

Chemistry
by myheartisinohio | KH

Chapter One

I was six years old the first time I kissed a girl. Her name was Susan Baxter, and we were playing a game that seemed like a bastardized version of I Love Lucy. She fixed plate of clay with a side of green plastic beads at the plastic kitchen counter, then put it on the tiny table. That was my cue to come over, panting with the effort of dragging along a briefcase I could've fit in. I announced that honey, I was in fact home, and she threw her arms around me, smashing her lips against mine. I ordered her off of me, and when she failed to comply, I threw the beads at her and ran like hell.

That's what it was like when Mom decided to move in with Bill. They were just playing house, and it took an obscene amount of effort for Bree and I to pack up everything and move into the three-floor estate Bill bought (to prove just how much money he actually had), especially since we all knew they were just going to end up throwing in the towel and the green plastic beads and running away (probably not in the exact way Susan Baxter and I had ten years earlier).

I first met Bill a week before we moved in to the new house, and I meet his son Garen on moving day. Mom and Bill evidently have better things to do than try being slightly intelligent human beings and are too busy kissing in the dining room (and, more likely than not, trying to make their sons and daughter sick) to help unpack, and Garen doesn't intend to help unless he's given the okay. He watches me carry disgustingly large box after disgustingly large box into the house. On my fourth trip inside, he had retrieved a cherry-red electric guitar and is lying on his back in the middle of the entrance hall floor, tuning it.

"Do you want help?" he asks after I trip on the stairs for the second time. I look over my shoulder. He's staring at a spot on the floor, but he glances over at me after a few seconds of silence. His eyes are such a dark shade of green that they look almost black. I turn back around and keep lugging the box upstairs.

"No, I got it," I say. I drop the box off in my room and go back out to the moving van. Bree hands off a box of china, and I drag it inside.

"You're going to break something. Probably something glass, and then probably your back," Garen says. I step over him, resisting the oh-so-tempting urge to crush his skull under fifty pounds of porcelain.

"I'm not going to break something," I say through gritted teeth.

"You're being a dick," he replies calmly. I stop in my tracks and glare down at him.

"Remind me of the part where I ask for the commentary," I demand. He smirks and looks down at the guitar again. The kitchen door bursts open.

"Travis, you met Garen!" The gleeful enthusiasm in my mother's voice is enough to make me gag. I look back down at Garen, who is still lying on the linoleum between my feet.

"It's kind of hard to miss him," I say.

"Why don't you ask him to help you?" Mom suggests.

"I offered," Garen says in his never ending quest to be annoyingly helpful.

"I've got it," I repeat. Gravity decides otherwise, and I have to adjust my hold on the box in order to avoid making a Garen-shaped pancake.

"If you crush my guitar, I'll kill you in your sleep," Garen warns.

"I was actually going to aim for your face," I explain. Mom frowns.

"It's nice to see you... can talk," she says slowly.

"Yeah. For around seventeen years now," Garen says, nodding.

"I meant to each other. The uh... openness is nice," Mom says.

"If that's the word you wanna use, sure. The openness is just great," I say. I readjust my hold again and bring the box over to the kitchen. Bill grins awkwardly at me as I pass.

"Here," I say disgustedly, and I thrust the box into his arms. People who make out with my mother do *not* get to smile at me.

"I'm writing a song," Garen says as I walk past him again. Next it's a box of clothes for Bree's room.

"It's called 'Travis Is A Stubborn Asshole'," he continues as I head past him for the stairs. On my return trip, he starts to play, and it's worse because he's good.

"It's about this guy Garen who has this stepbrother that starts breaking boxes full of stuff because he won't ask for help carrying them," he explains.

"I am not your brother," I snap.

"Did I say you were?" Garen asks sharply. "I said 'stepbrother'."

"They're not married," I say.

"They will be eventually. You think Evelyn would've agreed to move in if she didn't think she'd get a rock out of it?" Garen asks.

"Shut up," I snarl. I retrieve the next box. "Shit. I think I found my sister's TV," I gasp.

Garen abandons his guitar on the floor and braces the box with his knee while I fix my hold. He covers my hands with his, and I spread my fingers apart so he can slide his in between mine.

"They're not getting married," I say.

"So? They might as well, since they're already playing one big happy family. You're so deep in denial that it's actually sort of cute," Garen says.

"And you're cool with that?" I ask.

"You being cute? Well, I'll admit that those funny tingly feelings in my stomach are kind of creepy now that they're in relation to my pseudo-stepbrother, but I'm willing to move past it if you are," Garen says. I push the box hard against his chest.

"Fuck you. You know what I was talking about," I say.

"I know, they might get married, you're a whiney bitch, blah, blah, blah. And I really don't care what Dad does. He and my mom got divorced when I was fourteen, right after they sent me to PMA, so it's not like I have big issues about him moving on too fast. 'Sides, my mom's a bitch anyways," he replies.

"What's PMA?" I ask. Garen shakes his hair out of his eyes as we reach the top of the stairs. He leans against the banister for a second while trying to tighten his hold. I lace his fingers through mine so he can hold more of the box.

"Patton Military Academy. All-boys military school. I went there for three years. Just got pulled last week," he says.

"Sounds... fun," I say as we maneuver awkwardly through Bree's doorway. "More fun than Lakewood. Dad told me you do cross-country," he says. We lower the box to the floor and I brush my hair off my forehead.

"Yeah. The only junior on varsity," I say. Garen smirks at me before he starts for the door.

"Star player. Well, aren't you cute," he deadpans. I can't tell whether he's making fun of me or flirting with me, and the thought of either makes my face heat up. I rub the inside of my wrist across my forehead and turn to face the mirror on Bree's dresser.

"Can you stop doing that?" I ask. Garen turns back towards me and his brow wrinkles in confusion.

"Stop doing what?" he asks.

"Calling me cute. That's twice in ten minutes," I say. His eyes drop to the floor, then flicker back up to my face.

"And it bothers you, I take it?" he says. I push past him.

"I didn't say that," I say.

Garen hoists himself up onto the banister and presses his combat boots onto the top of the railing to keep himself at my speed as I go back downstairs.

"Then what's the problem?" he inquires. I glance at him. He props his chin up on his fist and widens his eyes like whatever my response is would be the most interesting thing he's ever heard.

"I don't know," I say before I can stop myself. Garen's eyebrows shoot up, and I snap my mouth shut so fast that my teeth click together audibly.

"And why, pray tell, would that be? Other than because, you know, you're suddenly madly and desperately hot for my body and tormented by the idea of your latent homosexuality?" he adds.

"Shut up before I push you off the banister," I mutter. Garen grins and jumps off the end of the rail.

"It's okay, Travis, you don't have to pretend. I know that behind that big, jockish exterior, there's a sad, scared, little boy just waiting to get his stepbrother into bed," he says, gripping my shoulder comfortingly.

"Garen," Bill says warningly from behind us, "we spoke about this before we got here. I told you to behave

yourself. They didn't let you act like that at Patton, so don't expect to act like that here." Garen throws his arm over my shoulders and spins around, steering me back to face Bill.

"Actually, they did let me act like that at Patton, as long as I did push-ups *while* I was hitting on the drill sergeant," he announces. Bill's eyes darken.

"Garen," he says.

"You're right. Sorry. Sergeant Smith was ugly as shit," Garen says apologetically. He spins back around, still dragging me with him.

"Dinner's ready," Bill adds. "Your mother told me to call you in."

Garen turns back towards the kitchen, still clutching me under one arm.

"You're gonna snap my neck if you don't stop that," I warn.

"Only if I'm lucky," Garen says, finally releasing me. I follow him into the dining room where Mom and Bree are already sitting down. Bill sits down at the head of the table, and I take the seat next to my sister. Mom and Bill join hands, and Bill takes Bree's. Mom holds hers out expectantly to Garen, and Bree takes mine. Garen stares at Mom's hand, then at his father.

"I'm Jewish," he says. Mom's brow creases in confusion.

"Bill never told me you were Jewish," she says. She turns to Bill in thinly veiled horror. "Why didn't you tell me your son is Jewish? I can't believe I tried to get him to say Grace, I'm so embarrassed."

No, she's not. I stare at her. It's easy to tell, just by the look on her face, that she's more appalled at the Jew seated to her right than at her own manners.

"He's not really Jewish, Evelyn. It's just something he picked up from his mother after the divorce. He was raised more as a Christian," Bill says. Garen lowers his chin slightly and stares at his father through the shock of hair in front of his eyes.

"Dad, I've been going to synagogue since I was two. Bar Mitzvah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah. The whole shebang. I'm not even close to Christian," he says. Bill clears his throat.

"Well, then don't participate, son. Bree, would you like to say Grace?" he questions. Bree shrugs, and once she's done, Mom turns to me.

"Travis, did you take your medication?" she asks. I pause with my pills halfway to my mouth.

"Mom, I've been taking them for years. I think I can handle it," I say. Bree snorts and I toss her a grin before dry-swallowing the two pills. I feel Garen watching me as I swallow, but I ignore him and pass Bree the serving dish of spaghetti.

"What do they keep you medicated for?" he asks.

"Don't wanna talk about it," I say. It's my trained response for people I don't like. Bree's friends, Mom's friends from work. Short, rude, to the point. I just met him, and I don't need to talk about this.

"They're antidepressants," Bree says. I turn my head sharply to her and kick her. Hard.

"Shut up," I order.

"Ow! Mom, Travis just kicked me!" Bree says.

"Well, she deserved it! I think the sentence 'don't want to talk about it' implied that I didn't want anyone to mention it," I snap.

"Um, I think he's gonna find out sooner or later, asshole. If you don't want everyone to find out about that visit the land of Valium you took two years ago, you shouldn't take antidepressants at the dinner table," Bree says.

"Fuck you, Bridget," I snarl. I keep my eyes glued to her. Mom must've told Bill about it. She had to have. You don't move in with a guy without mentioning the baggage that is your crazy son. But Garen obviously had no idea, or he would've known about the meds. I hate that look I know will be on his face. That surprised, sympathetic look.

"Travis, Bridget, both of you will stop fighting this instant," Mom orders.

"He started it!" Bree shouts.

"You're the one who told him what the meds were for!" I shoot back.

"Like he wouldn't figure it out the next time you go psycho and try to kill yourself," Bree says with a roll of her eyes.

"It was one fucking time two years ago!" I yell.

"Travis, stop," Mom commands. Bullshit. She can't be siding with Bree, not now. Not about this.

I shove my chair away from the table and storm out of the room. Going upstairs is a pointless, overly dramatic display of teen angst, but I head up there anyway. I slam my bedroom door shut behind me and stare at the floor. I can't throw myself onto my bed and cry my eyes out, because my bed is propped up against the wall, waiting to be taken down and positioned. I wouldn't do that even if my bed was ready, considering I'm not an eight year old girl. I yank open the window and twist sideways to sit, one foot balanced on the sill, the other bracing myself on the floor. I stare down at the backyard for what might be some combination of minutes or hours before I hear the door open slowly.

"Can I come in?" Garen asks cautiously from the doorway. I nod without looking at him. I hear him close the door behind himself and walk across the room to join me at the window. He swings one leg out to sit so he's straddling the sill.

"You gonna jump?" he asks. I have to laugh at the indifference in his voice. There's silence for a minute before I clear my throat and shrug slightly.

"I downed a bottle of Valium a few days before my fifteenth birthday, and they've had me jacked up on SSRI's ever since. I'm not suicidal, and I'm not gonna jump," I say. He raises his hips so he can fish around in the pocket of his jeans.

"Good. 'Cause if I'm here when you throw yourself out the window, they'll probably think I pushed you. Lovers' spat or something," he says with a grin.

"Why do you keep saying shit like that?" I ask.

"I'm still exploring the joys of my brand new housemates. And no offense, but your mom isn't exactly my type," he explains.

"What, I am?" I ask. Garen looks me up and down, then focuses his gaze on my shoe.

"You might be. Wanna?" he asks. For one mind-numbing second, I have no idea what he means by that. Then I see his extended hand and the gummy bears on the center of his palm.

"You're a seventeen year old guy who carries around gummy bears?" I say in disbelief, staring at him. He frowns and tears a green one in half with his teeth.

"Shut up, they're good," he says. He drops the handful of bears onto my lap and takes the package back out of his pocket. I pick up the bears and pop a few into my mouth. "So, you gonna tell me about it?" he asks, and I choke on the bears.

