust me to stay, then I will. But don't lie to me, don't placate me. I want you to tell it like it is because I've always sucked at reading between the lines. I hate playing mind games and I just want to know where we stand. If you're scared that I'm gonna hate your dick, then say so, I won't be mad, because you have a right to fear whatever you fear, and I have a right to prove you wrong." He takes a huge deep breath. "So yeah, you can have all the time you want to tell me you love me, or to sleep with me, but in the meantime, promise me you're *all the way in this.*"

I look deep into his eyes. I want him to see the certainty, the steel determination in mine.

I already love you, sunshine, and I always will, I say with my eyes. I can't say it out loud for some fucking reason and it makes me hate myself just a little bit more. His eyes get misty

as he sees into my soul. I hope he understands what I mean when I say, “I promise, sunshine.”

“That’s all I need from you. For now. Thank you.” Then he kisses me, and I don’t stop myself from taking every sigh, every moan, and groan he gifts me.

When we come up for air, who knows how long later, we eat a delicious mac and cheese—Hawk’s favorite—and talk about their song, their plans, what’s coming up in our jobs and lives. Anything and everything under the sun.

And hours later, we cuddle on the couch, which we moved so we could watch the sunset instead of TV. I hold my sunshine while we enjoy a spectacular view, and once more I feel the unbreakable certainty that I want to do this for the rest of my life.

SEVENTEEN

Hawk

LIFE SETTLES WHEN WE FLY BACK TO LA. DEE GOES BACK TO practicing every day and hanging out with both of us most afternoons. We finish *The Good Place* and are left a bit bereft after. It's a seriously good series, and so none of us feel ready to start another one. Instead, we catch up by having family-style dinners with Uncle Hulk—I think he's realized just how much Wolf needs to have our family close after Vegas, and he's been coming to see us a lot more since. Or at the studio, on the days when Wolf and I let our creative juices flow.

The new album is coming along way faster than either of us thought it would.

We'd planned on taking a big break—at least a year—after the huge world tour we just finished. And we both know that if we put this out now, we're not going to get that break unless we demand it from the record label. You don't get to make a lot of demands as artists in this industry, no matter who you are, so we're trying to keep it under wraps for now.

We talk about it a lot, and in the end choose to send the execs the song we wrote in Vegas. We both want to put it out, so we can stop thinking about it. The label is incredibly happy with us, since they didn't expect anything, but we make it clear it's just a single, and probably the only thing they will get from us for now.

“Remember the Pain of Remembering”—naming the song was a long process, but we both agreed on it, and that doesn't

happen every day—is the most personal song we’ve written in a long time. When it comes out, Derek’s in Boston, since he’s going to play there this weekend, and instead of obsessing over charts or looking for what the public’s perception of the song is, Wolf and I spend the day with Uncle Hulk at his place. We play in the pool and make plans to go visit Alexei in the winter, since he’s officially moving out from his mom’s house to go to the hockey boarding school.

Hulk looks proud as hell of his youngest son, and when I tell Dee all about it that night, I see his eyes tighten at that. I feel bad that it only reminds him of the dad he wishes he had, but the way he quickly recovers and tells me how cool that is, makes me realize that we shouldn’t stop sharing the good things, even when they remind us of what we don’t have.

Turns out, a lot of people have been waiting for us to say something about our mom’s death—*who would’ve thought?* The sarcasm in my thoughts gets tiring after a while, but when you get five frantic calls a day from Tristan, who’s stressed as hell because we failed to mention to him that we were dropping the single without any explanation—*oops*—you lose patience pretty quickly.

He gets over it after a day, but he doesn’t stop getting requests for live performances and interviews. The answer he gives is a firm no, every single time, but that doesn’t stop people from asking. When we talk about it at dinner one night, Hulk has a masterful, villainous idea.

We’ll perform the song live, once, and that’s all we’ll say to anyone who keeps asking. It’s only going to create more buzz, but that way they’ll stop.

We decide to do it at the next Grammys, since the Recording Academy has been asking us to do a tribute for Mom since she died. We’ve said no eight times, now we’ll say yes. It’ll be even more significant, because she has writing credits in “Remember the Pain of Remembering”.

Wolf and I do our best to go on as if nothing different is happening, and Dee helps a lot with that. For our third date, he

tells only Tate what our plans are, and the meanie blindfolds me as we get in the car.

He doesn't let me take the blindfold off when we step out of the car, or when we walk for a good half hour to get to wherever we're going. I can feel the sun on my skin and the ocean breeze, and I'm pretty sure we're walking on grass, but otherwise, I know nothing.

When Dee finally, *finally*, takes the blindfold off, I'm speechless. It's the cutest picnic setup I've seen *in my life*. I launch myself at him, and we roll around on the grass next to the blanket. We kiss until I'm bursting with the need to come. I'm pretty sure Derek's suffering too, but I don't say anything about it. The ball's absolutely in his court, and I'm actually, mostly okay with waiting after he explained why he was having such a hard time going all in on this.

I'm gonna be patient, and when Derek feels he's ready, I'll show him how much I want him.

Dee has three away games in October, which means he's not around on weekends most of the month, and that we don't have time to go on date number four until the end of the month. I spend the time away from him by going to Cindy's place, to have Sunday family dinner with her and her kids and husband. I let her stuff me full of the sweets she bakes, but never eats, and I dream of a time when I can burn all of them off with Derek.

Two days before Halloween, Dee arrives at my place with two women and one man in tow. I'm afraid as soon as I see the huge kits they've brought with them. Wolf, the traitor, escapes as soon as he can, but Dee and I are sat down at the dining table, and they put on prosthetic noses, bushy eyebrows, and uncomfortable mustaches until we look nothing like ourselves.

Then I hear the most magical words anyone's ever said to me. "We're going to Disneyland." I start to tear up, and the wonderful makeup artist, Dana, snaps at me to not ruin her masterpiece. I manage to hold the tears back, and we have a magical day.

I told Dee, a few years ago now, that Wolf and I hadn't had the chance to go to Disneyland since we were two and four, and that we'd always begged Mom to go again, but it wasn't safe for us. Everyone already knew what we looked like, but I've always wanted to come back.

He makes that dream come true. And at the end of the day—when my mustache and Dee's wig had fallen off and we'd bought Mickey Mouse hats to make up for it and to blend into the crowd—we walk hand in hand to watch the fireworks show in front of the big fairytale castle.

“We'll bring Wolf with us the next time we do this.” The soft murmur against my ear just makes everything more special. My back pressed to his chest, his arms around me—it really is the most magical place in the world.

Thinking about experiencing this with Wolf makes me hope that he'll ask for help soon. He's been a lot more focused on our album this time around, barely drinking while we're working. Maybe he's happier because he can see with his own two eyes that Derek and I dating hasn't changed their dynamic at all.

The future looks brighter than ever at this moment.

In the first week of November, after Derek's home game, I'm deep in thought over what to plan for our next date when he gets home. He's been planning all these amazing things for us, and I just want to make it up to him. I want there to be no doubt at all that I love him.

“Hey, sunshine.”

“Hey! Great game.” He smiles, looking totally gone over me, if I'm being honest. Tomorrow, we'll have all day to ourselves, well and Wolf, but he's been going more and more to the studio without me, to write songs for other artists, so maybe I'll nudge him to do that? I could plan a date here.

We could build a pillow fort! That's an idea. The press of Derek's lips on mine makes all thoughts disappear. His stomach grumbles, and that reminds me. “I have your dinner waiting in the oven. Let me heat it up real quick.”

I run to the kitchen and bring back his plate, with utensils and a napkin, to the couch where he's already grunting back and forth with Wolf—their special language. Derek seems spaced out while he eats, looking at the wall instead of the TV that's showing the Avengers movie. He loves it, so it's a little bit concerning. I try not to worry, but soon enough, my knee starts to bounce.

He—heh—wolfs down the meal and stands as soon as the last bite is consumed. I'm about to plead with him to stay when he offers me his hand. "Come on." There's a steel in his voice I haven't heard before.

I take his hand without hesitation but ask, "Where are we going?"

"My place."

I don't understand why, but don't protest—or pay attention—as he talks to Wolf, then Tate and Lee. In what seems like seconds, we're in Derek's garage and he's dragging me out of his precious SUV. I'm pretty sure he loves her more than anything.

"Uh, what's going on, Dee?" I'm not worried anymore, just really confused.

He stays silent, though, and keeps dragging me up the stairs and to his bedroom. When we get there, he whirls around and closes the door behind me, then walks back until I'm pressed against it. His huge, mouthwatering arms cage me—not complaining—as he leans closer and closer.

"I saw your list," he whispers, the second his body comes into full contact with mine.

"I—what?" I can't think with him so close to me, and he only makes it worse by placing his palm right against my Adam's apple.

"Your list, sunshine. You left your phone unlocked on the couch when you went to get me dinner."

I tense when his words register. Blood floods my face until I can feel it burning. I groan from embarrassment, and it just

brings attention to his hand around my throat. My dick likes that, *I like that very, very much.*

“I, uh. What list?” I go for clueless. Maybe it’ll save me the embarrassment.

“Your twenty-one-step master plan to put a ring on Derek Johnson’s finger,” he whispers, then kisses the corner of my mouth. Fuck he’s good at this, why is he so good at this and still not *giving it to me?*

“But, ah.” I try to make words. I have to swallow hard and actively focus on keeping my eyes on his dark, intense ones. “Wha—Why did you bring me here?”

“Because,” is the only thing he says. Then there’s no more talking. At least nothing coherent is said. He pulls me up to him by the throat and kisses the living daylights out of me. I thought our previous, stopped-before-they-could-go-too-far make out sessions were good, but they’ve got nothing on this. I throw my arms over his shoulders and just hold on as he snakes his free arm around me and grabs my ass. The contact feels fucking amazing. It brings my erection right up against his and damn, he’s hard. He’s so fucking hard behind the fabric of his sweats that I actually whimper with the need to touch him.

I’ve been imagining touching, sucking, and riding Derek enough. It’s time to make it a reality. I start to lower my hands down his chest when he pulls back and shoves me kind of gently against the door. Then, without looking away from my eyes, he drops to his knees.

“Dee,” I whimper—can’t help it.

“I don’t deserve you, sunshine, but I’m not gonna let you get away from me now. I’m gonna give you everything you’ve been asking for.”

“Fuck yes,” I whisper, when he unbuttons my jeans. I’m pretty sure it takes less than thirty seconds, but the process of him getting my dick out feels eternal.

A tiny voice in my head appears. *He’s not gonna like my dick. He has so much more experience—*

Hot, wet suction stops that asshole voice in its tracks. I focus on what's in front of me and sure enough, Dee's sucking my tip, his eyes still on mine, making it even hotter. He cups my balls, squeezing lightly, and I have to reach down and fist my base not to come on the spot. He tongues my slit, slides down and up, sucks harder and harder.

I can only lean against the door, pray that my knees don't give out on me, and watch.

Watch how his eyes glaze with pleasure when my cock taps the back of his throat. Watch as he tells me "gotcha" with his eyes and swallows around me. Watch as he sits back on his heels and asks, "Do you want to come in my mouth or my ass?"

Jesus, fuck. "How am I supposed to make that kind of decision?" I demand, already panting. "Also, I never knew you bottomed. But then again"—my fucking brain takes over—"you probably top from the bottom, don't you? I asked Sterling all about gay sex, and Wolf. They said—"

"Sunshine," he interrupts. "Don't talk about your brother when my mouth is this close to your dick, okay? Better yet"—he keeps going before I can agree—"don't talk about your brother if either of our dicks is hard and exposed, yeah?"

"That's a good rule." The words are moans as he licks the head delicately. I get lost in that sight. It's better than I ever could've imagined.

"So?" he asks, leaning back.

"Don't stop," I whine.

"You choose my mouth then?"

"Huh?" Why is he still talking?

"Focus, sunshine."

"How am I supposed to focus on anything when your pretty lips are so close to my dick, Derek?" I demand.

He laughs.

Actually laughs, and a belly laugh at that. I'd enjoy the sight at any other time, but right now all I can do is whine. He's turned me into an unintelligent horny mess—the asshole.

When he finally stops chuckling and looks up at me, I see it. I see the love he still can't express with words, but damn, it's the most beautiful sight in the world.

“Take me to bed, Dee,” I whisper as I cup his cheek. He turns to kiss my palm, then, calm as ever, stands and leads me to his humongous bed. We undress with our eyes locked, and when I see his hard cock jutting out, that's when I almost pass out. “I'm gonna have to train for months to climb *that* Mount Everest.” He laughs again, and this time I can enjoy it.

“You're one of a kind, sunshine.” He hugs me, and it reminds me of that night in New Orleans when all of this started. I don't mention it, not wanting to bring the mood down, but I revel in it. Because those moments, when my feelings for him flourished for the first time, were as powerful as the strength of the water coming out of a broken dam. Unstoppable.

We kiss and topple down on the bed, my hands grabbing and squeezing every inch of flesh they come into contact with.

On our sides, Dee throws one leg over my hip and grinds against me. It's a new feeling and automatically becomes the best one in the world. Is this frothing? Fucking hell, I could do this all day. Dee keeps thrusting and thrusting until once again, I'm right on the edge. I want what he offered though. That's how I want to come, so I lean back and pant.

“Lube, condoms?” I say, like a question.

“I'm okay with no condoms if you are, but I gotta go to the bathroom real quick.” He kisses my jaw and down my neck in the sexiest form of distraction.

“Yes, I'm clean, but why do you have to go to the bathroom?”

“I'm gonna go prep.” He keeps fucking distracting me, but after a long moment, I latch on.

“Can I do it?” Even I hear the vulnerability in my voice.

“You want to?” He leans all the way back to look at my face.

“Mmhm,” I say quietly.

“Okay then, sunshine. You’ll get a real time lesson in prepping.” He kisses me one last time, soft but quick, and reaches over to his bedside drawer. I take the opportunity to goggle at his chest, his abs, hell, even his stretched neck is attractive.

He hands me the small bottle of lube and very seriously says, “I like the silicone-based ones best for anal. It just makes everything easier in my opinion.” I nod, aware that I really do have to pay attention now. “So, I showered after practice, of course, but keeping everything nice and clean is important.”

“Yeah, I got a lesson about that. Now please, for the love of all that is holy, can I get my fingers in your ass?” The creases between his eyebrows smooth over before he nods and I go with my instinct of kissing the spot. “Now.” I reach over him and slap his ass playfully. “Get on all fours, Dee.”

A predatory smile takes over his face and it’s like a gut punch—the power of that stare, *sweet baby Jesus*—but he does as I say, and I shift to kneel behind him. Not gonna lie, I’ve tried fingering my ass a time or twenty. A man looking for his prostate can be a persistent one, so I feel like I know at least some of what to do.

“Okay, walk me through it,” I ask, as I coat my pointer finger generously with lube, and he does.

“Just one finger at first. Don’t shove it in all the way, but you don’t have to go too slow either, I can take it. Good, now swirl it around, pull it back and push it back in.” And on and on it goes until he pants, “I’m ready.”

“Damn,” I whisper, as I watch my three fingers disappear in him and then slowly pull them out. I curve them a bit forward and am rewarded with a delicious groan from Dee. He even arches his back. I grab my dick and shuffle closer to get this party started when Derek flips around and grabs the bottle of lube.

Without saying anything, and trapping me with his eyes, he coats my erection and pumps it slowly. He drags it out. My mouth opens with my next breath. Fuck he drives me insane with those dark eyes.

“Lay down,” he commands.

I do. It’s not how I saw this going, but I won’t complain about being bossed around when Derek’s the one doing it—he’s so *good* at it.

He straddles my waist and I watch, enthralled, as he grabs my cock again and keeps it straight up as he slowly, oh so slowly, starts to sink down on it.

“Fuck,” I groan. I want to throw my head back and fucking whoop at the perfect heat of him, but I can’t take my eyes away from the way his face relaxes in pleasure. When he’s sitting on me fully, I get this urge, I have to hold him, I have to—

He takes my hands and brings them to his hips. The contrast of my silver rings against his dark skin catches my eye. My hands look *right* there.

“Sunshine.” He moans. It’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

“Can I record you moaning?” I ask, desperate. I feel him still, but can’t stop my thoughts from coming out. “I kinda want to use it as an instrumental in a song, it sounds so freaking *good*.”

EIGHTEEN

Derek

I HOLD THE CACKLE IN FOR A FULL SECOND—AND I THINK I should get an award for that achievement. Hawk loses that dazed look and instead looks up at me with that perfect, sunshiny smile that makes everything brighter.

“Sunshine,” I start, but another round of laughter stops me from saying anything. “You are, without a doubt, the most perfect human in the world.” I pull him up by his arms and kiss him, hard. His thick erection shifts inside me, and I groan. Fuck yes.

He drops back down with a whimper of his own.

I look at him, bright blue eyes shining *just for me*, blond hair a mess from *my hands*, and all his creamy skin right here for *me* to enjoy. I place my hands on his chest and lift only a little. He gasps and tightens his grip on my hips.

“Dee.” The moan of my name breaks any resolve I had to take it slow. I ride him hard, using every muscle my relentless training has given me, to bounce on top of my boyfriend’s dick to my heart’s content. I lean back a little and balance myself by getting a good grip on his thighs. *That* angle, it hits the spot just right.

I’m laser-focused on my chase to come, and seeing Hawk absolutely lose his mind under me just spurs me on. I want to see him at the peak of pleasure, I want to feel him explode inside me, and I want to hear him moan *my* name.

My dick bouncing between us is desperate too, but I need his release more than mine for now. That is until Hawk somehow grabs it midair and starts pumping me. Just as hard and fast as I'm fucking myself with his dick, he jacks me off.

Desperate to see him come, I win the race. His grip tightens almost painfully around me when his back bows off the mattress, and he throws his head back on a long, loud, "Derek." It's perfect, it's fucking perfect, and better than anything my mind could've ever come up with. It's enough to make me explode in his hand and flop forward on top of his chest.

"We're ... doing ... that ... every ... day," Hawk says between pants.

I pat my hand over his heart. "You got it, sunshine."

I know I'll need to get up and go to the bathroom to wipe myself off in a few minutes, but I let myself enjoy just lying here with the most perfect man in the world. I run my fingers through the little hair he has on his chest, I treasure every breath that makes my body move on top of him, and I even enjoy the feeling of his dick slowly slipping out of me as it deflates.

Way too soon, the feeling of his come dripping out has my skin itching to get clean. I brace my elbows on either side of his torso and look down at him. "Shower?" I ask in a low voice, and lean down for a soft, wet kiss.

"Mmhm," he mumbles, then grabs my face with both hands and drags me down for more kisses. I forget about the stickiness, the need to clean up. Hawk, and his lips, is all that exists in the world. I need nothing else.

When we finally do get into my shower, we take our time. I can't seem to stop kissing him, everywhere, and touching him.

"I want to ride you too," he says between kisses. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself." I don't miss the smirk when he angles his head to run soapy fingers over my

abs. He seems to have an obsession with them, and I can't say I mind.

“I did enjoy myself, but we gotta stretch you out and make sure you can take me.”

“Yeah,” he says, in a deadpan voice. “Cause you have a really big dick, Dee. And thick.” He gulps and circles my once again hard erection. “So fucking thick.”

I can't make out his tone now, I don't think I've ever heard it before. “We don't have to if you—” The tightening of his fingers and a slow pump make me grunt.

“Oh, I definitely want to. I want it now.”

“How about—” I clear my throat and try again. “How about we try this first?” I ask as I reach behind him with both hands and tease his pucker.