"No," I gasp out when I'm finally no longer in danger of suffocation.

"Why not?" Garen presses on. I throw a gummy bear at him.

"Because. I just met you," I say.

"So I have to wait like, a month before I find out why you tried to off yourself when you were fourteen?" Garen asks. I nod.

"I'm breaking you in. If I just laid out all my crazy cards now, there wouldn't be any fun left for the rest of the time our parents spend playing house," I say.

"You still think that's what they're doing?" Garen asks. I reach over and steal another handful of gummy bears.

"Uh huh. I'm telling you, they won't last a year. My money's on three months," I say. Garen shrugs.

"Not so sure about that. Dad's looking for someone who will do what he says when he says it, and your mom might just be spineless enough to play the part," he says.

"Then I guess it sucks that I've already decided that if they try to get engaged, I'm gonna blow up the house," I sigh. Garen nods knowingly.

"That does suck. Mind you, I'd appreciate some warning before you start on the TNT?" he says. I smirk.

"Oh, you'll have warning. It'll probably be in the form of a bellowed war cry before I disappear into the basement for hours on end," I say.

"We don't have a basement," Garen points out. I blink.

"Bullshit. Everyone has a basement," I say. Garen shrugs.

"We've got a shed out back, I think. That work?" he asks.

"For my imaginary bomb building? Yeah, it should," I say, nodding. Garen stands up and swings his leg

back into the room.

“Good. You okay now?” he asks. I nod and look back outside.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say softly. Garen holds out the bag of gummy bears.

“Think of these as a consolation prize to dinner. I’ve got about a billion bags in my room. Always do,” he says. “Which was pretty hard to swing when I was at PMA. Some guys smuggled in drugs, some smuggled in porn. I was the only one hardcore enough to break out the bears.”

I laugh and take the bag from him. He stands there for a second in a sudden awkward hesitation, then turns around and heads for his own room.

Chapter Two

"Travis! You're going to be late!"

"Jesus Christ, Mom, I'm right here," I say. Mom spins around, and her briefcase knocks into the bowl of fruit sitting on the counter, sending it spiraling towards the edge. I reach past her and grab it.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were still in bed," she says.

"I figured," I say. I put the bowl back in the center of the counter and climb up onto one of the barstools.

"I'm going to be late if I don't leave right now, so..." She pauses, thinking, then clasps her hands in a business-like manner. "Don't forget to take your medication. It's in the cabinet, and you know not to eat it on an empty stomach, right? Right. Get a ride to school with Garen, he has his own car. He can give you a ride home too. I won't be back until around eight thirty, and Bill won't be back until late."

"Tragedy," I mutter.

"Travis," Mom says warningly. I kick the leg of the barstool and raise my eyebrows to signal her to continue. "Do your homework as soon as you get home. Don't fight with your sister. Or Garen."

"Mom, I've done the 'home alone' thing before. I get how it works," I say. Mom laughs and picks up her briefcase again.

"I know. Make sure Garen is up soon? He needs to be ready in time to leave," she says, and she's gone with a few clicks of her heels against the tile and the slam of the door. I get my pills out of the bottle in the cabinet and set them down next to the fruit bowl. I peel one of the oranges slowly. I hate eating breakfast, but I can't take the meds on an empty stomach, and my mom and my doctor are always trying to find some new self-destructive hobby of mine. A skipped meal is anorexia, a paper cut is self mutilation. I separate the orange into sections and am biting into the first one when the sound of feet clomping down the stairs announces Garen's arrival. As if to make sure I know he's there, he hops up onto the counter and positions his feet on it right next to my food, then selects an apple from the bowl before kicking it out of the way. It teeters on the edge of the counter for a moment before toppling over the side and onto the floor.

"That was really intelligent," I remark. Garen smiles without comment and bites into the apple. I get up and get myself a glass of water from the faucet. I take another bite of the orange, then swallow the pills with a mouthful of water. I drop the remaining sections of the orange into the trash can and sit back down in front of Garen.

"Mom and Bill are already gone, and Bree goes to the magnet school two towns over, so she had to leave twenty minutes ago. Mom says to get a ride from you," I say. Garen snorts.

"Brotherly bonding. Nice. Well, I'll be upstairs. Call me when you're ready to go," he says. He hops off the counter and pauses by the kitchen door. "*Literally* call me. I won't hear you over my music if you just yell."

"But you'll magically hear your cell phone?" I say, raising my eyebrows. Garen walks back to me and slaps his phone against my stomach and presses a button on the side. It vibrates and he quirks an eyebrow at me. I step back and he puts the phone back in his pocket.

"I don't have your number," I say. "I'll just come up and get you."

Garen grabs a marker out of the jar on the counter and uncaps it. He grabs my arm and before I can stop him, scrawls his cell phone number down the length of my forearm.

"Oh, thanks for that," I snap.

"It'll wash off eventually," he says with a shrug before disappearing upstairs. I sit back down at the counter and take out my Microbiology textbook. I have a test second period. I studied for four hours last night, and I know I'll ace it, but that doesn't stop the mind-numbing panic. It happens whenever I have to do something I have a possibility of failing at; track, school, relationships. Basically everything. The meds are supposed to help, but they don't. That's why every morning I end up just like this. Sitting in my kitchen studying my ass off for something I know I can do. Mom calls it ambitious. Bree calls it psychotic. I'm not sure which I agree with.

After ten more minutes, I check my watch. Seven thirty. I unzip my backpack and pull out my cell phone. Dial in the number, wait.

"Hello?"

"You say that like you think it might be somebody else. How many people do you have calling you at seven thirty in the morning?" I ask.

"You'd be surprised. Time to go?" Garen says.

"Yeah. Hurry up. I've got a test second period, and study hall first. I wanna use all my time to study, so I can't be late," I say. My stomach churns just thinking about it, and I hang up. A few seconds later, Garen pounds down the stairs and out the front door. I follow him, locking it behind me, and get into the passenger side of his car. A cherry red Ferrari Testarossa. My dad bought one in black a few years ago as his mid-life crisis fuckmobile. I decide not to mention this, partially because Garen doesn't need to know, and partially because I desperately do not want to mention a car exactly like this being a fuckmobile. Not while I'm in it, and not with Garen.

"Oh, and just so you have fair warning? If you touch the stereo, I will cut off your hands. And I'm serious," Garen says. I look at him. He looks back, his face perfectly neutral.

"Fine. I don't really listen to much music anyway," I say. The neutrality is gone in a second, replaced by shock, then repulsion.

"What?" he demands. I shrug.

"I don't have time. Between school, track, work, therapy, and homework, I don't have time to do anything else," I say. Slowly, Garen appears to calm down, shifting the car into reverse and twisting to check for traffic. He backs out, then turns back forward, eyebrows raised.

"You realize that makes you a freak, right?" he says. I laugh. I can't help it.

"Yeah," I say. I pause a second, then decide to go for it. "I can't drive either," I add. Garen stops the car right in the middle of the road and puts it in park.

"Please tell me you're joking," he says. I laugh again and shake my head.

"Dead serious," I say.

"You don't even have a permit?" he asks. I shake my head again. "Dude, you turn seventeen in a month. That's just weird."

"How'd you know that?" I ask.

"I'm stalking you," he explains.

"Seriously. Tell me," I say. He shrugs.

"Dad told me last night. He was saying how I have to buy you a present. You know, I was thinking I'd get you strippers or something, but now I think I'm going to have to get you a life. Or at least an iPod. *Something*," he says.

"Oh, that's really generous. I always wanted a life," I say.

"You say that like you're joking," he says with his brow furrowed. I punch his arm.

"Fuck you."

Garen is silent for a moment. Then he cocks his head to the side, blinks, and unbuckles and gets out.

"Um... Garen? Just out of curiosity, are you stoned? 'Cause you know you have to be in the car to drive it," I say.

"I'm not driving it. You are. Get in the other seat," he says.

"I can't. I don't even have a permit," I say. But even as I'm saying it, I unbuckle and slide over into the driver's seat. I shut the door and buckle the seatbelt. Garen climbs in next to me and does the same.

"Okay. Hands at ten and two," he says, shifting my hands on the wheel into the right place. "Now, step on the break. It's on the left."

"I know that. I'm not retarded. I just can't drive," I say.

"Shut up and listen, or you'll crash the car and we'll both die and you'll never get to take your test. Step on the break and shift it into drive," Garen instructs. I do it slowly, then release the break. The car eases forward slightly.

"Okay, step on the gas," he says. I slowly press my foot down, and the car moves forward more. Shit shit shit it's moving. I slam on the break, put the car in park, and fold my hands in my lap. Garen bursts out laughing.

"Shut up!" I say. He manages to get his laughter under control and reaches over and puts my hands back on the wheel.

"Come on. You have to do it, or we're not getting to school," he says. I slowly shift back into drive and ease forward. "Alright, more gas," Garen says. I move my foot down almost imperceptibly, then a little more. We speed up slightly. After another few tiny applications of pressure, I have us going at twenty-five miles per hour. I thank God that there aren't many corners on the way to school, because every time I have to use the turn signal, I panic and Garen laughs. When we finally pull into the parking lot, I put the car in park right in the middle of the parking lot and unbuckle.

"There's no way in hell I can actually park like I have a brain, so you do it," I say. Garen unbuckles and we awkwardly climb over each other to switch seats. Garen puts the car in drive and parks it smoothly.

"It's not that hard. Come on, you did it every time we had to do a corner," he says.

"Shut up, I didn't park. I just... stopped. Which you're supposed to do anyway," I protest.

"For two minutes?" Garen says. I open my door and get out. Once Garen is out and the car is locked, I nod to him.

"Thanks. For uh, letting me drive," I say. He grins.

"I think of it as my responsibility. See," he throws an arm over my shoulder and starts to head towards the school, "I'm a lot cooler than you, Travis. I know this may come as a shock, because I'm sure you're pretty bitchin' by Lakewood standards, but that's not saying much. I, however--"

"Need to go fuck yourself. Don't you have to go to the office?" I ask.

"Yep. I have to get my schedule. And then have my schedule changed, because they probably stuck me in the worst classes here," he says.

"I bet you've got fifth period Home Ec. There are three ovens, but one doesn't work at all and the blue one catches on fire if you turn it on. They put the new kids in that class because they think they won't complain in their first week, and after that if you go to them, they tell you to stick it out," I say.

"I was actually hoping for a music elective," he says.

"Tough shit. They're sticking you in Home Ec," I say. And then it happens.

Garen's arm, still draped over my shoulders, pulls me a little closer as he leans in so close that his lips are actually *touching my ear* and whispers, "Lucky for you, I look good in an apron."

My entire body freezes up. I have no idea what to do, and my mind is blaring at me to push him off of me, but I can't. He's a guy, my brain screams. His dad is dating your mom and he's like your almost-stepbrother and he's a *guy* and *his lips are on your ear*. And suddenly it's not his lips anymore because those are definitely his teeth on my earlobe. Garen Anderson is nibbling on my ear right in front of the main office at school. Oh my fucking god.

And then he's gone, walking into the office like nothing happened, leaning down to talk to the secretary, all smiles and cordiality. I stand there, frozen, watching him through the office window for at least three minutes. Fuck. Pull it together, Travis. I blink, then look quickly around. No one is watching me, no one is staring. No one saw. I head for my locker, drop off my backpack and sweatshirt. His number is still scrawled across my arm. I stare at it for a second, then yank my sweatshirt back on and head to study.

Study. Second period. The test.

Fuck.

Chapter Three

--so it's good to know Travis is ignoring all of us and not just me, because I was starting to feel rejected."

I blink and look up from my tray. Nicole is smirking at me.

"I wasn't ignoring anyone. Just kind of spacing," I say. I stab at the greasy chicken patty on my tray with a plastic fork. Two of the tines snap off. I stare at it for a second, then shove it away, disgusted.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Corey says. He fishes in his jeans for a penny to illustrate the point, but comes up empty. Miles slides one across the table, and Corey then presents it proudly to me. I take it from him and toss it on the chicken.

"Just home stuff. We moved into the new house yesterday. And I met Bill's son," I say. They all grimace in sympathy.

"How is he?" Faye asks. I shrug.