“Yes,” he says decisively, and with a nod moves his hips to encourage me. “Now.”

“Whatever you want, sunshine, I'll give you.” I gather a few suds trailing down his back with my finger and then slip the tip into him at the same time as I slam my lips down on his. His head falls back, and I swallow his moan. He's right, we should definitely record our moans so he can put them in a song.

I sink my finger deeper, and that's all the encouragement he needs to start thrusting back and forth. Our cocks glide against each other, and he must read my mind because his hand circles us the next second. I rut against him as I bite his lip and push my finger fully into him.

“Yes,” he snarls. “More.”

I pull my finger out, and keep thrusting my dick in and out of the tight channel his hand makes as I reach for the shower gel. I coat my whole fucking hand and then, as carefully as I'm able to with desperation dictating my actions, I start working two fingers into him.

The angle's not the best, but it does the job, while he works our dicks until all we can do is pant against each other. I

bite down on his ear lightly, and when he pumps us faster and I spill over his hand, I shout my release against his throat. He gets himself off faster than I can recover.

Then, well, we get clean all over again.



WE SPEND THE NEXT FEW WEEKS MOSTLY FUCKING. I'M enjoying stretching Hawk out and building his anticipation too much. He's a greedy little thing—no surprise there—and every time he begs, I swear I get added a day of life.

I feel bad for the days when we bail on Wolf to spend hours in bed, but he assures both of us that he's enjoying his time in the studio and that we should spend our honeymoon phase very far away from him.

So we take him at his word.

I train, watch tape, and make sure our defense is as formidable as possible with Coach Savage during the day, and at night, I almost always come home to Hawk waiting for me in my living room.

The week before Thanksgiving arrives, seemingly out of nowhere, and with the knowledge that we get seven free days after the game against Las Vegas, we go out onto the field ready to play. Like it was when we played at the start of the season, the game's tied for most of it, but this time, they're the ones who get the win at the last second.

We don't let it get to us since we have an eight-two record. We're confident we're going to get to the playoffs, so we don't mope around in the locker room. Coach Rodriguez makes sure to let us know he's gonna whip us into shape like nobody's business when we get back next Monday, but for now, we're free to go.

No one lingers, least of all me. I've got a plan for the week.

Other seasons, when I've had the awesome luck to have Thanksgiving week as my bye-week, I've gone to Portland to spend it with Mom and Gracie, but this year I'm going to

Carmel-by-the-Sea with Hawk. Gracie took the Thanksgiving shift at the hospital, and Mom always works that week, so they understand me not going to see them.

I haven't told them about Hawk and I. Not because I'm scared we're gonna break up or anything like that—because I'm confident we won't—but because I wanna make sure Hawk's okay with it first, and I wanna do it in person.

They're gonna come spend Christmas with me in LA, so I'll talk it through with Hawk before then. Hawk, the saint, doesn't even offer to charter a helicopter to go to the house they have on the lot next to the spa. He knows I wasn't eager to ever fly in one of those things, even after the relatively good flight we had in Vegas, and that I'd prefer any other mode of transportation.

So, with Tate in the SUV behind us, we drive north just after five. We would've had to drive Monday morning if I'd had to play the late slot, but this way, we get to wake up there at the start of the week.

Wolf assured us he'd come too on Thursday morning, which made Hawk happy. He hasn't said it, but he doesn't have to for me to know that he's still worried about his brother. I am too. We're both trying to act like any new couple does and live in our perfect lust-filled bubble for a while, but that's not always possible when we're in this situation.

It's way too dark, and I'm way too exhausted to pay any mind to what their house—more like a mansion—looks like when we get there. It's all I can do to stay standing, while Tate goes in and makes sure there are no intruders and everything's as it should be. When he comes back out and gives us the all clear, he heads out to the apartments over the garage where he and Rich stay, and leaves us to it.

I lay in bed and look at Hawk as he undresses, wishing I had the energy to ravish and tease him some more, but I don't. My eyelids feel heavy, and I'm fast asleep before I feel Hawk stretch out beside me and claim his spot sprawled over me.

The sound of waves wakes me up in the morning. The curtains aren't closed, so I can see the dim light of the

approaching morning coming through. I watch as the world comes slowly awake and just enjoy the moment.

Like their place in LA, this house must be professionally decorated, since neither Wolf nor Hawk have an eye for that, but it's incredibly cozy. I'm not sure, since Hawk didn't say—and I didn't ask—but I'm pretty sure this is the house where they spent most of their childhood. All Hawk told me is that the house was left to Wolf, just like the spa was left to him.

When the world outside the window is bright and warming up, I decide to wake Hawk up with my mouth around his morning wood. He's moaning my name before he fully wakes up, but I know for sure he's wide awake when he spills on my tongue. After he gets his breath back, he flips us over and attacks my dick with a determination I've only seen on him when he's playing video games.

He's stubborn, which makes me lucky, because he has in his head the idea that he has to deepthroat me or else ... I don't know, something bad will happen? I don't really care. I just reap the benefits.

We spend the day in front of the pool, trading kisses, and I ride him in the jacuzzi. In the afternoon, after closing hours, we go next door to the spa and he gives me a massage again. This time there's a *very* happy ending, and we clean up after ourselves. I demand it, and my sunshine doesn't get annoyed with me even once.

I'm pretty sure we're perfect for each other, and that same sentiment spills into the next day, and the next, when we're once again lounging in bed after I spent hours teasing him with my fingers and mouth. I showed him the pleasure of rimming, and he's definitely a fan.

He tells me about the Lloyd's, their next door neighbors who were the only family who let their son play with them when they first moved here. "No one trusted Mom, but the Lloyd's did, and we spent a lot of time with little Ollie." Hawk has a serene smile as he tells me about the years they lived here and how peaceful it was after the circus of LA.

We're lying comfortably on a lounge by the pool and I'm about to ask if he's up for cooking dinner together, when he scrambles up and mumbles something about Wolf.

"What's going on?" I ask, startled.

"I knew I was forgetting something yesterday and today. I haven't heard from Wolf, and Gina is out all week. He's all alone—"

"But Rich is there." I interrupt in an effort to calm him down. He's already hyperventilating.

"Rich doesn't have to check on Wolf as long as he doesn't leave the house!" The shout coupled with his wide eyes bring the point home. "If he hasn't left the house then there's only one possible thing he's been doing."

I keep my mouth shut as he places the phone to his ear and paces up and down the side of the pool. He pulls his hair with his free hand, mutters, "Pick up, pick up, pick up," and hangs up after a minute. "I'm calling Rich." He puts the call on speakerphone this time, and I'm grateful.

"Hey, Hawk."

"Rich, have you seen Wolf in the last two days?"

"No, he hasn't left the house."

"At all?" Hawk asks, hysterical now. I'm feeling pretty hysterical myself. Wolf was supposed to spend the week going to the studio.

"No."

"Can you please check on him?"

"Yeah, no problem. I'll call you back in a minute."

The call disconnects, and I feel a sense of dread like never before. I grab my phone. "Give me Cindy's phone number. I'll call her from my phone so you can pick up when Rich calls back."

He nods and rattles off the digits a moment later.

“Hello?” I hear Cindy’s normally cheery voice, now serious.

“Hey Cindy, this is Derek Johnson, Wolf and Hawk’s—”

“Hey, sweetie.”

“Hey, so Hawk and I are in Carmel-by-the-Sea, and Wolf’s supposed to drive up tonight or maybe tomorrow morning, but we haven’t heard from him since Monday, and Rich just told us he hasn’t left the house at all. Do you think—”

“I’m on my way over.” She cuts me off and hangs up.

In the silence, I can only stare at Hawk as he looks into my eyes. Despair already fills his, and I want nothing more than to comfort him, but I can’t seem to move the two steps it would take. I jump a little when his phone rings, but he doesn’t. That’s weird. He’s the jumpy one normally.

“Yeah,” he croaks, and once again puts the call on speakerphone.

“I’ve already called an ambulance. It looks like he fell down the stairs. The whole lower half of the stairs is gone. There’s glass everywhere.” The tension in Rich’s voice stops my heart. The man is unflappable, goddammit. What is he seeing that has him so on edge?

“Fuck,” I whisper, totally paralyzed and useless. But Hawk is calm. Maybe because he’s been unconsciously preparing himself for this for years.

“Cindy’s on her way. Please, both of you go with him. Tell me which hospital they take him to. I’m gonna find a way to get there ASAP. Tell nine-one-one *no sirens*.”

“I already did. He’s breathing normally but ...” They exchange a couple more words, but I don’t hear any of them. Wolf. Wolf is hurt. He fell down the fucking stairs. The stairs that are fully made of glass. Shit fucking dammit.

Suddenly Hawk is in front of me, holding my cheeks firmly and forcing me to look at him.

“Get dressed, don’t worry about packing, then come back downstairs okay?”

“Yes, okay, sunsh—”

“No. Not now, Dee. We gotta go.”

With that, he turns and walks inside. I do as he says, get dressed as quickly as I can, bring down clothes and sneakers for him too—because he was only wearing trunks—and meet him at the front door. Just outside, Tate is already at the wheel and the engine is running. Hawk’s on the phone, but he mouths a “thank you” at me as I hand him the clothes and shoes and climb in behind him.

I literally hate my fear of heights right now. How the fuck are we going to get there fast enough?

I get an answer when we drive to a helipad ten minutes later and climb down, only to get back in the death machine—fuck no. It’s not a death machine. We’re getting to Wolf. He’s gonna be fine, and we’re going to be there for him.

NINETEEN

Hawk

ALMOST THREE HOURS LATER I CLENCH MY TEETH AND FIST MY hands because we can't land on the helipad of Cedars-Sinai Hospital because ... I don't care enough to remember, but we can land on the building next door.

Covering ourselves using Tate and Dee's jackets, we cross the street and step through the emergency entrance of the hospital.

It really fucking sucks that I have to worry about public perception and try my best to make sure no one hears a peep about this instead of letting out the fear I feel coursing through my veins, but that's the celebrity life—yay.

A nurse rushes to us, looking worried as hell until we uncover our heads. She sighs and looks sympathetically at me. *Oh God.* "Follow me, please." It starts to sink in then. Is Wolf ... Did he . . .

No, no, no. I can't even think the words.

"Mr. Storm," she begins, clasping her hands, when we enter a small and empty waiting area. "Your brother is in surgery right now."

"Oh, God." My knees just about give out on me. Derek reaches around me and his strong hold on my back keeps me upright. *That means he's gonna get better, he's going to be okay.*

“What happened to him? What are they operating on?”
Dee takes over, thank fucking God.

“We believe he fell down the stairs, but we don’t know how long he was there before they found him.” She speaks calmly and not loudly at all which I appreciate. I have no idea how this is going to go down in the media. Someone probably already knows, and if no one does, then it’s going to be insanely hard to keep it that way.

I can’t think about that now, that’s why I called Tristan and Cindy. Where *is* Cindy?

“He broke his left ankle and femur. That’s his thigh,” she explains at my blank look. “He also has a lot of glass shards in his left hand, and the surgeons are doing everything they can to make sure he recovers full use and mobility, but at this time, that’s everything I know.”

“Do you know—” I clear my throat. “The people who came with him?” I can’t seem to form the question properly. Fucking dammit, Wolf went and broke all over. *I have to keep it together, I have to keep it together.*

“They’re in another waiting room, two floors up. I’ll take you to them now.”

“Thank you,” Derek says.

I’ve run out of words.

I can’t think, can’t speak, can’t do anything but let Derek lead me to an elevator, to a chair, into Cindy’s arms.

If anyone talks, I don’t hear it.

All that’s happening inside my head is the same thing as last time I was at the hospital facing the possibility of losing my family. *He can’t leave me alone. He has to stay with me. For me.*

But he shouldn’t. I know that, rationally. I know Wolf has to fight for himself and no one else. He has to choose.

But why won’t he do it for me?

Why doesn't he want to get help, even after witnessing how much I've healed since Mom died?

Why won't he let me fully heal?

Next thing I know, Tristan's in front of me. More than six hours have passed I realize, since he was in New York when I called him.

"Is Wolfie out of surgery?" I ask, coming alive all of a sudden.

"No," Tristan whispers.

"Oh." Back to not wasting my energy on speaking then.

"Hawk you need to eat." What for? "You need to sleep, too." No I don't. "Yes, you do."

Oh, I guess I said that out loud.

"What I need is to see my brother. To see he's alive and breathing and he's not going to die. What I need is for him to want to live, Tristan. Food, sleep, nothing matters. All that matters is that Wolfie gets out of that surgery and wants to live." I scream the last word, and wish I had the energy to feel bad about waking Rich, Tate, Bruce, Cindy, and Derek up. But I don't. I honestly couldn't give less of a shit because all of this, *everything* is my fault.

"I abandoned him," I say through clenched teeth, and the first tear slips out of my eye. "I left to have a good time with my boyfriend and didn't call. For *two days*, Tristan. Never in my life have I been away from him for more than twenty-four hours, but I thought 'oh, what could happen? Wolfie's fine with this, and me and Dee deserve this time alone'. It's all bullshit. And it's all my fucking fault. So I'll sleep after I talk to Wolf, okay?"

"Okay," Tristan says, raising his palms in surrender and backing away.

I sit—when did I stand?—go back to looking at nothing and make sure my eyes stay open, but this time, tears fall in steady streams down my face. I feel arms come around me and hate myself when nothing but gratitude floods my brain.

Because it's Dee holding me. I have him, and I don't ever want to let him go.

For some reason, one of my mental snapshots comes into my thoughts. Years ago, Mom and Wolfie, laughing in the sand. She threw her head back, her long, blonde hair blew wildly in the wind. Wolfie stared at her smile like he couldn't possibly look away.

It only manages to make the pain keener, sharper. Is that all I'll have left of Wolfie? Maybe not tomorrow, but eventually? Snapshots of happy times?



I SPEND WAY TOO MANY HOURS LOOKING AT WOLFIE'S CHEST rise and fall. Long enough for my emotions to take a dark turn.

Why did he lose his balance walking down the stairs?

A very high blood alcohol content, the doctors said. Turns out he'd also taken some sleeping pills, so the doctor's best guess is it happened sometime in the middle of the night.

Who the fuck knows. Bottom line is, he's gonna live. There was no damage to his spinal cord because some higher power looked out for him—the only explanation.

What a fucking joke.

Millions of people who've done nothing but good get into accidents every day and come out way worse than he did. I can't say I'm not grateful, but I'm also so fucking pissed off.

Two days.

My deranged, delusional first reaction was to blame myself. Because of course it fucking was. But now I see that being afraid to leave my grown-ass brother, my *older* brother, alone for *two days* is the definition of irrational.

I should be able to go on a getaway with my boyfriend guilt free.

I should be able to talk about my mother without being silenced.

I should be able to enjoy family dinners and big events without checking every two fucking second how much my brother is drinking.

But I haven't been able to do any of those things.

A lot of good it did, since it landed me here.

Exhausted, scared, angry.

Feeling like a lost little boy, like a helpless young man watching his mother die slowly in a sterile hospital room, and wondering if the selfish piece of shit my brother's become took his best shot at leaving me for good.

When Wolfie opens his eyes hours later, I see the truth in them.

It must be a mistake, he can't—no. I'm not seeing right. It's three in the morning and I haven't had a rational thought in too long.

“How bad?” he asks, voice as dry as a desert where I last saw his smile.

“You broke your left ankle and femur—thigh,” I explain, just like the nurse did to me a bunch of times. I wanted to make sure I knew everything I could about Wolfie's condition when they wheeled him into the private ICU room where he can only have one visitor. “You broke that one in two places. Shattered it, pretty much. They put in screws and plates and God knows what else. You'll probably need your hip replaced before you're forty. You also managed to get about a million tiny shards of glass in your hand.” I gesture to his completely bandaged left hand. “They tried to get them all out, but they'll have to get another type of imaging to be sure they did. If they didn't, you're going back to surgery. They don't know about any nerve damage, and will only know once you've healed enough to move it.”

I see *that* hits him hard.

“You also have a mild concussion, which is a miracle considering you fell down ten steps of glass.”

He says nothing, only keeps looking at his hand. I have no idea what to do, what else to say. Why can't a grown-up come here and take over?

I can't fucking do this anymore.

Wolf simply closes his eyes and falls asleep.

Fucking asshole. He's such *a fucking asshole*.

I stand and go in search of Dee. I know he didn't leave like Tristan, Bruce, and Cindy did after seeing Wolf sleep. I find him with Tate and Rich in the ICU waiting room.

"Rich, we're going home. I'm sorry, man but you gotta stay with him."

"Of course," the stoic man says simply. He hands Tate car keys and strides in the direction I just came from.

"What's going on?" Dee asks in a whisper.

"I need to get out of here." My words are clipped, but I can't soften them right now.

"Okay." Derek nods and looks at Tate. "Lead the way."

I try to stay in control until we arrive at Derek's place, but I only manage a quick warning before I absolutely lose it when the car starts moving. "Tate, I'm gonna shout a lot, please forgive me and please don't get scared." Then I let it all out. I punch the passenger seat in front of me. I wail and curse my brother until my throat hurts. I don't stop, even when we're inside Derek's garage, I just keep going until I run out of fuel.

That's when I slump on Dee's shoulder and close my eyes.

Thursday, November 19th — Thanksgiving

EVEN THOUGH I SLEPT EIGHT FULL HOURS, I'VE ONLY EVER felt this level of exhaustion once before—me and hospitals don't mix well. I still have the energy to shudder when we cross the private entrance of the hospital. We find Rich outside of Wolf's room, and I feel like shit all over again for leaving him alone this morning.

He sees my face and waves me off with a hand and a sharp shake of his head.

“Don’t start Hawk. It’s my job to take care of him and I didn’t.” He shows more emotion in the few seconds it takes to say that than he has in the past six years I’ve known him.

“Yes, you did,” I whisper, and then—because fuck the rules—I throw my arms around him and hold on tight. “You’ve taken better care of him than he deserves.” He pats me on the back after a long moment. I take a full step back. “That’s the last time I hug you, I promise. Well, unless you’re too wonderful for words again.” He nods, frowning, but gets over it quickly. “Now, I know you need to sleep, so how about you get an Uber home—because you’re *not* driving—and come back tonight. We’ll call you if anything happens, okay? We won’t leave Wolf alone, and Tate will stay by his side the whole time. If I go wandering . . .” I pat Dee’s chest. “Well, I have the best safety in the NFL with me, kay? Okay, byeeeee.”

He exchanges a long glance with Tate over my head and then nods again. “Tristan’s in there now, as well as Cindy.”

“Good, I hope they’re kicking his ass.” I don’t actually know if I mean it or not. My brain’s all scrambled.

I face the closed door, trying to gather the courage to open it, but it takes me a minute.

“I’ll stay out here,” Derek’s whisper takes me out of my head.

“No,” I whine a plea. “Please come with me.” I feel small and weak, but I need him with me when I lay down the law.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I nod a lot.

“Then I’ll go in with you. If you want me to step out at any moment, you just tell me, okay sunshine?”

I hug him tight. “Thank you.” The murmured words aren’t enough to express my gratitude for all he’s done for me, but they’re all I’ve got at the moment.

Wolf’s his best friend, too, and he’s been my rock since we got here yesterday.

When raised voices come from the room, I immediately find the courage I need and run inside with Dee hot on my heels.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Wolf says with a derisive laugh.

“You should give a fuck,” Tristan says loudly. “Otherwise the life you’ll come back to when you get back on your feet will be very different. Stop being such an asshole, Wolf. This isn’t only about you, you know?”

The click of the door shutting behind me seems to break the tension of their stare-off.

Cindy looks up from her seat next to the bed. She looks devastated—probably how I did last night.

Wolf turns back to look at Tristan, who’s standing with his hands braced on the railing at the foot of the bed. “I don’t give a fuck if the whole world finds out I got out of my mind drunk and fell down the stairs.” He laughs harshly. “It’s funny as fuck.”

The smile on his face isn’t right.

The words coming out of his mouth aren’t right.

What the hell is he doing? Alienating Tristan after he’s helped us so much, after he chartered a plane to come take care of us from the other side of the fucking country?

This isn’t my brother, this is ... his addiction.

“So you’re feeling the withdrawal effects already, huh?” I say, with a fake smugness in my tone that I hope no one realizes is fake.

Wolf literally snarls at me.

“You going feral now? Finally turning into the wolf you pretend to be? You know Tristan is right. Do you want the comparisons to Dad to gain more traction? Do you want the world to believe you’re like him? Is that it? You want everyone to think what you’ve been thinking all these years?” That stops him short. Good. “You didn’t die, Wolf. You’re here, and you have to face—no, you have a chance to face your demons and finally fight for a good life. Fight to be

happy. It's time to put your big-boy panties on and face reality."

"I have faced reality, Birdie. You have Deedee now. You're both happy and in love and will be together forever. So what the hell do you need *me* for?!" The shout, and the pain I hear in it, breaks my fucking heart.

"So you did ..." I whisper. "Do you want to die, Wolf?" I explode when he doesn't answer immediately. "Tell me the truth!"

"No!" he shouts back. The silence that follows deflates any fight he had in him. "I didn't try to kill myself, but ..." He looks down, and I wish I didn't need to see or hear him tell me any of this, but *I* can face it. Even if he can't. "I did think maybe I didn't have to try so hard to control myself anymore."

"Control yourself?!" Now I really sound unhinged. "Since when have you been controlling yourself, even a little?" Wolf doesn't answer, he just keeps staring at his lap. I shake my head at Tristan and Cindy when I see they're about to break the silence.

They shouldn't. He has to get all this out now. This is an impromptu fucking intervention. It's now or never, I know it in my gut.

I see tears stream down Wolf's cheeks, so I walk to the chair on the other side of his bed. I grab his unbandaged hand in mine, careful not to jostle the IV line too much.

"I don't want to die." I only hear the whisper because the room is so silent.

"Then *live*. Goddammit, Wolfie." I hate him so much right now, for making me have to spell it out to him, for every shuddering breath and every sob that starts to demand to come out. "You're worth more than this." He looks up, red eyes open and alert. "It's gonna be hard, Wolfie. Probably the hardest thing you've ever done. But I know you can put the work in. You have to work to get better otherwise you're never gonna play the guitar again."

"That's a low blow," he says in a warning tone.

“It’s also the fucking truth.” I resist the urge to say anything else and leave it at that.

TWENTY

Friday, November 20th — Derek

THE NURSES WHEEL WOLF BACK INTO HIS ROOM AT MIDDAY. They took him away this morning to perform surgery on his hand again. Yesterday, after spending the most depressing Thanksgiving ever—despite Cindy bringing us a feast—in complete silence, the doctors came in and told us they had to get a few stray pieces that were still stuck in there.

Just like the doctor warned us he would be, Wolf is passed out and doesn't wake up for an hour.

Hawk has been on the phone most of the day. He seems to have come back to life since yesterday and Wednesday's fiasco. Calling his aunt and uncle was the first order of business after they took Wolf away, and ever since, he's been putting out fires with producers, artists, and other writers who were supposed to get some time with Wolf earlier this week.

I, on the other hand, have spent hours researching rehab centers in California. There are *a lot*. And all of them boast that they've treated all kinds of celebrities and guarantee absolute privacy, but how the fuck am I supposed to corroborate that?

I need to know if other patients sign NDAs while they're there. I need to know if Rich can stay with Wolf. I need to know if that'd be good or bad for his recovery, but then again, his physical safety should be a priority too, right?

It's just a lot, and as it turns out, useless.

“No, as soon as he decides to accept our help, he’ll go to Cove in Carmel-by-the-Sea. I’ve had a spot booked for him for almost two years now.” Tristan leaves me and Hawk speechless and with our mouths hanging open.

“What?” Hawk whispers when he finally snaps out of it.

“Yeah, it’s the best. They signed all my NDAs, so you know they understand the need for privacy. Rich can stay there for as long as Wolf does if he gives a bi-weekly self-defense class to the patients—which he’s already agreed to—and they have a wonderful program that includes the family of the patients in a lot of activities and therapy sessions. Cove is the best of the best, really.” He assures Hawk. “I called just now and asked if they’d be able to help with the physical therapy Wolf will need, and they assure me they can coordinate with his doctors here.”

“Okay.” Hawk breathes out. Then in a stronger voice and with a determined look in his eyes, he repeats, “Okay. Good. Now all we have to do is wait for him to decide he wants to go to rehab.”

“Easy peasy,” I say, in as cheerful a voice as I can muster.

I only have three more days off, then it’s back to daily training, and I’m already dreading Monday coming along. Because of the second surgery and the complexity of his leg’s injuries, Wolf’s doctors told us he probably won’t be discharged until the end of next week, possibly ten days depending on how they see his stitches heal.

I feel like a waste of space most of the time. Having no clue what to do isn’t normal for me. I’ve always had a task, and the confidence that I can execute it well, but now ... well holding Hawk’s hand and giving him endless hugs is the extent of my usefulness.

I’m alone in the room, with Wolf of course, when he finally wakes up from the anesthesia. He’s groggy and takes a while to get his bearings. Hawk went outside to make some more calls. So did Tristan. Cindy is supposed to get here soon.

I panic, having no idea if I should say anything about the rehab place—Cove, Tristan said it's called—and am saved by an efficient nurse coming in and asking Wolf questions, jotting down numbers on the chart in her tablet, and dishing out instructions.

I write them all down, because neither Wolf nor I will remember all of her warnings otherwise. When she leaves, I'm still the only one here, and back to panicking.

“Did they say anything about my hand?” Wolf asks, and closes his eyes. Maybe he's fallen asleep ... so I don't have to answer?

I haven't talked to him one-on-one in what seems like months, and I realize that I've never not known what to say to him. I miss my friend, and the awful thought that maybe I've never met the real Wolf has a knot growing in my throat.

When I met him, it had been months since his fake-ex committed suicide, and I didn't find out it was a fake relationship until long after. I could still see that he was haunted, though. It had also been years since his mom passed, and Hawk's always saying how much he changed after that.

So, no. I probably don't know the *real* Wolf. Or at least not the version that made Hawk be the most loyal champion for him.

But I do know this Wolf—minus the withdrawal effects. I know he loves nothing more than picking up a guitar at a party, and making everyone around him smile and sing along. I know he's a competitive little shit. I know he has the driest, most sarcastic, dark sense of humor. He's loyal and protective at his core. He's fearless.

And yet he's probably scared shitless right now.

“Well?” he asks in a slurred voice, still with his eyes closed, and I jump in my seat.

The question and the impatient tone prove just how scared he is. “They said the orthopedic surgeon would come by after you woke up to talk about everything. They didn't give me any details.”

He grunts in response. That's his unhappy grunt, I can tell.

"Where's Birdie?" Now there's an edge of panic in the question.

"He's dealing with everyone you bailed on earlier this week." My sunshine told me not to mince my words, and I understand why, but I don't enjoy his flinching at all. I wish we weren't in this situation in the first place, but I'm doing my best.

"Remind me to thank him if I forget, please."

"You got it," I say without hesitation. When his breaths even out a few minutes later, I let out a long breath. Fuck, I hope he gets to play the guitar again.



"IT LOOKS LIKE DR. STRANGE'S HAND," HAWK SAYS. HE'S ON the opposite side of the bed to the doctor, leaning over way too eagerly. Bruce is standing by the door, shoulder leaning against the wall and staring—unamused—at Wolf.

"Shut up, brat," Wolf mumbles.

The doctor stays silent as he removes the bandages carefully. When the whole hand is finally visible, he reaches over for a rolling stool and sits with a heavy sigh. I don't like the look in his eyes. My fingers flex on Hawk's shoulders, needing and offering support.

"Most of the scars you'll have are from the glass. We didn't make any new incisions." He clasps his hands, straightens, and looks only at Wolf. "There's a long road of recovery in front of you, Mr. Storm. I'm not going to lie, it's going to be hard, it's going to be painful. Especially since you don't want any opioids. But." I let out a long breath at that single word. "You *can* recover full use if you're diligent with your physical therapy. Both for your hand and your leg. The way you do everything will be different for the next few months, until you regain more mobility and strength. For now, letting the wounds heal is what's most important." He lets the

words sink in and only speaks again after Wolf swallows hard and nods.

“If everything goes to plan then you’ll be discharged in six days.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Wolf’s voice sounds raspy and dry, tears shine in his eyes.

“Lastly, I know you know this, but as your doctor, I have to say it. You need help, Mr. Storm. The blood alcohol content when you were brought in was at 0.26, which would’ve been enough for you to fall down the stairs without the sleeping pills. The fact that you were even able to get up from bed and walk down the first half of the stairs tells me your tolerance is high. Just to put things in perspective, when a person’s blood alcohol level is at 0.31 they’re more than likely comatose.” He pauses, as if looking for the right words to say the next part, or maybe for theatrical effect, who knows. “Everything I’ve learned about your health in the last two days tells me you’re an alcoholic, Mr. Storm.” He doesn’t say it with derision, or pity. There’s only fact, no judgment, and I could kiss the man for his professionalism. “You need help if you want to live a healthy life moving forward.” At that, he stands, and tells us he’ll come by to check on the incisions in the leg tomorrow morning.

“Well,” Hawk says after a long moment of silence. There’s a lot of fake cheer in his tone. “That was all good news, right Wolfie?”

He doesn’t answer, he just keeps holding Hawk’s hand in his good one and looking at the spot the doctor left vacant.



THAT NIGHT, WHEN WE’RE LYING IN OUR BED—*AND WHEN DID I start thinking about my bed as ours? Whatever*—Hawk’s fully on top of me. His moods have been, understandably, all over the place, but I’m just going with it, doing what he asks of me and not trying to tell him he should feel a certain way.

He’s going through it in the only way he knows how, and my job is to be here.

“Dee?” He raises his head and rests his chin on my sternum.

“Hmm?” I run my fingers through his still-damp hair and get lost in the blue pool of his eyes.

“I want you to fuck me.” My body tenses, fingers stopping abruptly.

“Right now?” I ask, wary. I was just thinking that my job is to be here and help him in any way I can, give him anything he asks for, but this ... “Are you sure?” I swallow hard.

“Unless you don’t want to?” The vulnerability in his tone snaps me out of the little hesitation I have. I bend forward as much as I can and pull his head to me to attack his lips and show him just how much I want to.

Without ungluing my lips from his I roll us over so I can pin him down, give him what he wants. I keep a good grip on his hair, not pulling, just making sure he stays exactly where I want him. A deep groan from my sunshine and the slightest shift of his hips has my dick going from a chub to fully hard. I need him. I need him now.

“We need to stretch and prep you,” I growl against his mouth, and try to find the will to go get lube.

“I kinda already did.” His panting words make me happier than they should.

“Really? You got ready for me in the shower, sunshine?” I kiss down his throat, his pecs, and lick one nipple delicately.

“Yes,” he moans, and I don’t know if it’s an answer to my question or because he likes it so much when I play with his nipples. *Could be both*, I think, as I repeat the action with the other one. It’s probably both.

I release his head and sneak my hand between his legs. His cock is as hard as mine and I can’t resist giving him one strong, slow stroke on my way to investigate.

“Please,” he whines with his head thrown back. I keep kissing and licking his torso, lower every time, as I massage

his balls gently, which drives him insane as I knew it would—my sunshine likes a firmer hand.

I extend my middle finger past his balls and immediately feel the slickness of lube. He did get ready. Let's see how much.

The single digit slides inside him without any resistance, and there's also barely any when I add my index finger. "Fuck," I groan against the happy trail below his bellybutton. "Need you, sunshine." I nuzzle there, and as I line up my ring finger and start working them all in, I take his pre-come covered tip into my mouth and suck hard.

"Dee!" Hawk's back bows off the bed, and I simply suck harder when it pushes deeper into my mouth. When his muscles go lax, he shoves my fingers deeper too, and that's when I realize he's ready. Finally ready, and so am I.

I really, *really* don't want to, but I pull my hand away and raise to my knees letting his angry red erection slip out of my mouth with a pop.

"Just getting lube, sunshine." I cut off any protest.

When I find the bottle, I resist the urge to hold it over my head triumphantly and instead get my butt next to Hawk's head and pat my lap with a hand. "Straddle me." Hawk moves at lightning speed and watches with dark, hungry eyes while I coat my cock with lube. I grab his thighs when I'm done and pull him in.

"Put your hands on my shoulders," I instruct, and hold my cock again so he can just slide right down as soon as he lines up perfectly. "Go slow, okay?" I make sure to look into his eyes. He's biting his lip so hard, I'm scared he'll draw blood soon. So I pull it away with my free hand, then bring him down, to touch my lips to his sweetly as the tip breaches his hole.

Perfection.

Wet, hot perfection.

"Sunshine." I breathe a sigh against his lips at the same time as he groans.

“So, so good.” Then he slides lower and lower until his ass is pressed to my pelvis. “I need you to fuck me, Derek.” The serious tone has concern filling me, but he shakes his head, anticipating my reaction. “Hard. I need you over me, Dee. Please.”

“I fucking love the way you beg,” I growl, then surge forward and once again flip us over. The movement makes my dick slide out, and Hawk cries out in protest. But less than a second later, I’m lined up and thrusting back inside him.

I go slow at first. I know he asked for hard, but I won’t allow even a twinge of pain for him. Hawk will only ever feel pleasure with me. I kiss him and kiss him as I pull almost all the way out, push back in. Torturously slow, but it’s the best torture in the world. Nothing, absolutely nothing is better than this.

It turns out to be the correct move when Hawk’s fingers loosen on my shoulder and he starts stroking my back, down to my ass, squeezing hard, then traveling back up. Eventually, his legs come around me and he crosses his ankles over my ass. That’s when I know he’s ready.

“How hard?” I tease, as I finally come up for air.

“I-I mean, I love this, but right at this moment, I kinda want you to fuck me like you hate me.” His laboring breaths don’t stop him from saying the funniest shit. I’ve never laughed while having sex, but with Hawk, it happens every single time. How does he do it?

I don’t really care about the answer. “Okay, sunshine.” I crawl back and flip him over. “On your knees, head on the pillow.” I try to sound stern, but the lingering chuckles make it impossible.

He follows my instructions eagerly, and I line up behind him.

I slip in only the tip, and bracket his body with my arms next to his shoulders. Once I’m in the perfect position, I thrust all the way in, and not gently at all.

“Oh, God yes. Yes, yes, yes. Dee. Har—harder, Dee!” The shouting is new, but I fucking love it. I pound into him harder, the strain on my muscles getting real, but wild horses couldn’t drag me away from him. Could it be ...?

I drop to my elbow, my chest completely pressed against his sweaty back, and nudge one arm under him to grab a firm hold of his neck. In a low voice, I whisper in his ear. “Do you want me to fuck you harder?”

“Fu-uck, please, Dee. Please, *please*. Ye-es. Har-harder,” he stutters breathlessly, then gets his forearms under him for leverage and starts moving his hips. It takes us out of rhythm for two thrusts, but then we synchronize perfectly and it’s like he turns me into a feral animal.

All I can feel is him around me and the vibrations of his groans against my palm and chest. He’s the only thing that exists as his voice starts to get hoarse from begging.

“You’re a little bit of a cock slut, aren’t you?” A whiny moan is the only answer I get. “You like being full of my cock, sunshine?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he repeats, over and over.

“Let’s see if we can fill you up a little more.” I push off the mattress and bring him up with me as I raise to my knees. I squeeze a little more around his throat, and okay, he likes that.

“Yes!” He *really* likes that.

“My greedy sunshine,” I growl, and squeeze a little more. Completely out of rhythm and not giving a crap, I get a good grip on his hip with my free hand and fuck into him desperately. “You’re gonna use that hole to make me come. Gonna fill you up.”

Hawk’s incoherent moans and groans throw me over the edge the next second. I fall on my heels, and he starts bouncing up and down, using my slowly deflating cock and his hand to get off. I can only stare, mesmerized, as he spills all over his hand then falls forward on his face.

He barely seems to notice, and the smile on his face is more peaceful than any I have ever seen before.

TWENTY-ONE

Friday, December 18th — Hawk

I'VE GOTTEN USED TO WAKING UP NEXT TO DEE EVERY DAY, SO when I open my eyes, I know he isn't next to me. Just like he hasn't been for the last few days.

He's always there when I fall asleep though, and now, if all goes well today, I'm gonna lose that too for three days at the very least. He has a game on Sunday, and I hope he can come see us on Monday, but nothing is set in stone.

We spent every second we could with Wolf at the hospital while Derek was still on his bye-week. When that was done, it was only me driving to the hospital in the mornings, but Dee met us there in the evenings and was with me for the drive back home. Even Wolf gets a ghost of a smile when Derek brings dinner.

I can see how much he hates it, not being with us all the time, just as I can see his shoulders don't look as tense when he comes back from practice or home from away games. It's good for him, doing what he loves.

Cindy took over everything again, after the first few days Wolf spent in the hospital. I did a lot of damage control at first, because I needed to feel like I could do *something*, and she needed to feel the fear and panic of almost losing Wolfe.

Now it's back to regular business with her, and with Tristan and Zoe since he flew back to New York. The media miraculously didn't pick up on Wolf's trip to the hospital right

away, but four days after his second surgery, we woke up to news of the “report”—what a joke—that he had broken his leg.

We all sighed in relief. Now we’re just crossing our fingers that the truth of his fall never comes out.

Wolf realized that the last thing he needs is for everyone and their mother to know about his addiction, so now he’s all on board with the secrecy. “If you want to become an AA poster boy, you can make the decision to be just that once you’re not feeling the full effects of detox,” Tristan drawled at Wolf over the phone, and we all agreed.

Now, it’s ten in the morning and I have to get up and get going. Today’s the big day.

There have been no discussions of rehab with Wolf, except for the ones he’s had with his doctors. I’ve said nothing, only that I’ll offer him all the help in the world if he decides to ask for it. I’m pretty sure Tristan hinted at something. Bruce for sure told him not to be a dumbass and that he’d make sure everything was okay while he took care of himself. Cindy was probably as subtle as a sledgehammer when she spent two hours alone with him.

I wish I could say that not being able to run away from Cindy when she’s in the middle of one of her lectures is punishment enough for the level of stupidity Wolf displayed, but it’s not.

Seeing him tremble and sweat through the withdrawals has been hard, though, no matter how much resentment I still feel. His suffering is real enough, since he’s an even bigger asshole than normal, but he’s the one who asked not to be put on any heavy-duty painkillers after the second surgery. “Last thing I need is to get addicted to opioids,” he’d mumbled.

Dee asked me if he was an asshole before Mom died—conversationally and acting relaxed as hell—last night while we were watching Thursday Night Football. Wolf almost flew out of bed with how hard he flinched at that, but Dee kept staring at the TV, cool as a cucumber.