"I don't really know him, but he seems..." Fifty thousand adjectives come to mind and I don't want to say a single one of them. They wait though, so I finally finish, "fucking weird."

Miles laughs. "Dude, welcome to the world of stepfamilies. You've got it kind of extreme though. I met Barbara and her kids way before she and my dad got married. They didn't even move in together until we'd all known each other for like, five months."

"No such luck here. I mean, I met Garen last night and my mom and Billy are already acting like we're brothers. Which we're obviously not," I say. I pull my tray back towards me and stab the chicken with the fork's one remaining tine. "If they were gonna get engaged, they would've already. You only move in with somebody like this when you don't want to get engaged."

"I don't know. Becky's mom and step dad lived together for a few months before they got engaged," Faye says with a shrug. The remaining tine snaps off and I throw the fork handle across the cafeteria.

"Well Becky's parents can go fuck themselves," I say vehemently. Corey stands up quickly.

"Uh, I'm gonna go get a cookie. Give Trav-Trav here some time to cool down. Anyone up for making it a field trip?" he asks. Nicole and Miles both stand up and follow him back to the food, but Faye stays where she is.

"So. What's he like?" she asks.

"Which one of them?" I ask.

"Garen. I know, weird, but like... how?" she says. I look over at the rest of the group. Nicole and Miles are trying to convince Corey to just pick something, but he's making a federal case about it. I cross my arms and leans towards her across the table.

"Okay, he knows that we're not going to be stepbrothers, and I know we're not going to be stepbrothers. But he just... he acts like someone whose dad is dating my mom shouldn't act. Stuff he says, stuff he does," I say. Faye cocks her head to the side.

"Like what?" she asks. I sigh. Fuck it. I'm going to have to tell her, or she's not going to get it.

"Last night. He said I was cute. Twice," I say.

"Travis... you *are* cute." She wrinkles her nose. "I mean that in a, you know, just-friends way. He probably did too."

"Okay. I'm marginally willing to believe you can explain that away. Even I can. So he said it a few times. No big deal, right? But it doesn't stop there," I say urgently. Faye raises her eyebrows.

"What else?" she asks.

"Um... this morning, he gave me a ride to school. And we were standing in the hall, near the office..." I stop. I have to. No way can I actually talk to anyone about this.

"What? What did he say?" she demands. I clear my throat and lean forward a little more.

"Well, I wouldn't say he really *said* anything. It was more the fact that he bit my ear. In the middle of the hall. And not in a crazy-ass Mike Tyson way. In like, a sexual way," I say. Faye stares at me for at least ten seconds before she clamps a hand over her mouth, her shoulders shaking. "Fuck you! Don't laugh!" I say. The laughter bubbles over and she collapses forward on the table. I shove her shoulder, and she leans back to look at me. It takes several more seconds for her to regain control. As soon as she does, however, I realize God hates me.

"Remember how you told me they'd stick me in fifth period Home Ec?" Garen asks, swinging one leg over the bench so he's straddling it, facing me. I manage a glance at him. His eyes are wide open, not showing a trace of acknowledgement of the fact that four and half hours ago, his mouth was on my person. I look pointedly away

"Yeah," I force out.

"Well, you were right. Remember how you said the blue stove sets itself on fire if you turn it on?" he continues.

"Yeah," I repeat.

"And remember how I have self-control issues?" he says. My eyes snap back to his face. He's biting his lower lip like he's trying to stop a smile.

"Yeah," I say. My voice cracks and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"*Well*... the bad news is I have detention for the rest of the week. The good news is that they were able to put the fire out in under five minutes. The even better news is that they transfer me to Musical Theory starting tomorrow," he says.

"Cool," I say. I fix my gaze on the writing on the table. D.A. loves K.O. School sucks. Principal Hammond is a dick.

"What's your deal?" Garen asks. I can hear the frown in his voice without looking up. I don't reply, just keep reading the table. Blink 182 rox. I love you. Chelsea is a slutty bitch.

"Sorry. Garen Anderson." I finally look up. He's holding his hand out to Faye. She shakes it and glances at me, smiling.

"I know. Travis was just talking about you, actually. Faye Taylor," she says. I glare at her and she grins back. Garen glances at me.

"You were talking about me? How cute. I'll have to go get friends so I can talk about you to them too. In fact, I think I'll go do that now. You need a ride home tonight?" he asks. I bite my thumb nail.

"I have track tonight. I normally just walk home in the afternoon 'cause my schedule's different every day. Work, track, shrink. You know the deal," I say.

"So I'll wait in the library and then drive you home after. Big deal," Garen replies.

"You don't have to, really," I say.

"Travis." The way he says my name makes me look at him, no matter how much I don't want to. He holds my gaze for less than two seconds before standing up.

"I'll be out front after your practice. Meet me there, okay? It was nice to meet you," he adds to Faye before turning and walking quickly out of the cafeteria.

"So... it was kind of weird to watch your stepbrother hit on you," Faye says slowly. I roll my eyes.

"Okay, first, he's not my stepbrother. Second, he wasn't hitting on me. I think. Wait, was he?" I let my head fall onto the table with a loud thud. "Ugh, it's just so fucked up. His dad is dating my mom."

"Well... do you like him?" Faye asks. I snap upright.

"Faye, are you missing a huge feature here? I'm not gay," I say.

"I know, I know," she says quickly. "I just wanted to make sure. I didn't wanna say anything if that was like, an issue."

"Wait, did you *think* it was an issue?" I ask. She shakes her head quickly.

"No, that's not what I meant! I just wanted to make sure that there wasn't something you were just hiding from us," she says. Corey drops down onto the bench next to her and Nicole and Miles take their seats on either side of me.

"Okay, so it took ten minutes, but I got the best fucking cookie this school has ever seen. What do you think, Trav?" Corey says.

"Do I come off as gay?" I demand. Corey stares at me as he takes a bite of his cookie, chewing it very slowly.

"Um, no, but you do kind of come off as a crack addict for asking that. What the fuck, dude?" he says.

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head.

"Why? Are you? Like, is this you coming out?" Nicole asks.

"No! Jesus Christ, no. I'm not gay. I just wanted to know," I say.

"Faye... you're not allowed to talk to Travis anymore, if leaving him alone with you gets him to ask shit like

that," Corey says.

"No, we can give her another chance. But if the next time we sit down, Travis asks if he should buy a pair of fuchsia pumps or something, Faye gets put in isolation," Nicole says.

"I, on the other hand, will support Travis in everything he does, even if that means he's wearing fuchsia pumps. But... you'll have to take them off for track, man," Miles says.

"Oh, ha fucking ha, you assholes," I say. Nicole snaps her fingers suddenly and points at me.

"That reminds me! Since we've all firmly established that you're straight, what do you think of Blaire?" she asks.

"Blaire Kennedy? The girl on your soccer team?" I ask. She nods. I shrug. "I don't really know her. She's kinda hot though."

"Cause she asked me during Calc what I thought you thought of her, and I said I'd find out," Nicole explains.

"Oh yeah, I forgot we're in third grade," I say.

"Dude, you were getting play from girls in third grade? Man whore," Corey says.

"Don't get pissed at me just 'cause I get more action than you do," I say before taking a sip of my soda. *Yeah. From your fucking almost-stepbrother.* The thought makes me choke, and I'm quiet the rest of the period.

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Over the next two weeks, I develop a system for avoiding Garen at all costs, most of which is just luck. We already have no classes together, and everyday he goes off-campus for lunch. He drives me to and from school, and the second the car is stopped, I'm out and heading for the building. One of the other cashiers at The Daily Grind was fired, so I end up working twice as much anyway. I don't mind. Less time at home means less time alone with Garen. At home, I bury myself even deeper in my schoolwork and only come out of my room for meals. Usually.

"Garen!" I yell. I pound on the door. The only response is the music he's blasting. I hit the door again.

"Garen, you asshole, turn it down!" Nothing. I throw the door open. Garen is sitting at his computer, his back turned to me. I take two steps across the room before he reaches out and hits pause on the stereo.

"Are you studying?" he asks.

"No. My friends are coming over and I can hear this from all the way downstairs. I'd rather be able to hear them," I say.

"I'll turn it down if you stay and listen to one song," he replies. I walk slowly over to his desk and he finally looks up at me. "You don't listen to music, right? Well, I do. So we'll both make a sacrifice."

"It's not like I hate music. I just don't have time to listen to it," I say. Garen shrugs.

"You've got time before your friends come over," he says. I glance at the stereo again, then lean back against his desk and shrug. He almost smiles and turns back to the computer screen, reaching out blindly

to the side and skipping a few songs before hitting play.

"What's this?" I ask.

"The Perishers," he says.

"What's the song title?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter. Just listen," he replies. I shut up. After a few seconds, I remember that this is why I don't like to listen to music. I'm so used to doing something that just standing here listening seems strange. I shift against the desk and look around the room. Garen's room was made so it matches mine. Peach carpet, white walls. Every room upstairs is decorated that way, which is slightly disgusting. I had planned to do something with it so it was less annoying or boring or whatever, but -- all together now -- I never have the time. Garen, however, has put up posters all over the room, mostly of bands, some of movies. The ceiling light is off, and all of the light comes instead from a blue and silver floor lamp in the corner. The entire door is completely covered in photos he's put up.

His bedroom door has more personality than everything of mine put together.

Looking around the room is mildly depressing, so I look around for something else to stare at. The only other thing is Garen. I realize now they I don't think I've ever really *looked* at him much. His eyes are trained on the computer screen, so I figure now is as good a time as any.

He looks nothing like anyone I've ever seen. For one thing, the hair. I don't think a single other person in Lakewood has hair like that. It's dark brown, which is normal enough, but it's the style that makes it weird. The way it sticks up in purposefully insane spikes. It's wild, but not punk, because the spikes aren't really clumps of hair gathered together; it's just straightened hair sticking up all over his head in every direction. As I'm staring at it, he reaches up for the pieces in the front and starts re-twisting the spikes so they're even straighter. For another thing, I've never seen eyes his color. I know people with green eyes, sure, but none that dark green. His look almost black, they're so dark.

As if he can feel me staring, he turns to look at me.

"What?" he asks. I shake my head quickly.

"Nothing," I say. The song ends on the stereo, and Garen immediately turns it down several clicks. The next song starts up. It's slow, deep, dark. Sexy. The doorbell rings downstairs and I jump.

"Thanks for uh, for turning it down," I say. Garen is still watching me, twisting the spikes with one hand. "I should... yeah." I turn quickly and head for the door. Just barely in the hall, I hesitate and glance over my shoulder. My eyes lock with Garen's for one, two, three, four seconds before the doorbell rings again and I shut the door behind myself. I hear the music go up another few clicks and mutter, "Asshole."

Chapter Four

"Okay, this place is huge. Bill must be totally loaded," Nicole says, spinning around in the entrance hall.

"Uh, yeah," I say uncomfortably.

"If I marry your stepbrother, do I get to be rich too?" she asks. I snort.

"First, he's not my stepbrother. Second, meet him and then reconsider that idea. Come on, let's go upstairs," I say. She, Miles, Corey, and Faye follow me upstairs. I push open the door to my room and go inside, but Nicole hesitates by Garen's door.

"Is this his room?" she mouths, pointing to it. I nod, and she claps. "Please introduce me? 'Cause I was talking to Tanya Jacobs in gym and she says he's totally gorgeous, but he's not in any of my classes, so I haven't seen him and *please*?"

I roll my eyes and push past Miles and Corey back out into the hall. I pound on Garen's door.

"Garen," I say loudly. Nicole grabs my arm.

"Wait, you're not going to say anything embarrassing, are you?" she asks.

"I'm going to tell him you want to have sex with him," I say.

"Travis!" she half-shrieks. "If you do that, I will never speak to you again."

"What?" Garen asks, opening the door.

"Nicole, Faye, Miles, Corey," I say, pointing to each in turn. "Wanna come watch a movie with us?"

"What movie?" he asks. Faye produces the DVD from her purse.

"*Edward Scissorhands*," she says. Garen looks around the group, then back at me.

"Can't," he says after a moment.

"Why?" I ask.

"'Cause I hate you," he replies. I move to hit him in the chest, but he catches my hand before I can actually make contact. I expect him to drop it, but he doesn't. Just holds my fist there against his chest.

"Seriously. Why?" I ask.