“He was,” I managed to say after a long, tense moment of silence. “He wasn’t as touchy, though.” I copied Derek’s tone, going for teasing.

“So, the dark humor isn’t the alcohol’s fault,” Dee mused, then kept on eating.

“You’re the assholes,” Wolf declared, then growled. “Talking as if I’m not here.”

It was a bit of normalcy before everything changes once more.

Today, I’m going to ask Wolf where he wants Rich to take us when we climb in the car, and whatever he answers, we’ll do. If he doesn’t want to go to rehab, it’s going to be really hard to not start putting some real harsh limits in place, for my sake, but I hope he asks for help.

That’s all I want. The opportunity to help.

Derek’s voice greets me when I step into Wolf’s room. “He’ll probably arrive in the next five minutes, Wolf, gee.”

Perched in a wheelchair, with one leg propped up in front of him, Wolf glares at me. “I’ve been waiting for an hour,” he grinds out.

“There was traffic—”

“There’s always traffic, Birdie.”

“Jesus, what crawled up your ass?”

“Nothing.” He sighs and rubs his brow. “Sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” I say lightly. I know how *over* his stay at the hospital he is. The initial plan of being discharged a week after Thanksgiving flew out the window pretty quickly. The doctors did all they could during both surgeries to clean up his hands, but it turns out that lying on the floor for who knows how many hours, with wounds all over, is pretty bad, and it led to infection after infection. He’s finally all clear and ready to never see this place again. And so am I. “So, we’re all ready?”

“Yes,” he whispers, not looking up.

I get behind the wheelchair, and send on-screen-Derek an air kiss and a wink over Wolf's shoulder.

"I have to get back to it," he tells Wolf.

"Yeah, all right. Talk later."

"Later."

With Rich and Tate at our front and back, we walk down the hallway, saying goodbyes and thank yous to the nurses. I see Rich pat and squeeze Wolf's shoulder when the elevator starts descending to the underground garage.

Then, the moment of truth arrives before I'm ready.

Wolf settles in, his leg extended in front of him thanks to the room we created by shoving the front passenger seat all the way forward and his all the way back. His left arm is in a sling, that hand completely covered in bandages, and I just stand there, staring, not closing his door, and have no fucking clue what to say.

"Birdie?" Hawk asks, his head tilted back against the headrest, eyes closed.

"Yeah?"

"Why aren't you in your seat already?" That familiar, put-off tone of impatience tugs at something in my heart. Something that makes me brave.

"I just wanted to ask where you want to go." My voice sounds steady, and I know, I just fucking know Mom's in heaven right now, jumping and clapping for me. For doing this the *right* way, and not the easy way.

Wolf looks at me like I've lost my mind.

"We're going to whatever rehab center you chose for me, of course."

"It wasn't a foregone conclusion, Wolf," I say, my nerves back. He looks surprised, and that just strengthens me. "We're taking you wherever you want to go. The stairs are repaired at home. Not a single shard of glass left. Wherever *you* want to go, is where Rich will drive us."

Tears fill his eyes. “Fuck Birdie, don’t talk to me like a grown up.” He goes back to looking down and rubbing his brows.

“It’s about time, I do. I think.” The last words are a whisper, all I can manage.

“I hate it,” he gripes, but looks back up at me. “Now get in the damn car.”

I do as he says, and thank Christ I’m sitting because the relief slams into me like a tsunami when he asks where the rehab center is. I can’t feel my legs.

“I know where it is,” Rich answers from the driver’s seat.

“All right.” Wolf relaxes again and closes his eyes. “Wait,” he snaps, and my heart just about stops. “We gotta stop at McDonald’s first. I want nuggets and burgers. I’m probably not going to get any wherever I’m going.”

With my heart in my throat, I agree. “You’re not.”

We get greasy, terrible-for-your-health deliciousness and eat it in the parking lot so Rich can eat too. There’s not a lot of talk on the drive until Wolf asks about clothes.

“I packed you a couple of suitcases. The program lasts six weeks, apparently, and you can choose to stay longer if you want.” I’m sure they’re going to explain this all to him when he gets there, but I tell him all I found out from my research and from Tristan. “If you want to leave, you can. At any time, but you won’t be allowed back if you do it before the six weeks are up.”

“All right. Does Marley know?” He asks about our contact at the record label.

“No,” I say simply. “There’s no need. We don’t have any deadlines, and they’re not about to start hounding us for any new material since we put out Mom’s lullaby. The Grammys are in exactly eight weeks though, so if you want to stay longer, we’ll cancel that.”

“I really don’t want to prolong that bullshit another year.”

“I know, but we *can* cancel, is all I’m saying. If, when the program finishes, you want to stay longer than two weeks, then you can.”

He sighs again, keeping his eyes closed. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to look you in the eyes again, Birdie.”

What can I say to that? Should I say anything?

In the end, I go with my gut, and my gut always wants to laugh, so humor it is.

“I hope you do. I like being able to look at my pretty eyes outside the mirror.”

“My eyes are prettier.” He whispers his usual answer as a tear slips down his face. I place a hand on his shoulder and squeeze hard. No other words are needed, he knows what I mean.

Sunday, December 20th

I STEP INTO THE CREAM-COLORED LOBBY AT COVE TWO DAYS later. Leaving Wolf here was hard, and Dee could tell how much of a mess I was, since I called him from the car only to cry and blubber without making sense.

Today’s the first time I’ll see Wolf in here, and after a workshop on the twelve-step program, we’re going to have our first family therapy session.

Aunt Lyla’s hand tenses in mine, and I thank all the stars in the universe that she and Uncle Hulk agreed to come too. If they hadn’t, they wouldn’t be allowed to be part of the program at all. I didn’t know if Aunt Lyla would want to leave her life for more than a month, only to spend time with Wolf once a week, but she did without hesitation when I asked her.

Since Alexei is near Vancouver now, she’ll go visit him for a few days at some point. She also packed up her very busy husband and stepson and they’re all staying with us through the holidays. Wolf is okay with me telling anyone we consider family, or friend. In fact, he asked me to do it for him. The list isn’t very long, so everyone on it already knows.

“Hello.” Uncle Hulk goes right to the desk.

“Good morning. Can you tell me the number of the patient you’re visiting?” To his credit, the employee—Tyler, I read on his name tag—acts as if he doesn’t know any of us. I rattle off the number they told me to remember on Friday, and he nods at us to pass through without even looking at his computer.

We step out of the building again, and follow a stone path through gardens and tall palm trees. It’s a beautiful place, I gotta admit. The signs everywhere with AA phrases and steps won’t let anyone forget why they’re here, but it’s still peaceful.

We arrive at another building, similar to the one up front, and it’s full of people. Now it’s my fingers flexing in Lyla’s hand. I feel like a kid again, trying to hide behind her legs whenever we left the house all those years ago. Wolf isn’t here. I don’t recognize anyone, why would I?

Then the patients start trickling in. There are men and women of all ages and ethnicities. One girl—she looks like she could be sixteen—with the most awesome rainbow dreads, runs to a couple that’s a few steps away from us. She looks happy to see them. Damn, I hope—

“Birdie.” I hear my second-favorite growl in the world. I let go of Lyla’s hand, I feel like I can now.

He almost crashes his still-extended leg and the wheelchair into me, but I pivot at the last second. He wraps his arms around my torso so tightly I’d tell him to let me breathe at any other time. But not today. I’m gonna enjoy this. “Hey, Wolfie,” I whisper. “You okay?”

I roll my eyes—not that he can see with his face buried in my belly—when he only grunts. “You know I don’t speak grunt like Dee, so you gotta use your words, okay?” I get a groan for my trouble. Okay, moving in the right direction.

“I’ve spoken so much in just two days, Birdie, I swear my throat hurts.” I know he’s exaggerating because he’s a singer for fuck’s sake. Despite his addiction he’s always managed to take care of his vocal cords. I find the strength to laugh when he leans back to look up at me, and I see his eyes open in panic. But he’s not really looking *at me*.

“Are you all in touch with your feelings now?”

“You’re such a brat.” He lets go and gets a double hug from Hulk and Lyla. He knew they were coming, I told him on Friday, but he’s probably still surprised they came.

“All right, everyone. Welcome. Please find a seat, the workshop will begin shortly.”

We sit in the front row, where there’s a clear gap of chairs for Wolf’s wheelchair. I listen intently to everything that’s shared even though I know most of it thanks to my Al-Anon meetings. I see Aunt Lyla take notes, and although Uncle Hulk doesn’t, he asks a lot of clarifying questions. I love how seriously they take it, and I can see it means a lot to Wolfie too.

When it’s done, we move on to our family therapy session, and the middle-aged man introduces himself as Adrian.

“Take a seat, please.” We settle on the couches around the spacious room. It doesn’t look like a traditional therapist’s office, but more of a classroom with couches. There isn’t even a desk, but bookshelves line two of the walls. There’s a play area, a table with eight chairs, and the couches. “So, for today, I thought we’d start first with just checking in, seeing where everyone is at with the knowledge of Wolf’s addiction. Then we’ll spend some time, just Hawk, Wolf, and I. Does that sound good?”

We all agree, and then Aunt Lyla starts. She cries, and makes me cry. “I feel like I could’ve done something to prevent it.”

“You couldn’t have,” Adrian tells her, point blank. He’s not gentle, but also not harsh. *What superpower is this?* “That’s your codependency talking. You don’t have the power to beat Wolf’s addiction. No one but Wolf does.” With that he moves on to Hulk.

He surprises me by the concern he shows for the future. “I did some research. I know the information online isn’t always the best, but the percentage of people who relapse—”

“I won’t.” The determination in Wolf’s voice makes Adrian’s lips tip up slightly.

“No one knows if you will or won’t. What we do know is that, for now, you want to stay sober. You want to get better and work on yourself. At least, that’s what you told me yesterday.”

“It is what I want. For a second there”—he looks at me then quickly away—“I thought of not coming here. Birdie gave me a choice when I was discharged from the hospital, and I pictured what my life would be like if I went home and just picked up a beer as soon as I got there. I knew I’d lose him. I knew I’d lose myself. So I chose to come here.”

The pride I hear in his voice only makes me choke up with more tears. “I’m so happy for you,” I whisper.

There’s a little more talk—more informative than anything—with Hulk and Lyla, and then they’re asked to leave.

“Hawk.” My head snaps up and I look at Adrian. “Your brother told me you’ve been going to therapy for four years?”

“Yes,” I answer, and clear my throat. “And I’ve been going to Al-Anon meetings for three.”

“So you have a good understanding of codependency?”

“I do.” I nod for emphasis.

He turns to Wolf. “Are you aware that you’re both codependent?”

“What?” Wolf looks truly shocked.

“Going by what you and I spoke about yesterday, I’d say you’re very dependent on each other. You’ve been each other’s main support from a very young age. Wolf, you protected your brother the night your father died. Hawk, you always step in front of Wolf when meeting other people. Did you know that?”

“No,” I whisper. I didn’t know that.

“You did it after the workshop, with other patients, and with me when we came in here. You’re both overprotective—which is an understandable response to the trauma you’ve

been through—but you’ll have to unlearn that in order to move forward with your life.”

I can’t look at Wolf. I don’t want to change that. I—

“What do we have to do?” My neck hurts with how quickly I turn to look at Wolf. How can he accept it so easily?

“What just went through your head, Hawk?” Adrian asks me.

“I—”

“Honesty—no matter how hard or harsh—is the best policy in therapy.”

I nod and swallow hard. God, my hands are clammy. “I was thinking that I don’t want to change how we are, and when he agreed so easily, it hurt.” I have to look down at my lap, ashamed.

“It’s understandable that you don’t want to change what makes you feel comfortable, but in this case, it’s necessary, so you two can form meaningful bonds outside your brotherhood. Your brother told me you have a partner?”

“Yes. Derek,” I say, without looking up. “He can’t come on Sundays, he ...” I trail off, not knowing how to explain.

“He knows who Derek is, Birdie,” Wolf says gently, and reaches for my hand. I clasp his tightly and nod.

“Wolf told me he’s been a good friend to both of you for years.”

“The best,” I whisper, and finally look up. Wolf’s covering his mouth with his bandaged hand, looking at Adrian. “Our ... romantic relationship started only a few months ago.”

“Wolf explained the situation. In fact, that was pretty much all he talked about. Can you tell your brother some of what you said to me, Wolf?”

Worry clogs my throat when he takes forever to speak and still won’t look at me. “I’m very happy that you’re together and I ... fuck.” He starts crying, and lets go of my hand to rub

his eyes since he can't with his bandaged hand. "I'm sorry, Birdie. I'm so sorry."

In shock, not knowing how to react, I whisper, "For what?" I truly don't know.

"For fucking things up with Deedee in the first place, then fucking up again when you came to Carmel to get away. I'm sorry for holding you back, for shutting you up or walking away whenever you started talking about Mom. I'm sorry for never going to therapy when you asked, and I'm sorry not being there for you like I promised I would be when Mom died. I'm just sorry."

My eyes fill with more tears the longer he speaks. I didn't know that's what I needed to feel like the best really is yet to come, that everything's going to be okay.

"I forgive you."

So simple. Three words that have a visible impact on my brother. I didn't know he needed to hear them, just like I didn't know I needed his apology.

I look back at Adrian, a new sense of determination driving me. "What do we have to do?" I echo Wolf's words.

"I first want to ask, since he's such an important person to Wolf, if there's any way Derek can come to a session with us?"

"He's going to try to drive up tomorrow," I hedge. "But I don't know what time he'll arrive."

"Okay. If he gets here before four, please bring him over. Now, let's start simple, tell me about your plans for the next year."

So we talk about work at first, discussing what a year after touring looks like normally, and what we would have to do and when.

"I think ... I think I don't want to tour like that anymore," Wolf says, surprising me.

"What do you mean?" I raise my right knee to the couch and turn to him even though he still won't look at me.

“I don’t want to be away from home for so long.”

“We don’t have to. I don’t love it as much either. We could space it out more too, and maybe we could do it only in the summers?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You brought up another thing I want to hear your thoughts on, Wolf. Home.” Adrian turns to me. “Do you see yourself moving in with Derek?”

“Yes.” I answer without hesitation.

“And does your brother live with you too, in that scenario?”

Honesty, I remind myself when shame burns my cheeks. “Yes.”

“Do you think that’s healthy?”

“No,” I whisper.

“Do you?” he asks Wolf.

“No.”

“Okay then, let’s discuss—”

“I don’t want to go back to the house,” Wolf says in a panicked voice.

“Okay,” I say simply.

“Now, don’t think I mean for you two to never see each other, because I don’t. You can even live very close by. But sharing a living space for so long, you’ve intertwined your lives to the extreme. Why don’t you keep that in mind during the week, and we can come back to it next Sunday?”

We agree, and thank him as we leave the room. There’s still time for visiting, so we go in search of Lyla and Hulk and find them lying on the grass, with their heads together and looking at the sky. I stop pushing Wolfie and just stare at them for a minute. They have huge smiles on their faces as they point in different directions. Trying to see what the clouds look like, I realize and chuckle to myself.

Those two, they don't care that no one in the world understands their love, or that everyone at Cove is watching them with curiosity as they pass by. They're the best of friends.

Eventually, they notice us and wave us over. I sit with them and hug Hulk, while Wolf apologizes to them, too. "And I'm sorry to pull you away from your lives—"

"Oh, I accept all your other apologies, but not that one. You're saving me from arguing all day and night on TV." Uncle Hulk shudders as if he doesn't absolutely love his NHL show with his best friend, Paul Wayne.

"Same with me. I get to spend the holidays with my whole family at the beach, since Ivan and Alexei are coming for a day. And in warm weather, instead of in the frozen tundra of Manhattan. It's good for Michael to leave his island now and again. And did I tell you? Eli's so excited to spend every day at the beach."

We move on to other topics, and soon enough, I remember what finally snapped me out of my tears on Friday.

"Oh my *God*, Wolf."

"What? What is it?" he asks, worried.

"You won't believe what happened on Friday. Tristan has a boyfriend!" I shriek.

"What?" he repeats.

I get my phone out and show him the pictures that flooded the internet. "It's none other than billionaire Harrison Crawford."

"Noooo," he says in disbelief.

I nod. "Yes!" I take my phone out, while Aunt Lyla laughs at us.

"He's a nice man," she tells us. "I've met him a few times."

"We know his son, Theo, because he's the boyfriend of Deedee's best friend Mike." We've just never met the dad."

Wolf tells her then his mouth falls open when I finally find the picture and shove my phone in his face. “Damn, the best things happen when you go to prison. Tristan went and got himself a sugar *Daddy*.” Wolf leers at the picture of the gorgeous silver fox with his arm around our PR manager.

“Ew,” I exclaim. “And you’re not in prison.” I shove his good leg. “Do you want to call him? They told me we could.”

“Fuck, yeah.”

So we talk to Tristan. First only Wolf, while he explains everything about Cove and how he’s doing, how his leg and hand feel.

“Are you sure you don’t want me there? Or Zoe?” I hear Tristan ask, when Wolf puts him on speaker.

“I’m positive. Derek and I have Wolf’s back,” I say, even though he was clearly asking Wolf.

“I’ve got Birdie here, and Deedee as well, so I’m as supported as I can be,” Wolf adds.

“Yeah, I know but—”

“You know we’ll call if anything happens, but no one’s found out anything since it happened, no one knows where I am.” Wolf’s reminder of their discussion has Tristan staying silent for a pointed second.

Then we hear a car over the phone, and a door open. “I know you didn’t want to hide it—”

“But you were right to push, Tristan. Don’t worry so much, I’m not mad,” Wolf says, smiling.

“Okay, good. Please keep me posted, Hawk.”

“I will,” I assure him. “But now you gotta tell us, did you really get yourself a sugar daddy, Tristan?” I smile like a lunatic.

“Ugh,” he grumbles. “That’s not what this is, and you know it.”

“Yeah, we do,” Wolf speaks now. “But we’re gonna give you endless shit for ending up with that delicious silver fox.”

We burst out laughing when Tristan growls.

“Well, I see you feel perfectly fine already, and don’t need me at all. Bye guys.”

“We *looooveee* you,” we sing-song, and I can hear the smile we get out of him when he signs off.

“Love you too. Be good.”

TWENTY-TWO

Derek

“THEN WE WENT OUT TO THE GARDENS. I PUSHED HIM AROUND for a while, he kept asking me to run because he was bored in his wheelchair, but I didn’t. ‘Cause I know that would’ve been bad. We talked about you a bit more.” Hawk’s face on my iPad goes from serious to mischievous, to serious, then to hesitant, all in less than ten seconds. I can see he’s lying sideways in his bed, with his own iPad propped up.

I was very thankful when he FaceTimed me as soon as he got home, and I love hearing about everything they went through today. Makes me feel better even though I’m not there to support them. “Do you want to tell me about that?” I ask gently.

“Well, Adrian talked about us not being glued together all the time.” He looks down at his bedsheets. “And one thing that he thought was that we shouldn’t live together anymore ... when he graduates from rehab.” I bite my lip to hold in the laugh that wants to come out at the term but stay quiet. History has taught me that there’s a lot more coming. “We also talked about maybe not touring so much in the next ... five years. That it’d be better if we settle down a little, and just work on being happy.” A big breath, and then, the floodgates really open up. “We’d still like to live close, you know? So I thought about the idea of buying just a big plot of land, like Clive’s, and building two houses there. Separate but close by.”

He goes on about the house deal for a good ten minutes, and when Coach Rodriguez looks at me like he's about to break my phone, I interrupt.

“Sunshine, I have to go. Sorry, but the game's about to start.”

“Oh! Yes, go, I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry, I wanna hear everything. We'll talk more later, yeah?”

“Yes, now go!”

I hang up and grab my helmet before jogging down the tunnel to the field. It's now been almost three days since I last kissed Hawk, and I'm feeling it. It's been hard, knowing my best friend and my boyfriend are going through so much and I can't be there with them, physically, to support them.

I've gone through the last month on autopilot, training every day, cursing myself for loving football as much as I do, whenever we have an away game and I don't see Hawk and Wolf for days, and generally feeling like shit.

The hardest thing for me has been not being able to explain to anyone why I'm so damn twitchy all the time. AJ and Appleton have asked how things are going with Hawk, like the awesome guys they are, and I tell them it's all good between us. Because it is. Of course it is. It doesn't matter that we've spent all our time together either on pins and needles about Wolf, sleeping, or fucking. That's what all new boyfriends do, right?

The game against Seattle is a doozy. They pull me out, as well as most starters, with twelve minutes left on the clock. We're up by five scores, and I can't say I don't love to see asshole Zack Welton—who made my life miserable, and then George's—rage on the other side of the field. Good riddance.

We clinched our division, so we're absolutely going to the playoffs and now we're just waiting to see when Las Vegas fucks up, so we can take the number one seed of the Conference and earn another off week in the middle of January.

Man, I want those free days. I'm gonna spend them going to therapy and hanging out with all of my boyfriend's family, but I can't fucking wait.

I run to my SUV and call Hawk back as soon as the engine starts.

"That was an *incredible* game, Dee!" he shouts. I smile despite myself.

"It was fun," I agree. "Then it was too easy."

"Yeah, it did get a bit boring by the end. Hulk says to tell you good game."

"Tell him thanks. So what else did you talk about with Wolf?"

"Oh, well the therapist, Adrian, he's great. Did I tell you that?"

"You did." I grind my teeth at the sudden, harsh flare of annoyance. *What's up with that? Am I actually jealous?*

"He's really awesome. I like him."

Yup. I'm jealous.

I hate myself for it, but really, how can I stop?

"You there, Dee?"

"Yeah, sorry, I think I lost you for a sec."

"Oh, okay. I just said how we talked to him about you and how important you are to both of us. He said he wants to have a session with you too whenever you can get here. He knows you can't come on Sundays, because Wolfie told him you play for the Warriors. I hope that's okay?"

I breathe easier. "Yes, of course. That's fine. I'll go tomorrow."

"Well, yeah, but he said to only go to Cove if you get here before four in the afternoon. But it's your only day off this week, before you have to go back for training on Tuesday and then come back here for Christmas on Thursday. Isn't that a

lot? Have you told your Mom and Gracie about coming here instead of LA?”

Fuck. No, I haven't.

“No, but I'll call them as soon as I get home.” And a plan starts forming in my head.

“Okay,” he says simply, then goes a little bit quiet. I'm sure it's because I didn't say anything about my plans to drive up and down California this week, but he'll be happy if I pull off my surprise. “Did you see the pics that came out earlier, of Tristan in Harrison Crawford's suite at the King's stadium?” I ask, to change the subject and to get him talking to me again.

He launches gleefully into the story of how Wolf reacted to the news. I listen while I sit in traffic, a smile on my face at hearing my sunshine brighten my night.



I RESIST KISSING THE GROUND.

A man has to have *some* dignity. I almost regretted the idea of this surprise as soon as I climbed into the helicopter two hours ago, but being here, knowing that Hawk's smile is waiting for me, I'm really, really not.

I wish I could swear on my life I'm never getting in one of those death traps again. But with Wolf in rehab five hours away, and Hawk determined to be here for every step of his journey, I know I'll have no choice if I want to see my boyfriend at least once a week for the next month and a half.

Mom and Gracie love the idea of coming to Carmel instead of LA, and I'm too excited for words that we're gonna spend the holidays with a big family. I can't wait to tell them about Hawk and me. I'm sure they'll be thrilled.

It's midnight, and I thank my lucky stars I thought of calling Tate before I arranged this whole thing. I climb into his SUV and let out a relieved sigh when he says, “He's gonna jump and clap his hands from happiness. He's been moping in the afternoons.”

“I hope so. Thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem,” he says simply. Then we drive away from the helipad and in less than ten minutes we’re in front of Wolf’s house. There are a lot more cars parked than usual.

“It’s the Ellsworth’s. They brought two security guards with them, too. You’ll meet them tomorrow. For now, I’m pretty sure Hawk’s suffering through another Hallmark Christmas movie with his aunt.”

“Thanks, man. Good night.”

I follow the sound of the TV when no one greets me upon entering through the kitchen.

Hawk stares at me, pure confusion in his eyes. “Oh, man. I think I’m having a stroke, Aunt Lyla.”

She laughs her musical laugh. “You’re not. Get up and give your boyfriend a kiss, Birdie. We’ll finish this one tomorrow.”

“Oh, thank God,” he says exaggeratedly, then jumps and runs into my arms. I resist kissing him senseless right then and there, but immediately carry him to his bedroom. I think Lyla understands my intentions by the way she laughs again.

Hawk attacks my mouth when I kick the door closed behind me, and I’m not gonna stop him . . . until I do?

“Wait.” Whatever this subconscious part of me is, that’s taken control and stopped me from getting laid, I want to kill it.

“What?” Hawk asks, eyes wide.

“I want to talk.” *What? No, I don’t.*

“What?” Tears start to gather in his eyes. “You’re gonna break up with me?” I finally regain full control of myself at the sight of his lower lip trembling. He stumbles back and sits at the foot of the bed.

“No. No. No. I’m not breaking up with you. At all. Ever.” I kneel at his feet.

“Okay,” he whispers hesitantly. “Then what do you want to talk about?”

“I just ...” Fuck. *How do I explain what I can't understand myself?* I look back into his eyes and realize I already know how to do it. Hawk-style, I just start talking. “This last month has been hard. For all of us, I know. But I feel like I’ve barely seen you. It’s only been three days, I know, but it feels like more. Since Wolf got hurt, it’s been go, go, go every day. I know we’ve talked and we’ve been together, but I feel like we haven’t actually *been together*. Does that make sense?” I ask a bit desperately. I honestly have no idea.

“Okay.” He breathes out and places his hands on my shoulders. “Okay. I think I know what you mean ... I’ve been so focused on Wolfie, and I’ve neglected you—”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I don’t think you’ve neglected me, sunshine. I’ve just missed you. I’ve missed being just you and me. Watching TV, eating, talking about anything and everything. I know we’ve done most of those things, but our heads have always been on Wolf.” I understand now. “I think I just need to be with you for a little while, and think about anything but Wolf. I haven’t seen you since before he decided to go to rehab, and now that he’s there, I’m so relieved, sunshine. I don’t know how to express how relieved and happy I am for him. But I’m also so, so tired. I need to just be with you.”

“Dee,” he whispers, and brings his hands to my neck. “I need that too.” He rests his forehead on mine. “I need that so, so much. I didn’t know. I didn’t know.” I rise to my feet and push him gently onto the bed. I take off his shoes, and mine, his pants, my slacks, his t-shirt, unbutton my shirt. Then I pull the duvet down, turn the lights off, and slide in beside him.

We spend hours awake, kissing and talking. We don’t fuck, we don’t come. We don’t need to. But some part of me is always touching him, and when we fall asleep, we do it sharing the same pillow.



I SIT DOWN, NERVOUS LIKE I'VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE, IN Adrian's office. Wolf is on my right and Hawk on my left.

"Thank you for coming, Derek. Wolf and Hawk have told me a lot of good things about you." I smile as much as I can and try not to rub my neck. I feel exposed.

"I'm happy to be here." Despite the nerves, that's true. He looks at us curiously for less than ten seconds, but it's enough to ruffle Wolf's feathers.

"What," he growls.

Adrian smiles, seemingly already used to Wolf's mood after only three full days of knowing him. "He's sitting between you two." He wags a finger from Wolf to Hawk.

"And?" I ask, confused.

"Wolf and Hawk are very close. I'd even go as far as to say they have the tightest sibling relationship I've ever seen. They rarely separate for long, but right now it seems natural for you three to sit like this."

There's a pointed beat of silence. "Is that bad?" Hawk asks hesitantly. I grab his hand when I see him bite his lip nervously.

"No, just interesting." Adrian shrugs. "I want to talk about the fact that you're family to both Hawk and Wolf, and how they both seem to have welcomed you into their lives like they've never done with anyone else."

The session is hard.

Putting my emotions out there for a stranger to hear isn't something I'm happy about, but I do it for Wolf. When I speak about what I realized last night with Hawk, the tension in the room is palpable, but Wolf breaks it by bursting into tears. His sobs wreck my soul, and he apologizes for everything under the sun when I hug him as much as I can with him being in a wheelchair.

Adrian allows us to cry and console each other, but soon enough, he keeps going.

“Hawk. Your brother told me everything you said to him when he was in the hospital. Do you think, or have you ever thought he’s like your father?”

Oh, fuck. I feel so, so, so uncomfortable. I wanna run away, but I don’t. I reach for Hawk’s hand, and holding them both, I steel myself for what is sure to be a hard conversation.

“No. Never. I mean, I don’t remember a lot about him. I was three when he died. All I know is he drank a lot, and hit us sometimes. I’ve worked on this ... issue in therapy for the last four years. I know Wolf would never do that. I know that the person he is is always present, even when he drinks—drank. I’m at peace with what happened *that night*. Because I’ve worked on it a lot. What I still can’t get over is everything that happened after ...” He trails off, looking to the side.

“Wolf, is your alcoholism the only reason why you’re scared you’ll become like your father?”

“I guess.” He takes a long time to keep talking, and staying silent isn’t easy, but I manage it. I didn’t know his father—obviously—but just from knowing what happened, I know Wolf would never do what he did. “I just don’t want to hurt anyone, ever. And that’s why it’s always on my mind, I guess.”

Hawk bursts then. “Don’t you want to stop doing that to yourself, though? You. Are. Nothing. Like. Dad.” He enunciates every word carefully. “All I remember is his laugh, and you never fucking laugh anyway.” He throws his hands in the air and keeps ranting. “I talked to Mom about it, you know? When she was in the hospital. I asked her to tell me about him. She told me how they met, how amazing he was, how they fell in love, how she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, and how it all changed. Little by little. You know he started resenting her success. You know because you’ve told me what you remember from that night. *Nothing about you*—no matter how much you look like him—*is like him.*”

We’re silent after that, and walking through the pretty gardens of Cove I feel a sense of release that I realize was only

made possible because I talked about my thoughts to Hawk last night.

Speaking of, he stops walking and fishes his phone from his jeans. “It’s Tristan,” he tells us.

“Hey, Tr—” He cuts off and frowns. “Wait, wait, I’m here with Wolfie, let me put you on speakerphone.”

“A magazine is going to run the story of Wolf being in rehab. They gave us twenty-four hours to decide if we want to offer them another story, but we’re out of ideas.” Zoe says.

“I’ll do it.”

“No.” The finality in Wolf’s tone tells me he knows what Hawk’s talking about, but I don’t.

“What?” I ask them.

“Every news outlet has been begging us to do an interview about *that* night,” Hawk says meaningfully, and it’s enough to clue me in. “Ever since we released our first single. I’ll do the interview, get it over with.”

“No,” Wolf says, with more force this time.

“Why not? I barely remember anything anyway.” Hawk throws his arms in the air.

“You don’t have to do it, Hawk. You really don’t.” Tristan’s compassion comes through the phone’s speakers.

“Let me talk about it with Wolf.” He hangs up the call without waiting for Tristan or Zoe to say anything.

Without a second’s pause, he faces Wolf head on and crosses his arms. “You don’t want to become a role model, do you?” he demands, and Wolf growls. “Exactly. If everyone finds out you’re suddenly sober, people are gonna stare at you whenever you have any kind of drink in your hand. They’re going to scrutinize you even more, and you don’t need that while you’re dealing with *staying* sober.

“So if I do this, first, the whole story will be finally out, even though they could read the court documents if they really wanted to know. Second, I’ll finally be able to say how fucked

up it is that people wanted me to talk about it when we released our first single because I was fucking *twelve*. I can explain that everything, including the way the media handled it, has been traumatic. And I can talk about Mom in a way that will make people understand, Wolfie. I want the world to understand that she was the best Mom to ever Mom.”

The stomp at the end of his speech takes a bit out of the awesomeness of it, but I keep my laugh in check as I see Wolf visibly struggle.

“Fuck Birdie, I can’t stop you if you really want to. This is your story to tell—” Hawk cuts him off.

“It’s *our* story, Wolfie.”

“I know, but you’re just going to talk about your side of things, not mine, and—” Aaaand he’s interrupted again. I turn from man to man like I’m watching a tennis match.

“I’m gonna make sure they don’t fucking bother you. At all. Ever again. You can trust me on that.”

I pipe up in the silence that follows. “We’re three days away from Christmas Eve and—”

“It won’t be until January, at least.” He’s interrupting *me* now, okay. “I won’t change my holiday plans for these assholes. If they want the story, they’ll wait.”

With that, he calls Tristan back.

TWENTY-THREE

Hawk

DEE FLIES BACK TO LA ON MONDAY EVENING, THEN COMES right back in time for Christmas Eve dinner on Thursday. He picks up his Mom and sister from the airport in Monterrey, then they all get swallowed in hugs by Lyla, Hulk, and me.

“Mom, Gracie. Hawk and I are ... together.” We turn to each other as if choreographed and clasp hands.

Waiting patiently—the whole two seconds—for their reaction to Dee telling them about us, is the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, but it’s worth it when they give us huge smiles and quick hugs. They’re not a family of huggers, the Johnson’s. But that’s okay.

“This is the best news ever!” Gracie tells me excitedly when she leans back.

“I think so too.”

I masterfully put the impending interview from hell out of my mind for those two days. When Alexei comes for his short visit on Christmas Day, I focus on him a little bit more and hear all about hockey boarding school, but he also spends most of the time catching up with Eli. Aunt Lyla told me she’s pretty sure they talk every day, but we leave them to it either way.

Gracie slides up to me that afternoon, and looking ashamed says, “I’m sorry but I just don’t understand.”

Thinking she's talking about me and Dee, I tense all over. "What?"

"What is *up* with your Aunt and Uncle and her husband?"

I bark out a laugh of relief and have no issues explaining as much as I can. "Lyla and Hulk are best friends. They have been since they met, and then they decided to get married. It wasn't romantic at all according to them. They just looked at each other one day and thought, well, let's do it. They both wanted to be parents, and so they got married, and then had my cousins." Gracie nods along, I can see I have her undivided attention. "So two years ago, Aunt Lyla was in New York for fashion week and met Michael. It was love at first sight. She ran back home and told Hulk, because he's still the first person she goes to whenever something big happens. They love each other. Of course they do, but they've never been *in* love, and Michael understands that." I shrug when I'm done, and she just keeps staring at me, waiting for more information. That's all I've got though.

She keeps staring at them throughout dinner, and eventually sighs heavily and tells me under her breath, "I wish I had even one of those relationships, the fated best friend or the love of my life, but I have neither."

"You don't have any close friends?" I ask, totally indelicately.

She shakes her head, not minding my bluntness. "No. I have casual friends, co-workers and all that." She waves her hand carelessly. "But not life-long friends." She sighs again, then smiles gently at me, that same small smile Dee has when he thinks I'm adorable, and then gets back to her plate full of deliciousness.



I ASK DEE IF I CAN RIDE HIM THAT NIGHT. TAKING IT SLOW, stretching the moment out, because I know the busiest time of the year for him is just beginning and we won't have much time together. I bend down to kiss him, and though it's awkward to keep moving my hips slowly, I don't stop, and he

doesn't seem to mind. I'm pretty sure we spend hours like that, and even though I'm not sure exactly what our future looks like—things are still so up in the air, and I haven't taken the time to talk to Dee about—

I come on a silent cry when he thrusts up and creates the perfect tight channel for my dick to rub against with his abs. I close my eyes after I feel Derek explode inside me, and it's lights out.

Derek leaves Friday night, and his mother and Gracie Saturday morning. I mope for five minutes when I wake up alone and remember I don't know when I'll see him again, and then I order myself to snap out of it.

Ivan arrives just after lunch and he bonds a little more with Michael thanks to Hulk's meddling.

My uncle has a heart of gold.

It's once again only Eli, Michael, Hulk, Lyla and me on Sunday, and we go to Cove for our weekly workshop and family therapy session.

“Can you see the games?” I ask Wolf, when we're once more lying on the grass, while he watches on from his wheelchair.

“Not all of them. They just let us watch for a little while, and since I don't have a phone, I can't see the highlights.” I hear the pout without having to look.

“I'll save all of them and you can see them later.”

“Have you seen Rich?” Hulk asks.

“Oh, yeah, he's really popular, everyone loves him. I don't see him every day, and I can't be part of the self-defense class, but they let me sit in and make fun of everyone. It's the highlight of my week.”

“And how's the hand and the leg?” Hulk keeps the conversation moving, wanting to soak up all the time we get with Wolf, I know. I'm thankful he can think of questions to ask.

“They're fine.”

I know what that means.

“When are you supposed to start physical therapy?” Lyla keeps it moving.

“Tomorrow, I think. It’s officially been six weeks since the big, dumb fall, and even with all the damn infections, the doc here says I’m right on schedule with my healing.”

Too soon, the time to leave comes, and we meet Tate and Lyla’s bodyguard, Felipe, outside.

New Year’s Eve — Derek

“THIS SUCKS,” I GROAN, AND BANG MY HEAD BACK AGAINST my borrowed locker in the Chicago stadium. I feel the heavy weight of Appleton’s huge hand land on my shoulder and resist shrugging it off. I don’t want to be mean.

“We’ll be home in no time.” His attempt at reassurance doesn’t help, just like it hasn’t helped in the last five days. The last five days where we’ve had *two games*. We played against Arizona at home on Sunday, then had no days off since we drew the short straw and are playing Thursday Night Football in fucking Chicago. On New Year’s Eve.

The first New Year’s Eve when I have a boyfriend. And instead of kissing him at midnight, I’m probably going to be on a bus on my way to the airport. I just want it to be over, and being down ten points at halftime isn’t helping my mood.

Most of the single guys are staying and finding a party to crash. Coach very gracefully gave us free reign on our travel plans, as long as we’re back at the training facility by Monday. We’ve got one more game and then the playoffs to get ready for. Since we earned an off week, I’ll be at least spending that time with Hawk in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

When the third quarter begins, I’m wishing for an interception from the first play on. I want to win this so I can get home, then get on another fucking helicopter and go see Hawk. I really don’t like being away from him when he’s having such a hard time. Therapy’s going well, and he’s happy that Wolf is taking his sobriety seriously, but it’s taking its toll.

I just want to hold him and do what little I can to make him feel better.

There's something he wants to talk to me about that he just won't spit out over the phone, and I want it out of the way. The sooner the better.

We sneak out a win in the end, by sheer, dumb luck honestly, when their field goal goes wayside. I have more than three hours 'till midnight in California comes around, so I wait until we're in the air and the seatbelt sign turns off to call Hawk.

I catch myself almost crying when he doesn't answer my texts or my calls, and I tell myself it's fine, that I'll call when we land. Only, when we land, he still doesn't pick up. I start thinking of how to get a helicopter at three in the morning on the first of January, when I arrive home and stop short at the shape on my couch.