"I just told you," he says, raising his eyebrows. He shifts our hands so we're more or less palm-to-palm and laces his fingers through mine. "But seriously, I'm busy," he adds.

"Doing what?" I ask. He raises an eyebrow as a slow sort of come-hither smile forms on his mouth. I cough and extract my hand carefully from his. He crosses his arms across his chest and leans against the doorframe.

"I'm just doing something," he says. His voice is lower, flatter than before.

"Um... okay. We're just gonna..." I jerk a thumb towards my room, and as if on cue, my friends filter back into it. I pause in mid-turn and swallow before turning back to face him.

"You have fun with that," I say.

"With what?" he asks. I let my eyes flicker down him once, then fix them back up on his face.

"Being busy," I say, smiling just barely. He bites his lip to keep back his own smile, something I've noticed is out of habit. I turn around and head back into my room.

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"Motherfuck!"

The word bursts out from Garen's room in the few seconds of silence between songs, louder than the music itself, which is saying something. It's followed by a loud crash, then more silence, then the wail of a guitar from the stereo.

I get up from my bed cautiously and go out into the hall. Garen's door is still shut. It's been like that since my friends left, which was at least two hours ago. I hesitate for a second, then knock.

"What?" Garen yells over the music.

"Can I come in?" I ask loudly. The music cuts off immediately.

"Yeah. Sure," he says in an almost defeated voice. I push open the door. Garen sprawled on his bed, his head hanging off the foot of it. His eyes are closed and he's rubbing his temples.

"Are you dying?" I ask nervously. I've seen him every day for two weeks, and I've never seen him look this pissed off and depressed.

"No. You will be, though, if you don't leave," he says through gritted teeth. I shut the door behind myself and sit down on the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong?" I ask. Wordlessly, Garen points across the room. A textbook is lying open, facedown, half hidden in the open closet door. I pick it up and brush off the cover.

"You're taking Genetics?" I ask.

"I'm supposed to be. Only I can't understand a fucking word of it because we never covered genetics at Patton, and there's a test on Tuesday, so I guess they expect me to just figure it the fuck out," Garen says.

"Do you want me to help?" I say. "I'm a psychotic overachiever, remember?"

Garen rolls over onto his stomach and props himself up on his elbows.

"So I exaggerated, I get some of it. It's the motherfucking squares. There are going to be a bunch of ones we have to fill out on the test, and I have no idea what to do," he says. I smile and sit down on the bed next to him.

"They're called Punnett squares. And they're actually easy, once you realize what you have to do.

Notebook?" He hands me his from the floor and I draw a box, then a cross inside it.

"Say you've got two people with different eye colors who get married. The woman has blue eyes and the man has brown eyes, but his father had blue eyes. Blue is a recessive gene, so we show that by using a small letter. Go with 'b' here. So the woman has lowercase 'b', lowercase 'b' as hers. The man has one lowercase 'b' from his father, but because he has brown eyes, he has to have gotten the brown eyed gene, which is uppercase 'B' from his mother. So his genetic genotype is uppercase 'B', lowercase 'b'. If they have a child—"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Garen interrupts.

It goes on like that for at least an hour. It takes me a while to adjust the way I explain it, and it takes Garen a while to adjust to actually listening for once. He's not stupid, I know that. He just doesn't care. I figure that out soon enough. His attention wanes, he stops listening, I have to start over.

"Okay, two brown-eyed people. One is homozygous, one is heterozygous. You want me to draw the square?" I ask. Garen yanks the pen and notebook out of my hands, draws the square, and fills in all of the boxes in under five seconds. He tosses the notebook back onto my lap, rolls onto his back, and stares up at me.

"I'm not a moron, Travis. I understand it now," he says. I blink a few times, then stand up.

"Okay. I'll leave then, I guess," I say. He grabs my arm and yanks me back down.

"What about me?" he asks. I stare.

"What?" I say. It comes out strangely, definitely not my normal voice.

"I have green eyes. You did tell me what you use for green eyes, and we ran out of cases for the letters to be," he says.

"That's something different. And it won't be on your test. This is only about basic crosses and dihybrid crosses. So you're fine," I say. He wrinkles his brow and lets go of my arm.

"Oh," he says, and before I can stand up again, "Are you going to Blaire Kennedy's party on Monday?"

"The Halloween thing?" I ask. He nods. "How'd you hear about it?"

"Some guy from Musical Theory told me and asked if I wanted to go with him and his friends," he says dismissively, and my eyes snap up to his face. "So, are you?"

I shrug.

"Nicole is trying to force me, 'cause apparently Blaire's got a thing for me and will be pissed if I don't show. I still kinda want to skip it though."

"Go. It'll be cool. And if it's not, we can leave early, no harm, no foul," he says. I shrug again.

"It seems like a waste of time. Plus, no costume," I say.

"It is a waste of time, that's the point. And just call somebody and ask them to help you find one. I'll bet Nicole is just begging to suit you up in something that matches Blaire's," he says. Practically spits.

"What?" I say, frowning.

"What do you mean, 'what'?" he says.

"You said that weird," I say. Now it's his turn to shrug.

"No, I just... I mean, Blaire Kennedy?" he says.

"What, you don't think she'd like me? Too good for me?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"No, moron, you're too good for her. The girl's the biggest slut I've gone to school with in years," he says.

"You've been going to an all-boys military school for like, three years," I point out. Garen raises his eyebrows at me.

"And you think we don't have sluts at all-boys military school?" he says. I don't know what I want to say to that. Well, that's not true. I know exactly what I want to say, I just can't. Shouldn't. Won't.

"What?" Garen asks, studying my face.

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. He cocks his head to the side.

"Are you thinking about whether or not I'm gay?" he asks. I turn to face him so fast I hear my neck crack.

"No, I'm— alright, I am. I definitely am. I'm sorry, but you say things like that, and you say things to me, you *do* things to me. You *act* like you are, but you don't say you are," I burst out. He doesn't look pissed, which is definitely not what I expected. He looks intrigued, sits up and crosses his legs with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward slightly.

"Do you honestly think I have to? It's not like straight people work being straight into conversation, so gay people don't usually have to either. I wouldn't say it either way. It's just not like my sexual orientation is one of the first things I feel compelled to tell people about myself. Like how you take meds. I've seen you take them, I know you take them, but we don't have to have a twelve hour talk about you taking them. It's the same thing with sexuality, no matter what it happens to be," he says. He pauses, then starts retwisting one of his spikes. "Besides, why does it matter to you?"

"Because it's kind of come up, in case you haven't noticed. Actually, you probably haven't, because you've been too busy biting my ear to really pay much attention to anything else," I say. Garen bites his lip on his smile, a gesture that I've realized infuriates me.

"I was wondering when you were going to bring that up. Two weeks, though. I'm impressed," he says.

"Shut up," I say. "You *bit my ear* in the middle of the school hallway."

"I know," he says, sounding all too proud of himself.

"You can't do that," I say.

"Why not? I don't remember you complaining at the time," he says.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I was supposed to cause a huge scene and have everyone realize what we were

doing," I say.

"We'? Oh, so it was a mutual thing, then? See, I was kind of worried you weren't into it," he says. It takes everything in me not to shove him off the bed right there.

"I wasn't into it, Garen. We were right in the middle of school!" I snap. His eyebrows shoot up just as I realize that was the wrong thing to say.

"What, it would've been okay if we had been here instead?" he asks.

"I didn't say that," I say.

"You didn't have to," he replies. I look quickly down at my hands and start tracing the lines on my palm.

"Look, all I said was that we were in school. And I'm really not into that," I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Garen roll onto his knees and move a little bit closer. All of a sudden I feel his hand on my jaw, turning my face toward him.

"We're not in school now," he says. There's one second of stillness, and then he leans forward. I'm not sure if his lips actually touch mine or not before I stand up quickly and head for the door.

"I have to go," I whisper. I leave the door open behind me and cross the hall into my bedroom, slamming the door shut behind myself. I lean back against it, and that's when it finally hits me. When he leaned in, I tilted my head to the side before I even thought about pulling back.

Chapter Five

"I look like a jackass," I observe, tilting my head to the side.

"Yeah, you do," Corey agrees. I elbow him in the ribs.

"Shut up. At least I'm wearing a costume. You just pussied out and threw together normal clothes," I say.

"They're not normal clothes. I'm Kurt Cobain," he says. He gestures emphatically to his baggy jeans and flannel button down.

"You don't have the hair," I say.

"I've got a wig downstairs," he says, waving his hand toward his bedroom door. "Where's your face?"

"You mean 'mask'?" I say, holding up the white plastic. I put it on and turn to face the mirror. Corey stands just behind me, also checking out my reflection.

"You look like a fucking geek with your hair all slicked back like that," he says.

"And you're gonna look like a heroin addict with your hair the way you're gonna have it. So fuck you," I say. I shove my cell phone in the pocket of my black dress pants and pull my cape a little tighter around me.

"What's Nicole going as?" Corey asks.

"I don't know. Something slutty, probably. Remember last year's costume?" I say. He grins.

"The nurse thing? Yeah. Fondly," he says. I shove him. "What's Blaire going as?"

"Christine," I say flatly. Corey bursts out laughing. I glare at him until he manages to gain control of himself, then I grab him by the shirt collar and drag him out of the room and down the hall to the front door.

"Are we picking up Faye and Miles?" I ask, tossing him his keys.

"No, they're both gonna meet us there. I think Faye and Nicole both went early to help Blaire set up," he says. "Sorry. Help *Christine* set up."

I shove him out the door and follow him to the car. He starts the engine, pulls out, glances at me, smirking.

"You wanna pick the tunage?" he asks. He does every time we're in the car together. His feelings about me not listening to music are similar to Garen's, except he won't do anything to try to make me change. This time, though, I grab my backpack out of the backseat and pull out a CD from the front pocket.

"Yeah, actually, I brought a CD," I say. I grin exaggeratedly at him as I load the CD into the stereo. He blinks, then laughs.

"Well, fuck me, you finally started listening to music, you spazz," he says. "What is it, anyway?"

Almost in response, the CD starts up. Corey's eyebrows shoot up. "Since when do you listen to The

Rasmus?”

“It’s called having layers, Cor. Most people are accustomed to it,” I say. In all honesty, I borrowed the CD from Garen yesterday. He was so ecstatic about me asking him to lend me a CD that he offered to let me borrow any CD from his entire collection. When I asked him to pick out something he thought I’d like, he was practically orgasmic. I left his room with at least a dozen.

We get to the party a little late. At least, later than people expected. The second I’m in the door, Faye appears in front of me, latching onto my arm and dragging me inside.

“Travis! Oh my god, what took you guys so long? Blaire thought you weren’t going to show,” she says.

“Why’s she flipping out so bad?” I ask. She gives me a look, and I shrug.

“Whatever. She’s in the kitchen.”

True to what Faye said, Blaire looks vaguely panicked when I come into the kitchen. She’s wringing her hands and trying not to let her brow furrow. When she sees me, the panic melts away and she grins brightly.

“Travis! You’re here!” she says. I feel like a dick, even though it was only ten minutes late.

“Yeah. Hey. Sorry I’m late,” I say. I see Nicole staring pointedly at me, so I duck down and kiss Blaire quickly on the cheek. She glows.

“It’s okay. No biggie,” she says. Bullshit. I don’t say anything to that, just try to sink into the swing of things.

It’s always weird hanging out in big groups like this. I barely know Blaire, and she won’t get off me. Every time Miles tosses off one of his usual one-liners or Corey says something stupid, Blaire giggles and leans back against my chest. I have had what... three conversations with her in my life? Suddenly it’s like she’s my girlfriend. I try to meet Nicole’s eyes to see if that’s what she’s been going for. When she finally catches my eye, she smiles innocently, then winks. God.

“Who is *that*?” Faye interrupts. In unison, we all turn to follow her eyes. I find myself looking at a guy dancing in a large group. He doesn’t seem to be wearing a costume, just black jeans, a black sweatshirt half-unzipped to show a dark grey t-shirt, and black boots. But the more I look, the more I notice; black gloves, a black mask covering his eyes. There’s a black nose and whiskers painted on, and tiny fake ears poking up through his dark brown curly hair. He turns to face someone, and I see the tail.

“*What* is that?” Miles asks.

“He’s a raccoon,” I say.

“That’s... okay, not going to lie here. That costume is worse than mine,” Corey says.