I do let the tears fall then. I'm so damn tired, body and mind, so I just curl up behind him without waking him. I'll give him a new year's kiss tomorrow.



THE GLARE OF THE MORNING SUN WAKES ME, AND I REGRET not taking off my belt and slacks the second I do. Then I realize, Hawk's not next to me. I bolt upright. Did I dream it? Did I dream him?

No, I'm pretty sure I felt him, I—

“Ouch, goddammit.” The wannabe-whisper saves me from a visit to a psychiatrist. I find Hawk, shirtless and with my favorite dark gray sweats on. Good enough to eat. And with that in mind I sneak up behind him and wrap him in my arms. “Oh, that feels so good.” I feel him relax so completely against me I'm about to demand he come back to the couch so we can sleep for another twelve hours or so, but he shifts forward the next second. “Breakfast's almost ready, Dee, just let me—” I cut him off with my mouth. I need to taste him, to feel him pressed to me, to hear every one of his breaths, and hear his moans. I need ... him. Next to me. Always next to me.

“I love you,” I breathe against his lips. “I love you,” I repeat. I need to say it a million times and show him in millions of ways. Why did I wait so long?

“Because I made breakfast?” he asks, a dazed look in his eyes.

“No.” I laugh. “Yes. I love you because of every little and big thing you do. I love you because you came to see me, and you slept on my sofa. I love you because of your smile, because of your mind, because you’re always so brave and say what you think. I love you because you’re my sunshine, and because you don’t need me to be yours, you just want me to be me. I love you because you’re the best person I know, the funniest, the bravest, the kindest. You’re everything, sunshine.”

“*Dear. God.*” He rushes to turn off the stove and leans heavily on the counter. “You can’t just *say things like that, Derek*. Swooning in the kitchen is dangerous!” Then he turns, springs up, wraps his legs around me, and shoves his tongue into my mouth. My hands go to his ass on autopilot, and I return every bit of passion he gives me.

I get annoyed with myself all over again for not taking off my clothes last night when I feel his hard cock rubbing against mine. “Fuck,” I groan, as I take my lips on a trip down his throat. “I need to taste you, sunshine. Now.”

“Okay,” he agrees in a high-pitched moan. I turn us and walk until I feel the kitchen island against my hand. I sure hope nothing’s on it because I plop Hawk down and shove the sweatpants low enough for his erection to spring free, and dive.

I suck him halfway into my mouth and groan at the taste of his precome. I’ve missed everything about him, and it’s only been five days. How am I going to survive the next month of playoffs? Any worry leaves my mind and is replaced by my need to come when he puts one hand on the back of my head and pushes me lower. I fucking love it when he’s so horny he starts pushing me around.

I undo the stupid belt and stupid slacks I always make myself wear on game day, then unceremoniously start jacking off in my kitchen while I suck my boyfriend's dick.

This is the life. The one I want to keep and cherish forever. Just the thought of it makes me hornier than I've ever been. I spill all over my hand, and my groans must do it for Hawk because he comes down my throat a few seconds later.

"Surprise," Hawk says weakly, from his position lying limp on the island. I look up at him from where I am, kneeling on the floor, and laugh and laugh.

We clean up and finally eat the very good breakfast Hawk made for us—French toast, his specialty. When I take my last bite, Hawk stands and takes my plate, but I grab his wrist to stop him.

"Sit for a minute, sunshine." He does, looking anywhere but at me. I let him get away with it for a minute, then decide, to hell with it. "Are you going to tell me what's been on your mind?"

"Mm-mm." He shakes his head now, looking at the ceiling.

"Sunshine." I take his hand again, but he just turns his head to the other side. "Hawk Storm, look at me." After a long second, he does. I see he's about to babble, so I cut him off before he gets going. "I love you, Hawk. Whatever it is you're scared of talking to me about won't change that."

"Okay." He takes a huge breath and squeezes my hand.

"So, you know Wolf and I have been talking to Adrian about how codependent we are, and that making some changes might help us."

"Yes, you told me."

"Right, and then Wolf said he doesn't want to go back to the house." He waves his hand toward the front of the house, which isn't the direction where his home is, but I get the point.

"He doesn't?"

"No. So then we started talking about getting a plot of land like Clive's and just building two houses there—"

“Oh, yes. You did tell me that part. That’s a good idea, sunshine.”

“Will you move in with me?” he blurts in a shout.

“I—”

“I know it’s soon. We’ve barely been dating five months, but I want us to. I don’t think I’d like living alone, but I can if you’re not ready. Wolf and I can find our place and start building, and you can just move in when you’re ready, but then I know how much you love this place and how much fun you had renovating the kitchen and your bathroom, so I would like it if you had some input into the new house. You don’t have to, it’s just that I’d like it, because eventually when you’re ready I’d really want you to come live with me and may—”

I shut him up with my hand over his mouth this time, because if I kiss him it’s very possible I’ll never stop.

“Yes.”

“Wes?” he asks, his voice muffled against my mouth.

“I’d really like to move into you. And building a house is bound to be stressful, but also fun, I bet. And I can’t wait to see Wolf try and figure out what he wants in a house.”

Hawk’s laugh sounds behind my hand and he’s jumping out of his seat before I can even pull it away. He straddles me on my chair, and I very gladly take the attack, just like I don’t give the messy kitchen a second thought for a lot of hours after.

TWENTY-FOUR

Hawk

TEN DAYS LATER I'M PACING IN THE DRIVEWAY OF THE CARMEL house, waiting for Dee to get here. The LA Warriors won their last game of the season last night, and today, Dee started his drive north early in the morning to have time for a long pit-stop at Clive's place.

Turns out, Clive's neighbor wants to sell. He doesn't have five acres like Clive, but *ten*, which is more than enough for what we want. The best part? He wants to make sure the property doesn't go to some developer, so today, Dee went to talk to him about making a deal.

He texted when he was about to start driving again, telling me I shouldn't be nervous, that everything went fine, and that he'd tell me all about it when he gets here.

I'm not nervous about him talking to the dude, I'm bursting with anticipation of having Dee here for *five whole days*. Also, we're going to see Wolf later today and tell him all about it. I can't wait. Keeping this from him has been eating at me, but I really wanted to wait until it was a real possibility. Now we get to tell him together.

I wait, holding my breath as Dee climbs down from his SUV, for him to tell me what happened.

"He's willing to sell it to us." He holds up a hand to keep my excitement at bay. "The price, though," he hedges.

“Oh, who gives a rat’s ass about the price! It’s perfect, Dee.” I jump into his arms—my new favorite thing to do, since I know he’ll catch me—and kiss him soundly, but don’t let it go on for too long.

“Well I do,” he says, still way too serious. “I don’t have that kind of money, a—”

“What good will the freaking inheritance from hell, decades and decades of royalties from Mom’s songs, and a life insurance policy do me in the bank, huh?” His surprised gasp makes me laugh. “That’s right, Dee, you’re shacking up with a very rich man who did very little for a good portion of his money. So we’re spending it all. Maybe I’ll make Wolf pay rent. Oh—”

Derek throws me over his shoulder and slaps my ass hard. Why do I kind of like that?

“No, you’re not. He’s buying half, and we’re buying the other half, end of discussion.”

“How about I buy the other half and you pay for the house?” He stops in his tracks, and I headbutt him ... literally. When he doesn’t move, I take advantage of the situation and squeeze the perfect globes of his ass.

“Jesus,” he squeaks—though he’ll never admit it to anyone—and makes me cackle from glee.

“That’s what you get for carrying me around like a sack of potatoes. Put me down, you big jock.” He does, and I get my real greeting kiss.

Everything’s perfect.

And it gets even perfect-er—*it’s more perfect, dumbass*, right—when we arrive at Cove just in time to see Wolf finishing up his physical therapy session. He’s playing the piano. Very slowly, and a simple melody at that, but he’s using his left hand, and I can see the joy in his face as he does.

Even better than that, when he sees us come in, he *stands up*.

“Wolfie,” I exclaim, but avoid jumping into his arms. No more hospitals please. “You’re walking!” I do shout though. All this emotion inside me has to come out somehow.

“I know.” I can tell he wants to be a grouch, but for once, he can’t manage it. His smile takes over.

“And the guitar?” I ask warily, seeing it on its stand next to the piano.

“That’s still a couple of weeks away, I’m afraid,” the PT says. Caleb. I read his name on the tag he has over his uniform. “The piano is easier on his stiff fingers, but I have no doubt we’ll have him impersonating Santana in no time.” He smiles over at Wolf, looking proud, and for some reason that has me about to break down.

“Birdie, don’t.” Wolf growls a warning, looking at my forehead.

“I can’t help it,” I whine, and stomp my foot. “You gotta let me feel my feelings.”

“I know.” There’s resignation in his sigh, and I want more than anything for him to look me in the eyes and tell me he’s going to be okay, and to see that I believe him. “Let’s get this over with.” He walks slowly to his wheelchair, sits without raising his leg, and pushes himself to us. “Thanks, Caleb. See you tomorrow.” He shakes the man’s hand on his way. “Hey, Deedee.” They hug longer than normal, and I wonder what that’s about.

I get my own hug, and then we go on our way to our therapy session. They’ve made a lot of exceptions for us at Cove, and I’m thankful that they let us come see Wolf when Dee can take the time to come here. The exceptions wouldn’t have been necessary if this had happened back in the summer, but now is what matters.

We greet Adrian, and I get right to it. “We have some news we want to share with Wolfie. And you Adrian,” I amend at the last second.

“Okay,” he says patiently, clasping his hands.

“Dee and I talked about moving in together, what that would mean for all of us, and about the idea of living close by to Wolfie. So he talked about it to a friend of his who has this big plot of land, to see what he could recommend, so we could buy something similar. He talked to him before getting here today, and his neighbor is willing to sell his land to us!” I look at Wolf and my excitement dies when I see his stormy expression.

“What’s going through your head, Wolf?” Adrian asks him.

Wolf stays silent for a long while, and I start twitching more and more. When he finally speaks, it’s only a whisper, so I have to strain to hear.

“I think they’d both be better off without me.”

“Fuck, Wolf.” Derek’s broken heart rings in his voice. “We wouldn’t.” Then he looks back at Adrian as if to make sure the therapist believes him. “I’m probably just as codependent as these two, because honestly? I’d be fine living with Wolf in the same house as us forever. I love that they’re so close, that they do everything together. I don’t need them to change. Wolf is like my brother too, and if you hadn’t suggested they no longer live together it would never have crossed my mind to talk about it with either of them.

“I know that sounds insane, but it’s true. A couple of months ago, Hawk was spending every night with me, and even though we were all loved up and shit, we still missed spending time with Wolf. *Both of us*. So if you need to live in another house for us to be a little healthier, then that’s what we’ll do, but you won’t be far. Because you’re our family.”

I take a huge breath, imitating Dee, when he finishes his speech. The man has never been sexier in my eyes. Jesus he’s so damn perfect. When I can finally pull my eyes away from him, I see Wolf’s confused frown.

“I feel the same way,” I say, speaking clearly. “I understand there needs to be new and clearer boundaries, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to work with you or binge series with you. I want to try to beat you at Mario Kart for the

rest of my life, Wolfie. And someday you'll find your own someone, and we'll all know they're the perfect person for you because we'll love them too. This may be the end of an era, but another one is starting too, and we're starting it together."

Wolf stays quiet for the rest of the session, where Adrian focuses more on Dee than on me. They even tell me to leave the room at one point, which I do happily and go lie on the grass until they find and join me. Wolf, with Dee's help, lies down too, and we stay silent for a long while.

"The interview is in a few days, right?" Wolf breaks the peace of the moment.

"On Thursday." My words are clipped. I don't want to think about it, I just want it done and over with. I decided I wanted to do it at the house here, since it's where I feel safest and where I've been living, and they don't have any issues with coming from LA for the interview. The magazine is stoked to get this exclusive, so they're not about to put up any roadblocks.

"I think you should go to LA." Wolf's quiet but determined statement takes me out of my thoughts.

"What?" I blurt.

"You should both go to LA, spend Deedee's week off being by yourselves, and have the interview somewhere over there. I don't ..." he trails off.

"What is it?" I demand as I sit up.

"I don't want strangers to come to Mom's house. I don't want the world to be allowed inside *her* place."

"Oh, God." Well now I feel like shit. "I'm sorry, Wolfie, I didn't even ask. It's your house—"

"Stop that." He waves me off with his good hand and sits up too. "It's our house no matter what the deed says. I didn't know how to tell you, but there you go. I don't want any strangers in Mom's house."

"Okay." I nod so hard I start to get motion sickness. "But we don't have to go back to LA, we can just have it

somewhere else here.”

“No. Go back to LA. This . . .” He waves a hand at the beautiful gardens. “Carmel is supposed to be our escape, not our reality. You need to get back to reality a little bit and make sure we close that deal before someone else snaps up that piece of land. You gotta go over it with Bruce so he can tell us how to pay for it, because *we’re* paying for it.” He looks straight at Dee who’s still lying down when he says the last part.

“I’m paying for our house,” he says simply, in response to Wolf’s threatening-sounding words.

“You don’t want me to be here?” I whisper, hesitant again.

“Of course I want you here. You’re coming back before Sunday.” He points at me, keeping the threatening glare alive.

“Okay, then.” I breathe deeply and enjoy, like I seldomly do, the silence.



WE DRIVE TO THE HOUSE TO TELL Lyla, Eli, Michael, and Hulk our plan, then we pack ourselves into Dee’s SUV—*his first love*, I think with a twinge of envy—and Tate in the black SUV behind us.

“We should’ve stayed,” Derek says, when we’ve been on the highway for approximately forty seconds. I see him tighten his hands around the wheel. “You don’t want to go to LA. You want to stay here. Wolf’s program ends in two weeks, and you—”

“Stop telling me what I want, Derek,” I interrupt firmly. “I don’t do things I don’t want normally, so why would I start now?”

That shuts him up, but his shoulders relax, and he extends his fingers, so I know he heard me loud and clear. I look forward again, wanting to see the awesome view the highway offers and I’m not disappointed. The sun is setting, and as I see the gentle glare, a figure in the distance catches my

attention. It's familiar—a lithe, tall man—and when we start to get closer, it comes to me.

“Oh, my God. Pull over Dee. That's little Ollie Lloyd. Pull over.” I hit the dashboard a few times. “What the hell is he doing walking on the side of the highway?” I mutter, and I hear Dee do the same but pay him no mind as he changes lanes and parks the car a hundred feet in front of Oliver. Tate parks behind us and gets out lightning fast.

“What's wrong?” I don't get to hear his panicked voice too often, and as always it puts me on edge.

“I know that guy, he's lived in Carmel all his life. His parents are our neighbors. I just want to talk to him.”

“Dammit, Hawk.” He runs a hand roughly through his brown hair.

“Sorry for scaring you, but I've known him all my life. I gotta see if he needs help.” Especially because little Oliver Lloyd could collapse at any moment. He *really* shouldn't be walking aimlessly next to speeding cars.

He jogs the last few dozen feet and that just makes me worry more.

“Hawk?” he asks.

“Hey, Ollie. What the hell are you doing?” I ask, gruffer than normal as I grab his shoulders and look him over.

“I'm fine,” he snaps, surprising the hell out of me. He's never been one to snap ... at anyone. “I'm twenty-seven years old for fuck's sake! I can take care of myself. I know how. I'm not reckless with my health.”

“Uhhh.” I'm so out of my depth here, but ... I look at Dee and Tate, both of them looking anywhere but at us. Yeah, it's all on me since they're not gonna help. “I didn't say you don't, Ollie. I just asked why you're on the side of the highway?” I squeak out the question. I don't want to keep being yelled at.

“Because I'm fucking leaving!” he screams, a bit hysterical. “And my parents didn't want me to, so they didn't let me take the car. Which is theirs, because I can't pay for my

own. Because I never went to college, never got a job. I'm a twenty-seven-year-old loser who has nothing of his own and I'm sick of it!"

"Okay." I raise both palms in surrender. "Okay, I get the picture. But *where* are you going?"

"Anywhere." He tilts his chin up defiantly.

"You wanna come to LA with us? You can stay at my place as long as you need. I'll help you find a job." The offer leaves my lips before I can process it. When I do, I don't regret voicing it. Ollie and his parents were always kind to us. I don't know what their relationship has been like in the fifteen years since we moved, but I do know his parents let Ollie keep playing with us after *that night*, unlike a lot of other adults.

"Really?" he asks excitedly.

"Yeah, man. You gotta call your parents and tell them you're safe though," I say, frowning. I just bet they're worried sick even though they didn't let him take his car.

"No problem. I'll text them. I don't want to call them."

"That's fine. Come on," I say, as Tate grumbles about strangers getting into cars. But I don't pay him any mind, simply lead Ollie to the back door and open it for him.

Once we're safely on the road again, Dee speaks for the first time.

"Uh, hi. I'm Derek."

"Oh yeah," I say, before Ollie can answer. "Ollie, this is Derek Johnson, my boyfriend and best friend. I got two for one." I look back and wink at him. "Dee, this is Oliver Lloyd. He's lived all his life in the house next to Mom's."

"Nice to meet you, Derek."

"Same to you. So, uh, what kind of work do you want to do?"

I hear a huge, put-out sigh from the back and resist a snicker. Ollie has always been one for dramatics. "I don't know. I know a little bit about a lot of things, you know? I like

learning. I always wanted to go to college, but there was no way I could because I had a bad year in my senior year of high school.”

“What do you mean bad?” I ask, worried.

He answers only after another big sigh. “The damn hormones were fucking up my brain even more and I had seizures every other day. Right, Derek wouldn’t know. I have epilepsy. A mild one if you compare it to the worst cases. But flashing lights, certain films and stuff can make me have a seizure and it’s *not* pretty at all. So it got really bad when I was eighteen and going through the latest puberty to ever exist, and my parents kinda went crazy. I mean, I had a car accident because of a seizure, and was in the hospital on and off ‘till I was twenty. So, yeah, I get it. But I’m so much better now, and I know when one is coming and can prepare so I don’t fall on my face. It’s been seven years, and I just wanna move on with my life. *Make a life, you know?*”

“Hmm.” Dee hums an agreement. “I bet it’s been hard. Are you always this impulsive?”

“No, I’m not. I—”

“Are you organized?” Dee interrupts before Ollie can go off on another tangent.

“Ooh yeah, I’m Marie Kondo level of organized. I—” He gets cut off again.

“Good with computers?”

“Sure, like any Millennial, I suppose.” Oliver’s answer comes as fast as Dee’s questions.

“How would you feel about being my assistant?”

The question shocks me as much as it does a very silent Oliver.

“Hey!” I protest, and smack his shoulder. “If he’s gonna be anyone’s assistant it’ll be mine. I’ve known him almost all my life.”

“He has epilepsy,” Dee deadpans. “He can’t go to your shows with all the stupid flashing lights and everything.”

“He can be my assistant and not see the shows,” I grumble.

“Well I call dibs.” Derek straightens in his seat and juts his chin out just like Ollie did a few minutes ago.

“Uh, do I get a say?”

Oliver raises his hand and makes me smile, but ... “No,” Dee and I say in unison.

“I mean of course you do,” Dee says, at the same time as me, “Sorry, yes you do.”

Oliver snorts. “I’ll think about it. Let me just text my parents before this goes any further.”

“Yes,” Dee whispers. “He’s mine.” The preening is a bit much, but the way he glares at me threateningly before quickly looking at the road again makes my competitive streak come alive.

“You’re going down, Johnson.”