“Corey, no costume is worse than yours,” I sat. I don’t realize I’m moving towards the raccoon guy until Blaire snags my arm, gazing up at me with wide blue eyes.

“Where are you going?” she asks. I twist my arm gently from her hands.

“To get a drink. You want anything?” I ask. She shakes her head.

"No thanks. Come back soon, my costume looks stupid alone," she says with a smile. The doorbell rings, and Blaire spins around, going off to answer it. The group trails slowly back to the front hall. I spin back around and head back across the living room. Raccoon Guy is still dancing with his friends, his back towards me. I swallow thickly and adjust my mask to make sure it covers my face properly. I lean forward so my mouth is next to his ear and place my hands on his hips.

"Nice tail," I whisper. I feel him move against me, but I'm not sure if it's supposed to be towards me or away from me. I yank my hands back before I can tell, and push through the crowd to the back door, throwing it open, slamming it shut behind me, and slumping against the wall next to it. I press my hands to my face.

I can't believe I just did that. To a guy. Maybe Faye was right. Maybe that's why Garen acts with me the way he does. He knows, sees it in me. Gaydar. If there's even any gay to have gaydar pick up on. No. Not possible. I've dated girls, I've kissed girls. And I've liked it. I can't be--

The door next to me opens suddenly, and I jump, slapping my hands down to my sides. Raccoon Guy takes four steps out onto the porch, pauses, then turns around to look at me. Shit. I straighten up and cough, open my mouth in hopes it will help me find some way to explain it. But Raccoon Guy reaches behind himself and brings forth his tail, waving the end of it as though in greeting. He cocks his head to the side and smiles. Familiar. He's gotta be in one of my classes. Microbiology? Calc? I shove my hands in my pockets and stare down at the ground. Now what? I just hit on some guy I don't know, and now everyone's going to find out. I shouldn't have done it to begin with, not with some guy I almost definitely go to school with. Not with any guy at all. I should apologize, explain, something.

And then Raccoon Guy stoops down so we're level and kisses me. I back up against the wall, but then I realize that my hands went to his hips the second he touches me, so I'm dragging him with me. I quickly yank my hands away, but he catches them, laces his fingers through mine, and pins my arms to the wall above my head.

It's so wildly different from kissing a girl that they barely even seem like the same action. Girls don't press you against a wall like this. Girls don't flatten themselves against you this hard. Girls don't shock you to the point of immobility when their mouth opens against yours and you realize that's their fucking *tongue*.

Raccoon Guy untangles one hand from mine and reaches for my mask, starting to slide it off. I panic and grab his hand.

"Don't," I say. Raccoon Guy steps quickly backward, his eyes widening. His head snaps down, avoiding my gaze.

"What?" I ask warily. A hand flies up to his hair and he hesitated for a second before raking his fingers through the curls. I reach out towards him, but he pushes past me, back inside the house. I stay where I am, stunned. What the fuck was that? That's not what was supposed to happen. Okay, I don't know what was *supposed* to happen, but it's not what I wanted to happen. I wanted to kiss him. Him. Kiss *him*. I run a finger over my lips. Did that really just happen? It had to have. No way could I have made that up.

"Travis? Are you out here?" I look at the doorway next to me, where Blaire just appeared. I straighten up, pull my mask off.

"Yeah. Sorry, I wanted some air," I say. "You know what? I've got a headache. I think I'm gonna head home. See you tomorrow?"

Blaire visibly deflates, but nods.

"Okay. Thanks for coming," she says. She raises herself up on her toes, tilting her face up to me expectantly. I pull her forward into a short, awkward hug.

"Bye," I say, and I shove my way back through the house and out the front door. I should've found Corey first and told him I was leaving, I realize when I'm halfway home. Blaire will tell them though. Probably bitch about it, cry, whatever. I can't worry about that now. I'm too busy with the am-I-am-I-not debate that's been going on in my head since I left the backyard. It keeps up the rest of the walk too, all the way up the driveway, into the house. Garen's car is parked out front. Great. Just what I need. My mom's boyfriend's son hitting on me to confuse me more. It's inevitable, though.

"I can't believe you didn't go to the party. You're the one who told me to go," I call once I reach the top of the stairs. I push open my bedroom door and toss the mask onto my desk. I unknot the tie on the cape, waiting for a response. It doesn't come. I fold the cape over the back of my desk chair.

"It sucked anyway, I guess. I mean... I don't know. I guess you didn't really miss much," I continue. I untuck my shirt and undo the top button. Still no reply. I sigh and head across the hall, pushing open Garen's door.

"Are you deaf or just ignoring—"

I stop. I have to, because my throat just closed up and now I can't breathe. Garen slowly spins his desk chair to face me, his face completely blank. We stare at each other for at least a minute before he pulls his sleeve down over his hand and drags it across his face, smearing off the whiskers and nose. His mask and tail are lying abandoned on his bed, and, still watching me, he pulls off his gloves and unclips the ears. I say the only thing I can think to say.

"Your hair." I know already. I've seen the vast multitude of shit he has in the bathroom. Flat irons, wax, pomade. He does as much to his hair as Bree does to hers.

"I straighten it. But uh... you couldn't see the ears through the spikes when I tried that," he says quietly. I have no idea what to say. No idea at all. Thirty seconds later, though, I do.

"What the fuck?" I say. It comes out loud and harsh, and Garen flinches.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"So you knew? You knew it was me and you still did it? Were you ever going to tell me it was you?" I demand.

"No!" he says quickly, then presses the heels of his hands to his eyes. "I mean, no, I didn't know it was you. I only figured that out when you started talking outside. I, I barely heard you in the house, and then it was so dark outside and I'm sorry—"

"Shut up," I order, and Garen stands up.

"Travis, I swear I didn't know until after it happened—"

"Shut up!" I yell. And then before I can stop myself, "Why did you leave? Why didn't you tell me there?"

"What would you have done if I had? It would've been this exact conversation, only at the party. Would

you really want that?" Garen demands.

"I didn't want any of this!" I snap.

"Bullshit. You didn't want it when you put your hands on my hips, when you came onto me? You initiated this, Travis, so don't pretend I took advantage of you," he says.

"Since when have I been the one who initiates things between us?" I ask.

"Since tonight. You think curly hair and a pair of ears means I'm not me? You can pretend all you want, but you didn't do what you did at the party because of anything I said or did. You did it because you wanted me as much as I wanted you." He swallows, then corrects himself. "Want. As much as I want you."

"Garen." I don't know what to continue with, so I just close my mouth instead. Luckily – unluckily? – Garen knows how to fill the silence. He crosses the room in three steps and wraps an arm around my waist.

"Garen," I repeat, grabbing his hands to untangle myself from him. His eyes flutter shut and his head lolls forward so our foreheads touch.

"Travis, I know the circumstance, okay? I've known since I met you, only in case you haven't noticed, they haven't really stopped me from anything. So just..." He sighs, his breath ghosting across my lips as he does so. "Can't you just forget about all that shit? Just for tonight?"

The rules and restrictions and am-I-am-I-not debates and reasons why not are blasting in my skull. Story of my life. Always talking myself down from what I want in favor of what I'm supposed to need. Avoiding anything that can disrupt my schoolwork, my job, my psychotherapy and with it, my return to sanity I'm not sure I ever lost to begin with. My entire life is centered around walking on eggshells for my own safety. Fuck it. Not now. Not tonight.

Slowly, I nod.

Chapter Six

It was stupid, but I definitely assumed that kissing Garen now wouldn't really be that weird, if I'd done it before. But now that it's happening and I know it's him, my mind is consuming itself in a thousand different trains of thought. Am I doing this right? Is this the way he pictured it? *Did* he picture it? How far does he expect this to go? What the fucking shit am I supposed to do with my hands?

Garen pulls back just enough so we're not kissing anymore, but he's still definitely in my personal space.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Why?" I whisper. This seems like such a bizarre time to have a conversation. It's so like him to do that though. Start getting chatty the second I'm willing to do this.

"You're shaking," he says.

"No I'm not," I force out. I tighten my hands around the fabric of his sweatshirt, clench my fists until my knuckles turn white and my hands stop trembling. Garen's hands shift on my waist, like he's not sure if he should pull back.

"Yeah, you are. Do you... want me to stop?" he asks.

"Don't," I say. I tilt my face up to his and lean towards him slightly. Just as my lips brush his, he leans his head back slightly again.

"Travis, if you're not okay with this, I don't want—"

I push myself off the wall and turn so my back is to his bed, then back up until I feel the edge of the mattress hit my legs. I sit down carefully, then lie back, yanking him down on top of me.

"I said don't stop," I say. Even though I did it, it's still kind of a shock to suddenly have him pressed hard against me. He's heavier than I'd expected, but that's probably because I've basically never had anyone lie on top of me before, so I don't have much of a reference point. He shifts, though, braces one knee on each side of my legs, pushes himself off me slightly. I wrap an arm around his neck and push his hair away from his face.

"You okay?" he asks again. I nod.

"Mmhm," I say, drawing his face back down to me. We kiss again, a little more lazily than before. It's so strange to acknowledge that I'm actually doing this now, to acknowledge that all of his little comments and gestures for the past two and half weeks have been heading towards this. I'm not just kissing some guy, like I had thought I was earlier. I'm kissing *Garen*. Bill's son, my almost-stepbrother, a guy I didn't even know until a few weeks ago, who I didn't even like until... I'm not even sure I like him now. We're not friends, at least not how Faye and I or Corey and I are friends. The sudden mental image of myself making out with Corey is enough to scar me for life, and I tighten my grip on his hair. He inhales sharply at that, drawing the air out of my mouth so I'm suddenly light-headed. He leans back, though, moves his lips to my jaw, my neck. I tip my head back into the pillows to give him better access and let my eyes roll shut. He whispers something against my throat.

"Hmm?" I say softly. He shakes his head.

"Nothing. Not important," he says. I pull his head back slightly.

"No, what'd you say?" I ask. He doesn't answer, just kisses me again. And again. And again. I grab the zipper pull on his sweatshirt and drag it slowly down. Once it's all the way open, I run a hand across his chest, down his stomach. God his muscles are hard as a fucking rock. I jerk his shirt up, slid my hand under it onto his abs. He shifts his weight back onto his legs as he moves his hands down to my shirt, his fingers fumbling for the buttons. I shove his shirt up a little higher and move to help Garen with unbuttoning mine. I'm so close to just pulling it open and letting all the buttons pop off, but this isn't some bad porn movie. It's real. We finally get it open and I push his sweatshirt off his shoulders. He pulls his arms out of the sleeves and tosses it behind himself, somewhere near the desk. I push him back, still pulling at the hem of his shirt. He leans away and starts to pull it off.

There's a crunch of tires on the driveway, then a slam of car doors.

"Fuck, are they home already?" Garen hisses.

"Is that Mom and Bill?" I ask. He nods. "Shit, shit, get off."

Garen scrambles to get off of me and I button my shirt back up as quickly as I can. The front door opens.

"Boys? Bree? Are you home?" Mom calls up the stairs. I stumble off of Garen's bed, look around the room for my mask and cape before I realize I left them in my room. I spin around and head for the door. Garen catches my arm.

"Wait a second," he whispers. The end of the sentence is said against my lips as he kisses me one last time, hard and fast and then he's pulling back. I bolt across the hall to my room and shut the door as quietly as I can. Mom apparently didn't really care too much if we're home, because she doesn't come upstairs for another hour. An hour I could've spent in Garen's room. Sixty minutes I could've been kissing him, had his lips on my neck, been pressed into the mattress under his fucking amazing body. I've never hated my mother more than I have now.

I check my watch. Eleven forty-three. The day's almost over, and with that my one-night-only agreement to what Garen's been offering since we moved in here. I lie down on my bed and stare at the ceiling, trying to pointedly ignore the way I can still almost feel him on top of me.

I hear Mom and Bill heading upstairs. There's a knock on my door. I roll onto my side and close my eyes, feigning sleep. I hear Mom open the door, then shut it again when she sees me. Across the hall, she takes a more direct approach and knocks on the door, opens it.

"Garen, it's time to turn off that music and go to bed," she says. Garen doesn't seem to say anything, just shuts off the stereo. Mom thanks him and shuts the door, heading down the hall to her and Bill's room. I wait five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes later, I get up and open my door cautiously. I stay there for a second, listening for any sound down the hall that'd signal they heard me, then step out of my room across the hall. I tap one finger on Garen's door and wait again. I hear his bed creak as he gets up and then his footsteps on the carpet. The door opens and he stares down at me for less than a second before his teeth are on his lower lip and he pulls me into his room.