“We’ll see about that, Storm.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Derek

WE ALL CRASH AS SOON AS WE GET TO MY PLACE. I HELP Oliver get settled in the guest bedroom as much as I can, and then only have the energy to strip down and flop onto the bed. Driving to and from Carmel has worn me out, but I'm not unhappy about coming back to LA.

Since I got to hang out with Wolf and witness the amazing process he's already made, I'm happy with being next to Hawk, wherever that may be.

In the morning, Hawk's *not* next to me, which is annoying. He should be here so I can make him come. I resist pouting and go downstairs to see where he went.

What I find instead is Hugh, my agent, sleeping on my couch. It's not the first time he's stayed over after he gets in from a very late or very early flight, but he normally sleeps in the—that's when I remember Oliver.

I leave Hugh to rest and go to the kitchen. Hawk's not there. I look through the window at my backyard as I make myself some coffee, and nope, not there either. I take my cup and go peek into the guest bedroom. The door is wide open, and Oliver isn't in there.

So they probably went somewhere together.

Alarm bells start to go off in my mind and I race back to my bedroom and dive for my phone. I spill some coffee, but it couldn't be helped.

“Hawk,” I growl, the second the call connects. “Don’t you dare take my assistant.” Their laughter is all the answer I get. I can tell they’re in the car. “Where the hell did you go?”

“We came to my place to get some clothes and my car. Tate’s following us, by the way, so don’t worry. I also took Ollie shopping. Gave him an advance on his salary.”

I only growl at that.

“Oh don’t get your panties in a twist, you big baby. You’re gonna have to learn to speak growl, Ollie. Wolf and Dee speak it fluently, like it’s their mother tongue.”

The brat laughs, and I feel better hearing Oliver laugh too. He was kinda freaking out a little by the time I left him alone in the guest bedroom. What he’d done was probably finally sinking in.

“Yeah, I decided I’ll be assistant to both of you. Hawk told me all about your daily lives and what you probably need to make your life easier. I think it’s gonna work just fine.” Oliver’s confidence destroys any doubt that remains.

“Okay, that works for me, but I don’t want you to overwork yourself.” And because I saw what him being hysterical looked like yesterday, I go on before he gets there. “And it’s not because of your epilepsy, Oliver, but because you’re now my employee. When are you getting here? We’re supposed to meet Bruce in”—I check the time on my phone—“one hour.”

“We’re almost there. And we bought you and Hugh breakfast burritos.”

“Yeah, when did he get here?” I settle back in bed and take another sip of what little coffee remains inside the cup.

“Last night,” Oliver answers. “I couldn’t sleep, and I heard noise, so I went to investigate and found him outside the door to my bedroom.”

“Sorry about that. I didn’t know he’d crash here today. He does that when he gets in late or very early. His house is all the way in Calabasas, so that’s why I let him stay over whenever he needs it.”

“It was no problem.” Oliver’s voice sounds strangled now, but I can’t worry about why because Hugh appears in my doorway.

“That’s good, I’ll see you in a few.” I hang up. “Hey, I didn’t know you’d get here, how are you?”

“Tired as fuck.” He rubs his eyes. “I need to go home, but I just wanted to check in with you. Congrats on the win Sunday. You made some great plays.

“Thanks. And everything’s fine. Hawk and I just decided to stay here instead of in Carmel-by-the-Sea this week.”

“He’s gonna have the interview here?” As my agent, and a close friend, Hugh knows everything that’s been going on these past few months.

“They’re still figuring all that out. He did call yesterday to let them know, but it’s probably going to be in an office somewhere downtown if we don’t do it at their house.”

“Got it. Well, just call if you need anything.”

“I will. Appreciate you, man.” I stand and go to give him a quick bro hug.

He leaves, and I realize he didn’t say a thing about meeting Oliver last night. It could be that he was too out of it then and too tired now, but it’s not like him, so it makes me wonder.



“THIS IS CERTAINLY SOME PLOT OF LAND,” BRUCE MUSES, AS he looks down at the email Clive’s neighbor sent me yesterday with all the information. “I don’t know enough about real estate—and I’ll be looking for someone who does before you buy, as well as making an appointment to have it appraised independently—but the price looks right to me.” He looks up and smiles. “And you know damn well it’s possible,” he tells Hawk.

We’ve come to have lunch with him at his office, which isn’t too far from my place, and are eating at the conference table he has for meetings.

“That’s what I thought. Wolfie and I wanna split it—the cost, not the land—and have both our names on the deed. But we don’t really know if paying cash or getting a mortgage is the way to go.”

“Well, that’s why you have me. If we throw enough money at it, then it can be yours in two months I’d say.”

“I say make it happen, and you know Wolf, he’s impatient as hell, so I know he agrees.”

“That’s true. Okay, I’ll get the ball rolling.” Then Bruce turns to me. “Did you tell the man they were gonna buy it and not you?”

I nod and swallow my bite. “I told him when I met with him that I wanted to buy it with my boyfriend, but I called him back yesterday, told him we were all in, and that my boyfriend would be forking up the cash.” I smirk despite myself, remembering Hawk’s words about me having a rich boyfriend.

Bruce smirks back at me and nods. “I’ll get in contact and schedule the appraisal, look into your options on a mortgage or paying in full, but I think it’s irrelevant to you, if I’m honest.”

“I’ll talk about it with Wolf next Sunday when you have all the options for us,” Hawk says with a nod, and then the business talk is over, and the Wolf talk starts.

We bring Bruce up to date, and he goes quiet when Hawk tells him about the interview. I know Bruce was Shell Storm’s business manager as well, and just like he is to Wolf and Hawk, he was a good friend to her. So I can only imagine what’s going through his mind.

“I don’t like this, Hawk. It feels like you’re opening up a window you won’t be able to close.” Bruce shakes his head.

“But I’m not.” Hawk leans forward. “I know exactly what I’m going to say, and I’m going to read the questions tomorrow. I’ll repeat that Wolf and I will only perform Mom’s lullaby once, ever. And that I’ll only speak about it this one time. It’ll not only make the magazine happier, but it also means people won’t ask more questions later, and if they do, then I’ll just say I don’t talk about that publicly.”

Bruce sighs heavily, and I get it. I don't think the public will let it go so easily. "Is the interview being recorded?" That question makes me pause.

"The clips would get overplayed everywhere in the world," I say, as the realization hits.

"It won't be. Well, voice recordings will happen more than likely, but Cindy and Dee will be there with me. You can be there too if you want."

"I think I'll rest easier if I am."

"Okay then. I'll tell you the details of when and where, when I get them."



THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW ARRIVES, AND I'M NOT READY. Not even close.

During our time with Adrian, when Hawk left the room, Wolf told me to record it too and to save it so he could listen to it when we see him. I told Hawk about it, and he agreed that having his own recording was smart.

We're at Wolf and Hawk's place. Since they won't live there anymore, and all the personal pictures and knick knacks they had lying around—at least the ones in the living areas—are packed and stored thanks to our amazing PA, we both felt it was the best option. Doing it on our turf, so to speak.

The interviewer, Gage Florence, is a renowned journalist. He writes thoughtful pieces, I realized when I did my Google search of him. Hopefully he won't be insensitive, because if he is, I'm pretty sure I'll break his face.

They're sitting at the dining table, and Cindy, Bruce, and I are by the kitchen counter, all of us basically waiting for the world to end.

But it won't.

Hawk wants to do this, and he knows what he's doing. He's smart.

“Right, so as you can tell by the questions I sent, I want to start with asking why you’re speaking about this now, and I know that’s a sensitive issue, and want the story beyond your brother,” he hedges, not actually saying that he knows about Wolf being in rehab, but making it clear he knows and that he’s not planning on saying anything about it. I’m sure there was a stack of NDAs to sign when Tristan went to the magazine.

“Got it.” Hawk nods and takes a sip from his water bottle. “Let’s just start.”

“All right.” Gage pointedly starts the recording on his phone. “So.” He gets right to it. “Why now?”

Hawk takes a deep breath but doesn’t delay answering at all. And he’s so fucking brave with how honest he is. I spend the whole interview entranced by the conversation.

Hawk

“WOLF AND I ... HEALED BY WRITING AND RELEASING Remember the Pain of Remembering. It was amazing to bring her words back to life, to remember all the good times she’d sung lullabies to us, and the bad. Even remembering the bad feels good to me. Because *she* was never bad. My mom, Shell Storm, was the best Mom I could’ve asked for, and I think she deserves to be understood and remembered as nothing less.”

“Your father, Oscar Miller, died almost twenty-seven years ago. What do you remember most about your father?”

I take a deep breath. I knew the question was coming, and still it’s a gut punch.

“I think a lot of my memories are muddled in with what was reported after his death, and what Mom or Wolf have told me, but the first thing that comes to mind when I think about him is funny.”

Gage smiles at me, understanding, even though he can’t possibly understand how much love and how much hate lives inside me for that man. “He was funny?” he presses for me to keep going.

“I remember him smiling a lot, and me and Wolf laughing with him. I don’t remember anything else that I could swear is my own memory.” That’s as truthful as I can be.

“So you don’t have any clear memories about the night he died?”

“I was knocked unconscious and so there’s no way to remember that part, but I do have a flashing memory of seeing Mom on the TV. That’s about it.”

“Does your brother remember?” I tell myself the same thing I said to Wolf. *It’s our story.*

“He does, but he won’t ever speak about it publicly. As anyone who’s read the court documents can guess, it was a very traumatic experience ... for all of us, even if I don’t remember. Knowing what happened is traumatic.”

“The reports are that your mother came home after winning her fifth Song of the Year Grammy at twenty-six, only one of the first records she has broken, and found you unconscious and bleeding from a head wound and your father hurting your brother. She asked him to stop, and when he didn’t, she got the gun that was in your home’s safe and shot him. Would you say, to your knowledge, that those reports reflect the truth?”

“I would, yes.” I take another sip of water. Damn this is so much harder than I thought it would be.

“What do you remember of the six months that followed? While your mother was on trial?”

“I know Wolf and I stayed with Aunt Lyla at her house, and that the paparazzi followed us everywhere. I remember being scared a lot, and Wolf being quiet most of the time. Mom didn’t smile the same ...” I trail off, remembering my thoughts from the day she was declared innocent because she’d acted in self-defense.

She saved her own life by saving us from Dad.

“She only ever smiled again, really smiled, about a year later when we moved away from LA.”

“And eventually, you came back. You became young, country rock singers and songwriters, and credited her with co-writing most of your songs.”

“Yeah, Mom loved to write songs.” I shrug because that’s who she was. “She never stopped. Not even when she was going through round after round of chemo. She always had something new to say, or a new way to say it. It inspires us to this day. Clearly.”

“Do you plan on releasing more of her songs in the future?”

“Oh, yes. Not all, I’m sure we can’t do that since there are so many. But we’ve talked about it since we released the last single, and we want her songs to be enjoyed, and to make people feel seen and heard. That was her specialty. No matter what we were doing, where we were, what was going on around us, Mom always made me feel like she knew me and she saw me, and that what she knew and saw was worthy of her love. Is there really more a child needs from their parents?”

“That’s a beautiful way to say it. You have your mother’s talent.”

“I wouldn’t say so. I learned from her, she learned from no one. She just was. And she wasn’t perfect, just like I’m not perfect. She suffered from depression, since killing the person you vowed to love ‘till death is pretty heavy stuff. She was never the same, even when she got her smile back. She yelled like any parent does sometimes, she loved sappy movies.” I shudder, and make Gage laugh. “She liked to tease and scare her sister every chance she got. She named her sons *Wolf and Hawk*,” I say, deadpan.

That has everyone behind me laughing too, and that’s the only reason I remember they’re there.

“So no, she wasn’t perfect. But she was fierce, and funny, and kind. She was present, and she never hurt us.”

I leave it there for now, I know what’s coming next.

“Has your view of the media, the paparazzi, limelight in general, changed since you were little?”

“No.” I shake my head for emphasis. “I think the same thing I did back then, but I have an adult’s perspective now. I know it’s not all bad. But the bad is really bad, you know? The paparazzi followed two little boys around the city, when they’d just lost their Dad and didn’t know what would happen to their Mom. The media gobbled up the pictures they took of us. Interviewers and TV hosts wanted to ask me and Wolf, when we were still teenagers, to relive our trauma on national television as ‘entertainment’ for the masses. Excuse my language, but that’s fucked up. I didn’t understand just how fucked up it was back then, but I was still scared of it. And that’s another big reason to talk about this now.

“I understand that as a musician, the media helps me get my music to more people, but at what cost? And isn’t it different to exploit the personal lives of adults than those of children? Shouldn’t there be a line that tells them not to cross it? I gotta be honest, I’m never talking about this again. I refuse to, like I’ve refused in the past. And Wolf and I will only ever perform Remember The Pain Of Remembering once, and then that’s it. We’re setting that boundary, and we’ll stop making music before we go down that road.”

There. That’s all I wanted to say.

“Well, there’s not much I can say to that except thank you for making an exception. Because I agree with you. I think your mom should be remembered in a better light.”

“Thank you.”

We all leave the house right after Gage does, and when we get to Dee’s place, I feel like I can take a full breath again. We haven’t really been alone since we left Carmel, and I need him. Right now.

“Come on.” I clasp his hand in mine, tightly, and drag him up the stairs to his bedroom. “Let’s shower.” I think a naked, wet make out session is just what I need.

I strip down faster than ever and help Dee with his jeans and shoes when he takes too long to get undressed.

The water's not super warm when I step into the shower, but it's good enough to throw my arms around Derek's shoulders and get lost in his pretty lips, in the feel of his rough hands on my skin, and in the delicious shiver that goes through my body when our hard erections line up perfectly. I use it to my advantage and tease him by thrusting slowly.

"Need you," I murmur, as I run my hands around his neck, to his shoulders, down his huge biceps. Damn he's so fucking strong, and with that thought, comes a dangerous idea.

I look down at the floor. It's tile, but a little rough, not slippery like the marble walls. "Need you here." That's all I can say to try and communicate what I need.

I'm so tired of words. I'm tired of everything except Derek. I only want Derek, but I gotta use my words now to get what I want.

"Fuck me now, Dee. Stretch me out, prep me here. I can't wait anymore." He looks into my eyes, probably making sure I mean what I say, the amazing man. I feel so much relief when he nods and turns me around. He pushes on my back until my chest comes into contact with the cold marble, then I feel him kneel behind me. Taking a solid hold of my hips, he pulls so I'm more exposed, more open, right where he wants me. He drives me insane with his fingers, with his lips and tongue, making me feel every nerve ending of my rim.

I can only moan and try to move my hips, but he won't let me. He keeps me in place, makes me take everything he has to give. It's the most peaceful feeling in the world. Dee will take care of me. He knows me, he's always seen me, and now that he's opened up to me I get to do the same for him.

The gentleness disappears gradually. When he slides two fingers inside me, and then moves on to three after less than a minute, he does it with a growl. And when he lines up his dick and fills me up completely in one smooth thrust, he shouts a dark sounding, "Fuck yes, sunshine."

Then he seems to lose his words too.

Except for one.

Sunshine. Sunshine. Sunshine.

How a man like Derek Johnson can think I'm the sunshine in his life after I've only made it more complicated, I'll never know.

But I'll never take it for granted. He will spend the rest of his life being cherished and celebrated every day.

And then ... well, there are still steps in my plan I haven't completed.

EPILOGUE

Sunday, February 6th — Hawk

I SIT ON MY STOOL IN THE DARK SECTION OF THE STAGE AND wait for the commercial break to end. I hate that I'm the one with a guitar in his lap and not Wolf, but he didn't feel secure enough in his ability to play the song perfectly, so it's up to me.

I have no issues playing guitar—I'm very good, thank you very much—but it's Wolf's thing, not mine. When the host of this year's Grammys comes out to a once-again clapping audience, I grip the guitar like it's my lifeline.

I really have to nail this.

We're completely in the dark, so not even the audience can see us, since we want this to be a surprise for everyone. I feel Wolf's hand land on my shoulder. He's looking at me with that frown that tells me to settle down, relax, we've got this.

“We've been telling you all night that there's a big surprise, and I gotta tell y'all, I thought they were going to clue me in before it actually happened, but they didn't. So now I have to welcome to the stage someone I'm very sorry to say I don't know. To introduce the big surprise, please let's all give a round of applause to Bruce Atkins.”

Bruce walks out, all handsome in his tuxedo and looking pretty shy and embarrassed, but he's always saying he'd do anything for us, so we put it to the test, and he came through.

“Hello everyone. I know no one knows who I am, and I like it that way.” He chuckles awkwardly. “But I’m incredibly proud and honored to be presenting this next act, since the people who’re about to sing are like family to me. So, to honor their mother, Shell Storm, please give a round of applause to, The Storm.” The audience starts clapping even before he’s done with introducing us. “Who are going to be performing their hit single, Remember the Pain of Remembering, live for the first and last time.” He waves a hand in our direction, as the lights come on in our section of the stage and the applause goes on.

I have to wait for it to die down since Wolf wants to say a couple of things before we start.

“Thank you, thank you.” They start to shut up then. “They’ve been asking us to do this for a long time.” Wolf swallows hard before continuing. “Since Mom passed, and we couldn’t do it then, but we’re very grateful that they kept asking, so we have the opportunity to honor her now that we can. We just want everyone to know how much the support you’ve given this song means to us, and that we’re going to be giving all the royalties away. To a few research centers around the world that are doing great work to try and figure out this cancer shit. So keep streaming and buying the song, we hope you enjoy it.”

When he does the tiny nod that’s our signal, I play the first note.

I let out a measured breath—away from the mic—when he starts singing the first verse, because here comes the big surprise. We wanted everyone to hear the song the way it sounds in our heads, so ...

It seems like everyone in the audience gasps at the same time when Aunt Lyla comes out to the stage as the lullaby part begins.

Run, run, run, you will run, my strong wolf.

Fight, fight, fight, you will fight for what is right.

You will love forever, my loyal wolf.

Strength lives in you, you will prevail, my knight.

Aunt Lyla looks just like Mom, in a flowy dress that has all the colors in it, as she stands between us. With no makeup on, and her hair wild and free, it feels like she's here. Like we're actually singing with her again.

I cut that train of thought because I can't sing if I want to cry, and my part's coming up. I don't know if I do the song justice—I keep my eyes closed until the last note rings out—but I feel like we must've done pretty well to receive a five-minute standing ovation.

Wolf claps my shoulder again as we walk off the stage and then hugs me.

He's been doing so good the last two weeks, but we were in Carmel for a lot of that time. I'm scared of how he's going to cope with being back in LA, back in the circus.

"You wanna stay?" he asks when he leans away, and for the first time, for whatever reason, for the first time in so, so long, he looks at me. He sees *me*.

"No," I whisper, with the biggest knot to ever knot in my throat. "No, I don't want to stay."

"Then let's get out of here." We start walking again, say goodbye to everyone backstage, thank Aunt Lyla and Bruce for coming, for doing us this huge favor. Once we're in the car, Wolf looks at me curiously. "You wanna just go to Atlanta now?"

"Now?" I demand, truly surprised.

"Why not? I don't feel like watching you mope for a whole week while you're missing Deedee. We can just go now. He probably doesn't have a lot of time, but I bet we can sneak into his room, bug Appleton into having a slumber party."

"Slumber party?" I tease, as a huge smile takes over my face.

"Shut up, brat, you know what I mean. We could try and see if we can get our reservations extended, but our rooms shouldn't be ready for a couple of days, so what do you say?"

“I say let’s see if we can get a plane.”