"Just tonight, right?" I say. The expression on his face changes, dims slightly, and he looks down.

"Yeah. Just tonight," he says. I frown and open my mouth to reply, but he brushes a hand under my jaw, closing my mouth, and leans in to kiss me. I let him, sliding my hands up his arms, across his shoulders, up his neck and onto the back of his head, knotting my fingers in his hair. He slips a hand into my back pocket, letting the other one rest lightly in the small of my back. I feel his lips curve up into a smile against

me, and I mimic the action. The hand on my back disappears and I hear the door shut behind me before it returns to its previous place. I steer him backwards to his bed and he lies down, bringing me with him. I try to remember and imitate things from before, like the way he put his knees on either side of me and kind of braced himself with his arms to balance his weight, but I'm shaking again, too much to actually stay like that. I shift so one of my legs is between his and let a little more of my weight rest on top of him. His hands slide just up under the back of my shirt so they're resting on my bare skin. I pull back slightly and hold his gaze for a few seconds before leaning forward to kiss his forehead, nose, lips, chin, throat. I continue my trail down to where his skin disappears under the collar of his t-shirt, then return to his lips. His left hand slides from my back around to my stomach, stroking my skin gently. I tense up. I'm definitely not built like him. Less muscular, more just scrawny. Nothing I'd really like to compare to him. His hand shifts again, though, this time down my stomach to the top of my pants. He strokes the skin right above the waistband for a second before undoing the button. He's sliding down the zipper before I can snap out of it enough to realize what is actually happening. I grab his hand and break the kiss.

"Wait," I breathe. Garen blinks, then shakes his head.

"Right. Sorry," he says. I'm not sure if I should reach down and redo them myself, or if that would be weird. But Garen has that covered. He pulls the zipper back up and fumbles with both hands to button them.

"Sorry," he repeats. "Got, uh..."

"Yeah. Me too," I say. Nice job, Travis. Way to make the entire experience awkward. Or, more awkward. It takes a little while, but Garen eventually gets back into it, his hands now firmly staying above the waist. I want to do something more with my hands, but it seems like no matter what I go to do, it'd be sending mixed signals. I settle for keeping them planted on the pillow.

It goes on like that for a while. Every time Garen's hands start to wander, he snaps them back up to my waist, and he makes sure they stay there for at least a little while. He figures out how to get around that rule anyway, grinding his hips up against mine whenever I seem like I'm moving. I worry his lower lip between my teeth and push my lower half down to meet him. Clothes? Intact. Innocence? Not so much.

"Fuck. How long have we been doing this?" he asks, laughing softly. I shrug and he grabs the alarm clock off his nightstand. "Bullshit."

I turn the clock to face me. Two oh seven. "Bullshit," I echo. As I say it, though, I sit up and attempt to straighten out my clothes. "If that's right, I should go back to my room. At least attempt to get some sleep."

"It's not right. It's actually only nine o'clock, so we've got at least five hours until you'll be thinking that. Come back," Garen says, pulling me back down. I grin and kiss him once more before sliding off the bed.

"I really do have to go. 'Sides, if we get caught?" I don't have to finish, because we both know. Garen makes a face at me.

"Fine. Night," he says. I open the door and pause when he speaks again. "Just tonight?"

I rotate slowly on my heels until I'm facing him again. He's propped up on his elbows, his hair mussed and his lips swollen and red from mine. I turn back around and say more to the door than him, "Just tonight."

When I wake up later that morning to the buzzing of my alarm clock, my original plan of pretending nothing happened doesn't work. It's the first thought in my head. I instead try to acknowledge that it happened and move on, but that doesn't do it either. I grab my clothes out of the dresser and head down the hall to the bathroom. I lock myself in and drop my stack of clothes on the counter. I turn on the shower, give it a second to warm up, then strip down and step under the spray.

The hot water feels good on my back, which is inexplicably sore. Okay, not inexplicably. It's sore from holding myself up at an awkward angle above Garen for two hours last night. I squeeze my eyes shut and start washing my hair, trying to block out the mental images. It doesn't work, just distracts me so I end up with shampoo in my eye. I direct my face under the spray, grit my teeth, and yank the faucet all the way to cold. Fuck. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck. Well, that distracts me well enough, and I finish showering in under a minute. I dry, get dressed, and head back into my room down the hall. My shit's scattered all over the place, and it takes me ten minutes to find my American Lit book. I probably would've found it last night before bed if I hadn't gotten... distracted. I shove it all into my backpack and toss it on the bed, heading back to the bathroom. The door is shut and I can hear the shower on the other side. I knock.

"What?" I hear Garen call from inside. I focus my attention on the doorknob so I'll stop picturing him showering, but it doesn't really work.

"Hurry up. I need to brush my teeth," I say loudly.

"Travis, just come in," he replies.

"You're showering, dude," I say. He laughs.

"I didn't say 'join me.' Just come in, brush your teeth, and don't look at me," he says. I take a deep breath and push open the door. "Unless, you know, you want to, in which case I'm not going to complain," he adds. I glance over at him without thinking. That's when I realize our shower curtain is a beautiful, beautiful thing. The top half is completely transparent, and the bottom half is an opaque sort of sea foam green. I can't see anything from Garen's waist down, but what I can see through the top is definitely *not* a bad thing. I shut the door and turn to face the sink. I grab my toothbrush, squeeze a little bit of toothpaste onto it, start brushing. I can see Garen in the mirror. His hands are flat on the tile beneath the shower head, and he's leaning forward slightly so the spray is directed onto the top of his head. He stays like that a few seconds, the water gathering on his face before dripping down into the drain and running in tiny rivers down his back. Then he reaches down and adjusts the faucet. The amount of steam in the room seems to lessen gradually, and I fix my gaze on the top of the mirror, where the fog is fading slightly. Is he...?

"Shut up," Garen says suddenly. I look at his reflected image in the mirror.

"I didn't say anything," I say.

"You thought it. And you thought it loudly. Shut up," he says. I rinse my mouth and drop my toothbrush back into the holder on the counter. I hop up onto the counter and grin at him.

"I thought what?" I ask.

"Fuck off," Garen snaps, shutting the water off.

"Seems to me like you're the one who needs to be fucking anything, not me," I say. He reaches around the curtain and grabs a towel off the rack on the wall. He wraps it low on his hips and pushes the curtain

aside.

"Well, unless you're offering, your opinion is kind of unnecessary. Move?" he says. I shift over a few inches and he fishes under the counter, producing a blow drier, a flat iron, and two different types of styling product. I stay where I am and watch him towel his hair dry. He drops the towel on my lap once he's done and I toss it to the ground. He spend five minutes blow drying his hair, then another fifteen straightening it. He starts at the back and works his way forward, adding wax as he goes to ensure that the spikes stay up like they're supposed to. He goes through it again at the end, retwisting the spikes until they're all just so. The whole process takes half an hour. Once it's done, he shoves everything back under the counter and looks at me, as if he knows I want to say something.

"You do your hair before you put your clothes on?" I ask.

"It'd dry while I was getting dressed if I did it the other way," he replies. I frown.

"You dried it anyway," I say.

"There's a difference. If it dries naturally, it gets curly," he explains. I reach out and start retwisting the spikes, just as he'd done before. Garen quirks an eyebrow at me, and I let my hands fall back down.

"I'm going to go change. You wanna come watch that too?" he asks. I shake my head and he grins, dropping his hands onto my knees. I instinctively part my legs and he steps forward between them. "Well, offer stands if you change your mind," he says. He slides his hands up my thighs, up my chest, to the back of my neck, where he laces his fingers together and pulls me forward as he closes his eyes. I almost let him. His lips are just barely touching mine when I speak.

"One night. That's all."

He freezes, opens his eyes again, but doesn't pull back. I do. He crosses his arms, staring at me. I stare back. Finally, he turns around and heads out to his room. I stay in the bathroom for another minute, then go downstairs to the kitchen. Everyone is gone by now. I grab an apple from the bowl on the counter and bite into it. Halfway through, I dump it in the trash and swallow my pills with my last bite. Therapy tomorrow. Joy oh fucking rapture.

Garen's boots pound down the stairs and to the front door.

"We're leaving now," he yells to me. I shoulder my bag and follow him out to the car. He's backing out onto the road almost before I get my door shut.

"What's your problem?" I ask.

"Are you seriously asking me that?" he demands. I nod. He slams his foot down on the gas pedal and we shoot off down the street.

"Calm the fuck down," I say.

"Fuck you," he snaps. I'm not sure how to reply, but I quickly learn I don't have to, because Garen launches. "What's *your* problem? I'm not asking to be your boyfriend, for fuck's sake, I'm not even trying to get you to have sex with me, which, just so you know, is taking a lot of restraint on my part, 'cause if we went my usual speed, you and I would've fucked like, twenty-eight times in the nineteen days I've known you. I'm trying to figure you out, but you're not really helping me, are you? You flirt with me, then you're screaming at me three hours later. You come onto me at the party, then you act like it's all my fault. You

fucking kiss me for *two hours* and then you flip a shit when I try it again five hours later. What's your problem? It's not like I'm gonna propose to you if you kiss me too much. Forget getting a ring on your finger, I can barely get your fucking tongue in my mouth. Just, *fuck*, Travis, what do you want from me?"

Um... wow. I don't think I've ever been around somebody this pissed off before, even during my parents' divorce when they couldn't stop screaming at each other. But that's close, so I resort to the tactic I used back when they'd turn their completely unwanted attention to me. I keep my mouth shut and stare at the ground. Seconds go by. Minutes.

"Okay, you know I actually was talking to you there, right?" Garen says finally. I press my lips together and look at him. He looks a little less pissed off now. Not by much, though.

"I'm sorry," I say. He laughs hollowly.

"Yeah, you sure seem it," he says.

"I am. I just..." I draw in a deep breath, then expel it slowly. "You're the only guy I've ever done anything with, okay? And based on what you've told me, your list seems pretty extensive, but you remember the first one, right? How well did *that* work out?"

He's silent for a minute before he looks at me.

"It's not the same," he says finally. I turn back to face the window.

"Of course not. 'Cause this time you're the one who's getting fucked over," I say.

Chapter Seven

It's over a week before Garen really speaks to me again. The days between the Tuesday of the fight and the following Thursday are full of dead silence, with the occasional exception of necessary phrases. I find myself waiting for the moments when he has to ask me to pass him something at the dinner table, or the times he asks if I need him to drive me home after school, or if I'm getting a ride to work with Miles. It's actually because of this complete lack of communication that we end up speaking to each other. Had we been conversing more in the past week, he probably would've known where I work, and therefore wouldn't have been there on Friday.

The Daily Grind is a coffee shop in between a karate studio and a flower shop. We only get locals and nearby college students, seeing as how increasing numbers of big-name coffee houses pretty much wipe out the fancier clientele. We're a little less Starbucks, a little more Central Perk. Only six people actually work here, and that's including our manager. It's because of this that I spend most of my time out of school, therapy, or track in here, and it's also because of this that I met Miles, who's also a slave to the Grind's long hours and shitty pay.

Every Friday night we host an open mike night. It starts at six and normally goes on until eight. Two horrible hours of drunk high school kids getting dared to do karaoke and smitten couples crooning ballads at each other. Suffice to say, that's two hours each week that I could spend doing something constructive, yet will never get back. To make it up to the customers, we immediately follow it with an actual band. No one big, no one really all that good, but a high school/college garage band that's more or less adequate. Jerry auditions them first to make sure they don't completely suck, and they get a half hour slot.

This Friday, the karaoke is so obscenely bad that I leave halfway through. I busy myself in the backroom, organizing the stock shelves and counting paper cups. I hate inventory with a passion, but I'd rather do it than stand at the counter and listen to Tommy Robertson screech a Spice Girls song for twenty dollars. I manage to stay in there for the majority of the night. It's a little after eight when Jerry comes in.

"You been doing inventory or just hiding?" he asks. I turn the clipboard in my hand around so he can see the writing all over it. He takes it and reads a few lines, bobbing his head.