Sunday, February 13th — Super Bowl

“I LOVE YOU,” I WHISPER AGAINST DEREK’S LIPS.

“Love you too, sunshine. I really gotta go, though.”

“I know,” I whine.

“I’ll see you on the field.” He smiles like the predator he is, and steps out of his suite where I came to have a very *happy* morning before he had to go to the stadium. Today, besides the obvious celebration of Derek playing in the Super Bowl again, we’re celebrating one year since I turned my brain off and kissed Dee for the first time. And I’ve got the perfect thing planned.

Now I’ve gotta hustle to my own room—there’s no need to tempt fate and have someone see me sneaking out of Derek’s room. I don’t want the world to know about us until I make it a hundred percent clear they only know because we want them to.

That should be tonight.

Because when Derek wins, *and he will win*, I’ll go down to the field, and I’ll kiss the living hell out of him. Tate isn’t happy about it, but there’s always loads of cameramen, reporters, and security when the confetti is floating down. I’m sure it’ll be fine.

Later, I think as I change into outside clothes, I’m going to hang out with Dee’s friends as his boyfriend for the first time.

It’s gonna be tricky though, because Derek’s playing *against* his friends tonight. Yup, The Super Bowl is between the LA Warriors and the New York Kings. So naturally, Tristan is here with his billionaire boyfriend who just so happens to own the Kings, Gab is here too supporting her nephew, and Clive is somewhere crying because no matter how this game ends, his heart’s gonna be broken. His nephew is playing against his team in the Super Bowl—the man can’t catch a break.

Sebas and Theo are in our suite's living room when I come out dressed to impress ... Warriors fans. They look at my all-blue, warrior-covered outfit with barely disguised disgust, and I just smirk at them.

"I look hot, don't I?" I raise my arms and twirl for them.

"Ugh," Theo groans. "Of course you do. But LA's not winning this, little bird."

"Oh-*kay*, shots fired, Theodore. Calm down. It's just a game. By the way things have been going, whoever doesn't win is gonna get a ring next year."

"You do know who my father is, right?"

"Jesus, you sound so stereotypical right now, Theo, it hurts." Sebas tells him none too gently.

"I know, I heard it only after I said it." Theo winces.

"Yes, *Theodore Harrison Crawford*," I mock. "I know who your dad is."

"Well then, you know this isn't just a game for my family."

I just smirk at him. "Why'd you guys come anyway? You need some jerseys from the winning team?" I keep teasing them because it's fun, and it only gets more fun when they roll their eyes at me.

"No." Sebas reminds me of Oliver when he slaps his hands on his hips and puffs his chest out. "We're here to tell you not to tease Clive tonight. The man is having a really hard time."

"We wouldn't do that to our neighbor. Ever." Wolf speaks in a serious tone that probably only Derek and I can tell is, in fact, serious.

"Promise." I cross my heart with my finger.

"Good. We're leaving in half an hour. Meet you downstairs." They leave, and I look after them.

"That's gonna be an interesting suite to be in," I muse.

"We're gonna be surrounded. I mean, not even Clive is going to cheer for LA, but they're with Gab, not with us.

We're with Theo's dad and Tristan."



I SEE WE HAVE ONE SUPPORTER—ONE TINY, ADORABLE supporter—in the suite with us as soon as we step in. Iris, Theo's sister, is giving the little girl's father a death glare, but I don't pay her, or anyone else, any mind.

Elizabeth—Lizzie—Bennett's daughter is dressed head to toe in Warrior's gear, just like me. I open my arms, crouched down, and she runs with a cute laugh and shouts, "Blue!"

"Really?" Iris snaps.

"She chose. I let her choose what she wants to wear, and she's in a blue phase."

I tune them out and turn to Wolf. "Will you look at that? I think this is a good omen." He nods distractedly at me and looks out to the field. There's a whole hell of a lot of alcohol around us, and I know it must be hard for him. "You wanna carry her?" I ask, though I know he'll say no.

"No, I'll just go sit outside. I see Clive's sulking out there already."

I stare after him, my mind suddenly blank when I try to think of all the Al-Anon lessons I've learned, but I look down at my arm. "Live and let live," I whisper, and crouch down again to give Lizzie free reign of the suite.

There are *a lot* of people in here, including Tristan and his sugar daddy. I walk to them, and Tristan spoils my fun before it can even begin.

"No." He holds his palm up in my face. "You will behave, or you don't get to talk to him."

I pout.

"I'm right here," Harrison complains.

"Yes, and you're a very fine-looking silver fox, sugar daddy," I blurt out quickly, then run away before Tristan can

say or do anything about it. “Go Warriors,” I shout like a war cry, as I escape to sit next to Wolfie outside.

“You’ll pay for that, you little shit!” I hear from behind me. And the thing that makes me really crack up is that it was Harrison who shouted it.

I sit next to Wolf, still laughing, and get an amused twinkle in his eye for my trouble. Then I feel someone sit right next to me, so I turn with a smile, and freeze at the shark-like smile. Oh damn.

“When I met Tristan the first time,” Iris whispers, leaning closer. “I suggested he could call dad ‘Daddy’ and I got grounded for that.” Oh, Iris Crawford is one hundred percent one of my people. Even with the shark smile.

“Tell me all,” I encourage her, and Wolf groans from my other side.

Just like always, perfect.

Clive ignores everyone on Wolf’s other side. The man is really not having a good time. Franny, Clive’s *lady friend*—wink wink—greet us politely but goes back inside to get something to eat. I can only imagine the rants she’s heard in the last two weeks, poor gal.

We greet all of Dee’s friend’s, who are in the suite next to ours, as well as the rest of Adam and Mike’s families.

Derek’s Mom and sister arrive, and I get longer hugs from them than I did at Christmas. I enjoy it immensely and tell them I can’t wait to celebrate with them when Derek wins.

Everyone’s super nice ... until the game begins and they banish us Warriors supporters to the far left seats. We go without complaint, and little Lizzie follows us. Clive acts as our barrier, and when the game begins, I focus only on Derek’s shape on the sidelines. LA’s offense gets the ball first, so he has to wait—hopefully a long time—to go out there and do his thing.

“Have you and Derek talked about kids?” Gracie asks me, as I hold little Lizzie in my lap during a commercial break. “You’re good with her.”

“Nah,” I say, looking quickly at Lizzie to make sure she’s doing well, but she’s watching all around the stadium with wide eyes, so I look back to the field. “I could see myself being a dad, but if that’s not what Dee wants, then I’ll just hound you to give me nephews.”

“And if I don’t want kids?” she asks, with a threatening glare that looks just like Dee’s. So naturally, I can’t take it seriously.

“Then ...” I look meaningfully at Wolf who’s laser-focused on the game.

“Forget about it,” he growls, without looking our way. “I’ll have kids if I want to, and I’ll wait until I’m sixty if you hound me.”

I sigh heavily. “You’re no fun.”

Gracie laughs at me, but seems happy enough with what little info she got out of me.

Not gonna lie, the game is so intense that every second that passes makes me forget the last one. All I know is that with one minute to go, New York has the ball, and they have the chance to tie the score and make this go into overtime.

Derek can stop them, though. I know he can rally the defense around him and stop the Kings swiftly. I don’t know how—he must have superpowers—but Dee jumps so freaking high in the middle of the field when Adam makes a pass to a receiver ten yards downfield, that it looks like he’s flying.

I can’t see if he, or the tight end who ran to him, has the ball when they both land hard on the grass, but I know that every person inside the stadium is holding their breath if they care about football.

If the Kings’ tight end has it that means New York has four new downs to move the chains, and if Dee has it ... then he just won the fucking Super Bowl.

The jumbotron shows the replay, and when I see what my man’s capable of, well ... damn. He’s so getting a blowjob tonight. Two, no three blowjobs.

I jump up and down like a maniac with my four loyal LA fans, and I swear Wolf's gonna get a wrinkle with how big he's smiling. I feel kinda bad when I see everyone else looking shell-shocked, then look down at Clive and see him holding onto the armrests so hard his whole fingers are white. I just bet he's trying not to celebrate. Better if I leave him alone.

What feels like an eternity later, the referee announces it was in fact an interception, and yeah . . . my man's gonna get lots of surprises tonight. He deserves it.

"I'm going with you," Clive says gruffly, as he buttons his jacket.

"Yeah, come on." I take his arm and drag him impatiently to the personnel-only elevators that are being used to bring down all the family members of the Warriors' players.

Wolf came with us, since he knows what's about to happen, and also because he's giddy about going down to the field to celebrate a fucking Super Bowl, no matter how much he pretends he's not.

Gracie and Mia are with us too, of course, as are Rich and Tate. We make our way slowly to the middle of the field where there's a mob of reporters, cameramen, and trainers.

"We'll just wait until they're done." Clive crosses his arms as he looks on.

AJ and Derek are in the center of that mob of people, as are Adam and Mike. I can't even begin to imagine what they must be feeling. It must be hard as hell.

Soon enough, most of the mob follows AJ, who's escorted by two security guards to where they're already raising a platform to give the Lombardi to the Warrior's owner. That's when Clive strides confidently to the remaining dozen people. I see Derek and Adam hugging, with Mike's big arms around both of them.

For some reason, the moment brings a knot to my throat. *Dammit, I have to hold the tears in. It's not time yet.*

The cameramen who are capturing the moment swivel around when they realize *the* Clive Darnell is walking toward

them, and the friends let go of one another.

I quickly avert my eyes when Adam runs to his grandfather, seriously, I can't cry, not yet. Gracie and Dee's Mom both run to him, and they hug it out for a few seconds only, but you can tell how much it means to all of them from the smile on their faces.

Then Wolf hugs Dee, and damn if a tear doesn't sneak out. I quickly wipe it away, cursing myself for it since there's no way at least one camera didn't catch it.

My foot starts to move on the grass, the nerves getting to me. This is it. Not only am I about to come out as queer, and let the world know I bagged myself the sexiest football player on the planet, but if all goes well, Dee will have two extra rings after tonight.

I see my two favorite people start to separate, and okay, damn.

I move on autopilot, throwing my arms around the love of my life and kissing him soundly. I'm sure there's some kind of reaction from the people around us, but I don't hear it. I don't care.

"You were amazing, Dee," I whisper, a hairsberth away from his lips.

"Sunshine." The way he breathes out my nickname always makes me weak in the knees, and I know it always will.

"Congratulations, Dee. You did it, again. You won the fucking Super Bowl." He laughs when I hug him harder and tuck my face under his jaw for a long moment.

A moment before *the moment*.

"So, uh." I falter. "I know you're getting your second ring and all, but." I lean back barely an inch and bring my hand up between our chests. I don't want anyone but him to see, to know. We may be surrounded by thousands of people, dozens of cameras, but this is just for us. So I lean forward on my tiptoes and whisper against his ear. "What do you think about just one more?" I fall back on my heels and look into his wide-open, deep, dark eyes. "For now." I bring his hand up and

press the golden band to his palm. There's no way he can miss what it is.

I give him a soft kiss, and ask. "Will you marry me, Derek Johnson?"

The teeth-showing, blinding smile that he rarely gifts me appears. "I think Derek Storm is a kickass name."

I throw my head back and laugh. "It sure is."

Now there's only five more things to check off my list.

21
~~20~~ STEP MASTER PLAN

TO PUT A RING ON

DEREK JOHNSON'S FINGER

BY HAWK STORM

1. PLAN THE PERFECT DATE ✓
2. ASK DEE TO GO ON A DATE WITH ME ✓
3. CONVINC DEE TO GO ON A DATE WITH ME ✓
4. STUDY GAY SEX AND BLOW JOBS ✓
5. GIVE DEE LOTS OF ORGASMS ✓
6. HAVE SEX WITH DEE ✓
7. GO ON MORE DATES WITH DEE ✓
8. MAKE DEE MY BOYFRIEND ✓
9. COME OUT AS BI ✓
10. MEET DEE'S FAMILY AND FRIENDS AS HIS BOYFRIEND ✓
11. TELL THE WORLD HE'S MINE ✓
12. TELL DEE I LOVE HIM ✓
13. WRITE DEE A LOVE SONG
14. SING TO DEE
15. SPEND THE HOLIDAYS TOGETHER ✓
16. TAKE A TRIP TOGETHER
17. TAKE HIM TO MOM'S GRAVE...?
18. MOVE IN TOGETHER ✓
19. GET A PUPPY!
20. PLAN THE PERFECT PROPOSAL ✓
21. ASK DEE TO MARRY ME ✓

HEY READER!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING HAWK AND DEREK'S story! I can't wait to give you more in this series and I wanted to ask that you consider leaving a review or a rating, as this helps self-published authors immensely.

The **Bonus Chapter** for this one is just a month in the future and we find out exactly how and why Mia and Gracie move to LA...

The next book in this series is...

Luke Riggs's Book: The Definition of Love.

The quarterback of the Las Vegas Rogues is next so we're going to be spending some time with Gab and with my hockey boys as cameos of course.

You can **Pre-Order it now!**

You'll reach the prologue of Luke's story at the end of the book.

IN THE MEANTIME, YOU'LL GET GLIMPSES OF THE CITY AND THE people we've met there in my next release, the second book in my Hockey series.

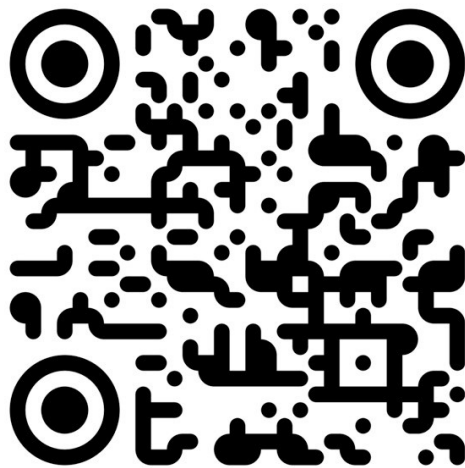
Bear's book will involve a groom left at the altar and a wedding planner desperate to get his business off the ground in Las Vegas. [Tell Me Lies](#) will be out soon.

If you want to find out the second I have news, subscribe to my [Newsletter](#) to be notified of any new releases, and where I'll let you know what I'm up to whenever something exciting happens.

If you're curious about how Tristan, the awesome PR manager, ended up in a very public relationship with the silver fox Harrison Crawford, check out [This Is On You](#) which is out now and available in Kindle Unlimited.

THANK YOU!

Everything linked before can also be found by scanning this image.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Dad, for not giving me a chance not to love football, Mom, for telling me all my life that I can achieve anything if I work hard enough, Belleza, for being my built-in best friend, making me love books as much as you do, and being as excited about this as I am, and Jimmy, for filling my life with smiles.

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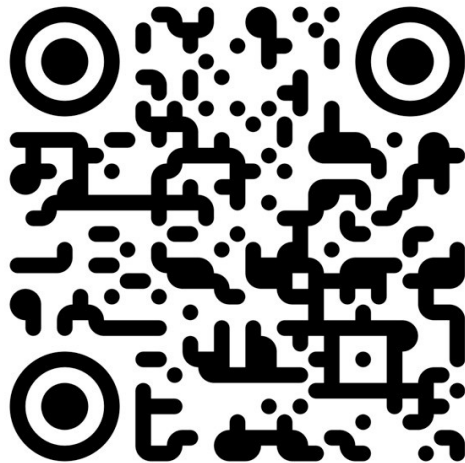
Thank you, all my lovely ARC readers, for all your help and support.

And THANK YOU READER!! For making this all possible☐☐

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hinsel Meyer is an avid romance reader that loves a HEA. This is why she started writing in the first place. The idea that she could answer all the questions that normally plague her at the end of a book was too intoxicating. She especially fell in love with MM romance some years ago and found the dynamic change from all the romances she'd read before addicting. She loves all kinds of books, especially romance and fantasy, and when those two collide, you won't hear from her until she reads it at least twice.

You can follow her everywhere by scanning this code.



ALSO BY HINSEL MEYER

Fan Service Series

[It Has To Be You](#)

[What We Earned](#)

[You Started It](#)

[This Is On You](#) (Novella)

[Know Me See Me](#)

[The Definition of Love](#)

All It Takes Series

[Repair And Prepare](#)

[Tell Me Lies](#)

[Hinsel's suggested reading order](#)

PROLOGUE

January — Luke Riggs

I RING THE DOORBELL BY HITTING IT WITH MY PALM carelessly. Not like anything really matters at this point. The iron gates open slowly, and my mood only takes a nose-dive from just how slowly. I've been here before—countless times actually—so what else was I expecting?

I was already in a shitty mood, losing the Conference Championship against the LA Warriors for the second year in a row will do that to a guy, I guess.

There's also the fact that I'm driving up my boss's boss's boss driveway, and I expect she's about to fire me. I wouldn't fucking blame her, honestly. I just finished my sixth season as the starting quarterback for the Las Vegas Rogues, and I feel like the last two seasons without a Lombardi or even a Superbowl appearance have been my fault.

It fucking stings.

Because I know we have an awesome fucking team. A team that is packed with amazingly talented men. As their leader, I take all the blame. Because it's my job to make the plays work. And I didn't. Two years running LA has been able to take the Championship from us.

And now it's a contract year for me.

Now is when I should've shown Gab Darnell that I'm the right person for this job.

Instead, I had an all-time high interception count this season.

Instead, I froze at the last second.

So when Gab asked me to come to her place last night about a minute after our plane landed in Las Vegas, I wasn't surprised.

If I'm gonna get fired, then at least I'm gonna be shitfaced while I am—I rarely drink, so getting there definitely won't be an issue. I drink a beer or two in the off season, so maybe the expensive as hell bottle of whiskey isn't the best choice, but I know Gab won't let me out of her house if I'm drunk, so I have nothing to worry about.

I carry the bottle and leave my phone in the cupholder of my car. Maybe I'll sell that car, I won't have a forty-seven-million-dollar paycheck anymore, so it's time to start saving.

Listen to yourself, I think. I sound fucking pathetic. There are so many people who have it worse, so much fucking worse. I have no sense of identity, a handful of friends who will probably ditch me when they get a new quarterback, a big ass mansion that feels empty, an estranged relationship with my father who's the only family I have, the stupidly expensive Porsche I just parked, and almost three hundred million dollars in the bank—thank you investments.

It could be a lot worse, I consider as I rap the wooden door twice. It could be *a lot* worse.

I could still be trapped in bumfuck nowhere Texas with my father, cleaning up his messes, spending all the savings I made working at the feed store on his bail, taking the beatings for years and years with no one to help me.

The door opens when that last thought flits through my mind, and the one person who has helped me more than anyone in the world rolls her eyes when she sees the bottle in my hand.

“We can drink the whole bottle if you want, but I'm not firing you, so you better not cry. You know I'm a sympathetic crier, and we don't have time for that. We've got work to do.”

At that, she spins on her heels and walk back inside, expecting me to follow her.

Of course I follow her, she's like an army general I would follow even to hell.

“What work?” I ask as I hurry to close the door and follow her to her office.

“We're gonna figure out what you had two years ago when we won this thing that we don't have now, and then we'll spend all fucking off season making sure you have it again.” She grabs two tumblers from the cart under the windowsill and brings them to the big conference table that has seven tablets and two laptops on top. A projector is connected to one of them and pointed at the white wall opposite to the window.

Bring that thing over, and we'll start.

I do as she says. “Always do what Gab says” is pretty much my one unbreakable rule in life. So I sit my ass down in the chair next to hers, pour us a drink each and let myself feel the relief. I'm not losing my dream, I have another shot at keeping this life, at doing the one thing I can say I love with all my heart.