"Alright. You can take your break if you want. Be back in ten, though," he says. I hear a crash of someone dropping a cymbal from a drum onto the ground, then someone laughing. The better band must be setting up by now. Great. I finally get a break, right when the real music is going to be starting. I head out back anyway. It's cold tonight, but I didn't expect much. In Lakewood, November is always cold as a bitch. It must be what, mid-month? I reach into my pocket and pull out my folded up work schedule, which I only have because I kept forgetting to take it down from the bulletin board in the back room. I check the date and blink. November eleventh. That's not possible, is it? I run my finger across the week, then down the Friday column. Nope. It's definitely the eleventh.

My fucking birthday and I didn't even know it. I'm not sure whether that's funny or scary. I grin to myself and sink onto the ground. I'm barely fucking human anymore, I realize. I probably didn't notice it because it had nothing to do with school, work, or a track meet. To be fair, though, it's not like anyone else noticed either. My friends, my mom, Bree. No one.

I know. So *Sixteen Candles*, just one year off.

I can hear the music thudding from inside the building behind me. It's loud, fast. Definitely alt. rock. Probably good, but it's not like I'm a good judge of that. I wait a few minutes, then sigh and stand up, brushing the gravel off my jeans and pushing the door open. I take three steps into the building and freeze right where I am. Garen is on the stage, his cherry red guitar strapped on and his head inclined

slightly towards the microphone. I've heard him sing before, his voice seeping out under his bedroom door, vaguely muffled. But I've never heard him sing like this, loud and *into* it. He's amazing. I shake my head and grin. How's this for fucking irony. He shakes his hair out of his face and scans the room. His eyes lock onto mine and he freezes. His breath hitches slightly and the words die in his mouth. Two seconds later though, he's singing again. It's another few seconds before I realize why that just happened.

"So with your swollen lips and my swollen heart

They work together to make me fall apart

This love may be different, yet all in the same

Why do you play with me? Screw this game

I want you here, I want you now

Get in my bed, I'll show you how

I'd love to spill it all right here

Problem is, you'll never hear it

Come on, baby, don't be afraid

Take my hand, let me show you the way

Kiss me hard or kiss me soft

Either way, you're gonna get off—"

The chord is still echoing through the speakers as I spin around and slam my palms against the door to out back. The sound from Garen's guitar cuts out abruptly and I hear him yanking the cord out of the amp and handing off his guitar to one of the other guys.

"Um, yeah, I'll be right back. Listen to Chris play, alright?" he says quickly into the microphone, and then I hear his boots hit the floor as he jumps off the slightly raised platform we use on open mike nights. I slam the door shut behind myself and head off down the alley. I have no idea where I'm going, but I just know it has to be away from here, after that. *Swollen lips and swollen heart?* Christ. The door bangs open behind me.

"Travis, wait," he says. I spin around to face him, and we almost collide. He reaches out as if to touch me, and I knock his hand away.

"When did you write that?" I demand. His eyes are wide, like he's not sure what he's supposed to say.

"I finished it last night," he says.

"Is it about me?" I ask. He doesn't say anything, just continues to stare at me. Finally, slowly, he nods.

"Christ," I mutter, turning my back to him.

"Oh fuck you, Travis. You weren't supposed to hear it, and anyway, what the fuck do you care if I write a

song about you?" he snaps.

"You keep saying you're pissed at me for sending you mixed signals, but the first time I've heard your voice in a week has been when you were singing a fucking song about me. About *kissing* me, Garen. Did you ever stop to think that maybe someone could figure out it was about me?" I ask.

"They wouldn't have if you didn't storm off like a fucking five year old after the song was over," he says. I shove him away from me, but he barely moves. My hands are shaking too much to really get a grip on his shoulders.

"You're a hypocrite, you know that?" I say, letting my gaze drop to the pavement.

"Like you can talk about that. You're all over me on Halloween, and the next morning it's like I don't fucking exist to you," he says.

"I told you when it happened that it was a one night thing," I reply.

"Bullshit," he says so forcefully that my eyes snap back up to his face. "We both know it wasn't. If it was just a one night thing, you wouldn't have flipped your shit so badly back there. If it was just a one night thing, you wouldn't have made such a big fucking deal about it. And if it was just a one night thing, you wouldn't want to do it again."

"I *don't* want to do it again," I say. In a second, his hands are sliding up my arms and across my shoulders to knot in my hair as he turns me so my back is pressed up against the brick wall.

"Then stop me," he says. I don't. He kisses me firmly on the lips, pressing his entire body forward so it's flat against mine. I have no idea what to do, so I just grip the front of his t-shirt, anchoring him in place. He leans his head back slightly.

"The song? The parts about, about kissing you? Nothing but compliments, seriously, I—"

I cut him off by yanking his head back down to mine and he leans into me again. I slide my hands down his chest and up under the hem of his shirt onto his stomach. He shivers, and I finally remember that it's forty degrees, at the most. I pull my sleeves down over my hands and rub the fabric over his stomach. He lowers his hands to my waist, then my hips. I press forward against him, and he grins against my mouth, and that's when I realize that if he offered, I would have sex with him. Right here, in forty degree weather, up against the building where I work, fifteen feet away from a door that can open at any second. Oh God. I pull back sharply.

"Fuck. What's the reason now?" he whispers. I shake my head.

"I, I can't. I um... I—"

He shakes his head and releases me.

"No, you don't have to explain. Really. I get it," he says. He squeezes his eyes shut for a few seconds, then pushes off and turns back toward the door.

"Hey," I say. My fingers drop down, wrapping around Garen's wrist and tugging it gently. My mouth is on his almost before he's done turning, and he leans into it on instinct, one hand coming to rest on my chest and the other cradling the back of my head. The kiss lasts a few seconds before he pulls back.

"What was that for?" he asks. His eyes are closed and I slip a hand around to settle in the small of his back.

"For me," I say. He bites down on his lower lip, and I'm not sure if that's good or bad. A second later, though, his eyes are open and he smiles slightly.

"Good," he says. He keeps his eyes locked on mine as we kiss again, which straddles the line between creeping me out and turning me on. It's intimidating, and sort of intense. His eyes are, for lack of a better word, beautiful. Dark, dark green, like the color of moss, and his lashes are so long I can almost feel them brush my face when he blinks. My hands are slowly sliding down from his back into dangerous territory, and I root them in place. If he's not going to keep a clear head, I am. Which is really, *really* hard to do when he's doing this. I slip a hand into his and squeeze. He squeezes back and slowly, almost reluctantly, he tilts his head back a little. Suddenly, a crash of cymbals sounds from inside the coffee shop, and Garen's eyes widen.

"Fuck. The band," he says. He moves to head back inside, and I pull him backwards so his back is against my chest and my head is on his shoulder.

"Exactly. Fuck the band," I say, and I lick a strip up the side of his neck.

"Fuck," he groans, twisting out of my arms. "I can't. I've been out here long enough, and Chris only knows so many lyric-less songs, you know?"

"Yeah. Got it," I say with a nod. He hooks a finger in my belt loop and drags me forward.

"Later, okay?" he says. I nod, and he gives me one last chaste kiss before ducking back into the building. I decide to wait outside for a few more minutes, so as not to arouse any more suspicion than we already have. Also, to give myself time to wrap my head around the fact that I think I just made a make-out date with Garen.

Chapter Eight

The shift goes on for another forty-five minutes according to the clock on the wall. According to my brain, however, it's another five years before I'm finally allowed to grab my jacket and backpack from the back room and toss a hurried goodbye over my shoulder to Miles, who is still focused on fixing the coffee machine, as Garen drags me out of the building, one hand laced with mine and the other holding his guitar case. I almost trip over the doorstep in my haste to get outside, and by the time I'm steadying myself, Garen is half-dropping his guitar case on the ground and bending me back onto the hood of his car to kiss me. I kiss him back for a total of seven seconds, my hands knotted in his hair and my feet barely touching the pavement, before I remember that the entire front wall of The Grind is glass. I yank my head back and focus my gaze back in the building. Garen's bandmates are still at the platform, watching us and laughing, like they're not really surprised.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, Garen, get off me," I say. Garen glances over his shoulder to see what I'm looking at, and rolls his eyes.

"Travis, it's not like this is a shock to them, okay? And they don't even go to our school, so you don't have to worry about it getting around town," he says.

"Except that we're making out on the hood of your car in front of one of the most frequented places to eat in Lakewood," I say. He blinks.

"Right. That. Well, it's dark, isn't it?" he says.

"And Miles is still in the building. He's like, thirty feet away from us at this exact second," I point out. "Also, the car is kind of uncomfortable."

Garen finally straightens up and extends a hand to help me up. I take it, and he pulls me around the side of the car to the passenger door. He opens it and leans in to toss the case into the backseat, then moves out of the way so I can get in. He shuts the door and goes around to his side. As soon as he's within reach, I seize a handful of his jacket and pull him back towards me. His eyes are closed, but mine remained fixed to the side, out the windshield into The Grind. All it would take is for Miles to turn his head just for a second, and it would all be shot to hell.

"How fast can you drive?" I ask against his lips.

"Under these circumstances? It would not be an exaggeration to say our speed would be well into the triple digits," he replies. He shifts into reverse and backs out of the space. He wasn't kidding, I soon realize. The streets of Lakewood are as empty as ever, which is lucky, since I'm almost positive Garen's foot is flattened. It takes six minutes to get to the house instead of fifteen, and then he eases into the driveway and turns off the car.

"Um... damn," I say. Garen grins at me, and he twists around to get his guitar case out of the back seat. I get out and follow him to the front door. He unlocks it with one hand, reaching out with the other to raise my hand so he can check the time on my watch.

"Eleven after nine. Shit. They're home then, right?" he asks. I nod.

"Yeah. Mom gets home at seven thirty on Fridays, I think," I say.

"Fuck," Garen mutters. He opens the door and steps in past me, dropping his keys on the table next to the door. I lower my backpack onto the floor and shrug out of my jacket.

"Mom, we're home," I call. There's no response. "Mom?"

Still nothing. I head for the kitchen, which is empty. There's a note on the refrigerator.

Travis Garen,

Bill and I are going out to a movie and then dinner. We'll be back around ten thirty. Bree is spending the night at Shannon's house. Please try not to fight or break anything while we're out.

Love,

Mom

I spend about five seconds staring in disgust at the fact that she refers to herself as "Mom" to Garen, and then it hits me. I check my watch again. Nine twelve now. One hour, eighteen minutes. I grab the note and dart back into the living room. Garen is leaning against the back of the couch, and I tackle him back over it onto the cushions.

"Travis, what are you—"

"Mom and Bill at dinner until ten thirty, Bree at friend's house for night," I say. Apparently when it comes to situations like this, Garen is disturbingly fast with processing, because he's kissing me almost before I'm done speaking. I attempt to put my hands on the cushion on the sides of his head, but there isn't enough room, and one hand slips off. Jesus, this won't work.

"Yours or mine?" I ask.

"What?" he says. I jerk my head to the stairs.

"Your room or mine?" I clarify. He snorts.

"Fuck that. Right here," he says. I shake my head.

"Nope. They might come home early," I reply. I roll off him and pull him back up to his feet. It's almost impossible to get up the stairs, because Garen won't stop kissing me, which I guess puts stock in his "right here" suggestion. But the one time he does manage to get me lying down, the stairs are digging into my back, which is about as comfortable as it sounds. I yank him up the rest of the stairs and he throws open my bedroom door. I reach to close it, but then his lips are on my neck, which is pretty distracting. I leave the door open instead and pull him back towards my bed. There are books scattered all over it, and Garen shoves a few out of the way before sprawling out on his back near the pillows. I tangle one hand in his hair as I kiss him, and use the other to shove the books onto the floor. The bed is finally clear, and we both shift so we're lying a bit more normally.

"You're a bit—oh, fuck, do that again—"

I press my hips down onto his again, and he arches his back to press his body flush against mine.

"I'm a bit what?" I ask.

"A bit more enthusiastic than last time," he finishes. He sits up and I move with him, nestling my knees on the sides of his hips so I'm seated almost comfortably in his lap.

"I know," I say. He cuts me off by wrestling me down onto the mattress and kissing me. I laugh into his mouth, and he just parts his lips, like he's swallowing my amusement. As soon as I start to reciprocate, he moves down to my neck. I hum contentedly as he kiss my throat gently, and then he bites down.

"Jesus! You fucker," I say, laughing, and I force him onto his back. He grins up at me. I brush the razored, wispy spikes away from his forehead, and he leans up to nip at my lower lip, and I decide it can't get much better than this.

My cell phone goes off. I jump and pull it quickly out of my pocket. Garen moves to take it from me and I lean away, but he manages to fight it away from me anyway.

"Travis can't come to the phone right now, he's busy," he says by way of introduction. My heart stops.

"What the fuck? Give me my phone, Garen," I demand. He shakes his head and I pry his fingers off the phone.

"Sorry," I say immediately.

"Travis?" The voice—Faye's, I think—is way too loud, and I jump again. In the struggle, one of us must have hit the speakerphone button. "Are you there?"

"No," Garen says loudly, and I clamp a hand down on his mouth.

"Yeah, I am! Sorry, that was Garen," I say.

"Oh. What are you guys doing?" Faye asks. I look over at Garen, who quirks an eyebrow in a completely unhelpful way.

"Fighting," I say finally. "As usual. He was supposed to be helping me for the AP History test I have on Wednesday."

"Reluctantly, I might add," Garen says loudly. He's anything but reluctant, though, when it comes to trying to take my shirt off. I fight his hands off and pin them onto the mattress above his head with one hand. He struggles to get back to his task, and I flatten myself on top of him to anchor him in one spot.

"So I take it you guys still aren't getting along?" Faye asks. She sounds like she's laughing, and I pray that the heavy breathing and movement from our end sounds like fighting. Garen grins his hips upward against mine in an experimental half-twist. Oh Jesus. Instant hard-on, just add Garen.

"No, Faye, we're doing great!" I say. My voice sounds like I'm being strangled, and Garen does it again. I hold the phone as far away as possible and lean down to his into his ear, "Knock it off."

"You don't need your dick to talk to your friend, so it's not like I'm stopping you from having a conversation," he whispers.

"Yes you are," I mutter. I untangle myself from him and scramble off the bed. I straighten my clothes and step out into the hall slightly. God, how do I get this off speakerphone? I can't find the button, and settle for just turning my body away from where Garen is still sprawled on the bed.

"Sorry, Faye, really. He's just... being an ass," I say.

"I kind of figured that," she laughs.

"Did you need something, or are you just checking in?" I ask.

"I'm calling to wish you a happy birthday, you idiot. Or did you forget it was the eleventh?" she asks.

"Almost did. And thanks," I say.

"So, you're going to come over tomorrow night, right? All of us want to celebrate the big one-seven, since you're the last one of us who's turning it. End of an era, and all that stuff. We would've kidnapped you tonight, but Miles said Jerry would've fired both of you if you hadn't come in on an open mike night," she says.

"Yeah, he would've. I'll uh, I'll have to check my work schedule later and see if I'm free tomorrow," I say.

"Again, I kind of figured that. God, Travis, your entire life is just that job. If we get you fired, will you hang out with us more?" Faye asks.

"No, I'll just hate you guys."

"Oh. Damn. So, other than you not having a life, what's up?" she asks. I hear Garen sigh behind me, and then he pushes past to head back into his own room.

"Um, nothing, really. Can I call you back later? Or, better yet, tomorrow? I kind of have to study now," I say quickly.

"Okay. Have fun with that," Faye says. Her voice has a slight lilt to it, like she's seconds away from telling me that she knows something I don't know. Before I have time to respond, she hangs up. I close my phone and toss it back into my room before heading into Garen's. He's lying on his bed with his headphones on, gazing out the window. I shut the door behind myself and reach over to take his headphones off.

"What are you listening to?" I ask.

"Motion City Soundtrack. Nothing you'd like, since you're a creep and hate music," he says, grinning slightly. He suddenly snaps his fingers and points at me. "That reminds me. Go look in the closet," he says. I stare at him.

"Is that a joke?" I ask. He blinks at me for a second, then rolls his eyes and nods towards the closet.

"No, you fucking idiot, I literally want you to go look in the closet. Hearing that conversation reminded me that I hadn't given you your present," he says.

"Okay, please tell me *that's* the joke," I say. He sighs in frustration and rolls off the bed. He kicks open the closet door and grabs a wrapped box off the top shelf.

"Sometimes I seriously wonder about you," he says, holding the box out to me as he sits back down next to me on the bed. I take the box without comment and tear off the paper. I blink, first at the box, then at him.

"You didn't seriously just do this," I say in disbelief. He shrugs.

"I told you I was going to. I distinctly remember saying I was going to get you it," he says.

"You also said you were going to get me strippers and a life," I point out.

"And I still believe you need both. But this is less noticeable," he says. He shrugs again and starts unpacking the box. "I also took the liberty of uploading some songs onto it. I figured even if there was some stuff you wanted to put on there, it wouldn't take up all the space."

I stare down at the iPod, turning it over in my hands. Compared to the nothing I've gotten from everyone else, it's my best birthday present by default. Odds are, though, it'd be best even if I *had* gotten something else.

"Thanks," I say. I extend an arm, and Garen hesitates, like he's not sure what I want him to do. It's my turn to roll my eyes now, and I pull him forward into an awkward one armed hug. Even after I turn my attention to carefully packing the iPod back up, he lets his arm linger around my waist. I close the lid on the box and set it aside on his nightstand.

"Thank you," I repeat, and I kiss him this time. He smiles.

"Consider it the best birthday present you've gotten thus far," he says. He kisses me once more on the lips. He waits a second after pulling away, just to see if I'll lean back in. When I don't move, he squeezes his eyes shut and stands up. My heart slams violently against my rib cage. Things with Garen are never constant. They never have been. This could be my only chance, and I'd rather take it now than spend the rest of my life knowing I was too chickenshit to just go for it. I snag the sleeve of his shirt and swallow hard, staring up at him.

"What if I want something else?" I ask. He holds my gaze for at least ten seconds before he laughs and looks quickly away.

"You should learn to pick your words better, Travis. You almost sound like you're propositioning me," he says. I stand up and raise my hands to his face, holding him still as I kiss him with pretty much everything I've got. I finally pull back, just barely.

"I am," I say. Garen lets out a short breath and glances to the side.

"Travis," is all he says.

"Garen. It's not like I'm on crack. I'm perfectly aware of what I'm saying here," I say. He laughs.

"I really, really doubt that," he says. I reach back and grab the back of my shirt and tug it up over my head, tossing it to the side, where it lands on his desk chair.

"Stop acting like you're so much more experienced than me," I order. His eyes move slowly up and down my chest before focusing on my face again.

"I *am* so much more experienced than you," he points out. I cross my arms.

"Well, pretend," I say shortly. He laughs at that and reaches out to drag me forward by my belt loops. He lets his forehead drop onto my shoulder and just stays there for a minute. I reach up and grab the collar of his shirt.

"If it doesn't matter to me, why does it matter to you?" I ask. I'm appalled to realize my voice sounds self

conscious and nervous again. God, no wonder he--

"It doesn't," he says finally, decisively.

"It what?" I ask. He leans his head back and cocks it to the side.

"Doesn't. It doesn't matter to me. I just don't want you to end up wishing you'd never laid your eyes or hands on me," he says. I shake my head.

"Won't," I say. I slip a hand under the hem of his t-shirt and stroke his abs for a second before pushing the shirt higher up until he raises his arms up and lets me pull it off. Once it's discarded, he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me so our chests are flush against each other. Skin on skin. He tugs me back towards the bed and I lean my weight against him to push him back onto it. His hand goes to my belt buckle, and everything suddenly seems Technicolor. This is real, this is happening, and this is Garen's hand undoing my pants.

It's only then that I start shaking. I clench every muscle in my body, praying that'll make it stop, but it doesn't help. Garen has to feel it when he touches me. There's no way he can't. But regardless, he doesn't mention it, just rolls me over onto my back. I'm only mentally aware of two things at this point—his hand in my jeans and his lips on my throat—but physically, everything is twice as noticeable to me as it had been before. I try to focus on keeping my breathing steady and not thrusting up into his hand, but it's nearly impossible, and I find I'm either breathing or not moving, and I can't actually seem to link the two actions. I try not to arch up against Garen's mouth as he brushes a soft line of kisses down my chest, but I soon figure out that that's pretty much impossible too. My entire body is going against what I'm telling it to do, but I don't mind nearly as much as I think I should.

Discussing the matter clinically... blowjobs are both exactly what I expected and the complete opposite. Garen's mouth is just as warm and wet as I'd assumed it would be, but I'm still not prepared for it. Not at all. I'm not trying to stay in control anymore, because I'm pretty much not aware of the fact that I'm *out* of control. Even though there's the usual chorus of thoughts in my head—he's Bill's son, our parents could come home at any second, did he put a condom on me or not, he's a guy—I'm not fixated on any particular one. I'm just absorbed in the way his fingertips are stroking my hipbones gently, the way his head is slowly bobbing up and down, the way for just a few seconds at a time I can feel him swallow around the head of my cock, taking me deeper than I'd thought he would. I'm not sure exactly how long I last, but when I come, Garen's fingers press a little harder on my hips so I won't choke him when I arch up. I'm only sort of aware of him sliding up to lie next to me. It takes me a few minutes to come back down, but when I do, I start thinking about so many things at once that I wish I was still just basking in the afterglow of orgasm.

It's around this time that I remember that the previous activity was entirely one-sided. Fuck. I may be starting to accept the attraction to another guy, but no way in hell am I going to actually *blow* another guy. I can't. Not now. I survey Garen's face for a moment. His eyes are closed, not staring at me expectantly like I'd kind of predicted. He doesn't expect me to reciprocate at all, but I can't just be like "Thanks for the blowjob, see you later."

Slowly, I inch my way closer to him and touch his stomach gently.

"Hey," I say softly. Garen opens one eye to look at me.

"Yeah?" he says. I lick my lips, just for something to do, then lean over and kiss him. He kisses me back lazily, not at all with the need and greed we both had earlier. I gently lower one shaking hand to the front of his jeans, and I hear him inhale sharply. I can do this. I know I can. Okay, maybe not a blowjob, but

something. Just like doing it to yourself, only now it's to someone else instead. I ease his fly down, and the sound is louder than I'd thought it would be, almost making me jump. Then I hear the crunch of tires on the driveway.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" Garen groans loudly. I laugh, but it kind of catches in my throat.

"I'll get you later, okay? I, I obviously, you know, can't. Not now, I mean. But later? Tomorrow?" I say.

"Tomorrow you're going over Faye's house," he reminds me.

"At night," I point out. He makes a sound in his throat and I snort. "What, you're too good to get a blowjob during the day?"

"No, actually, I'll pretty much take any blowjob I can get. But..." He makes the sound again and rolls onto his stomach. The front door opens downstairs.

"Boys! Are you home yet?" Bill calls.

"Yeah," I say loudly, and Garen seems to do the same, only his response is muffled by the pillow pressed against his face. I kiss the back of his neck softly.

"Later. I promise," I whisper.

"You better," he replies, lifting his head just enough so I can hear him. I laugh again and roll off the bed, heading back for my room. I pause by the door.

"Garen?" I say. He turns his head to the side so he's actually looking at me again.

"Yeah?" he says.

I bite my lower lip in almost perfect imitation of him and say, "Best birthday present ever."

Chapter Nine

I'm awake by ten on Saturday morning, but I don't get out of bed. I lie there and stare at the ceiling, trying to process everything. I had sex last night. Sort of. At least, it was a type of sex. I know it still counts, because I've gotten at least eight different "oral sex is real sex" lectures from health class. But... I *had* it. With *Garen*. So I'm gay.

Except I can't be.

Except I sort of am. I just had sex with a guy last night, and he's not the first one I've liked, is he? I can verify that definitively. God, how many hours did I spend staring at Miles the first day I had to sit behind him in English, having to clench my hands together to stop myself from reaching out and stroking the back of his neck, right where his dark brown skin peeked out from under the collar of his shirt? How often did I knock over my water glass from nervousness back when Bree's first boyfriend, Jake, came over for dinner? There's no other way to explain it, and at the same time, there's no way to explain how in the first week of sophomore year, Billy Stuart beat the shit out of me for getting to second base with his girlfriend at a party. Gay guys don't get to second with cheerleaders. They just don't, but I did. Therefore, that negates the gay. Right?

I eventually roll out of bed and shuffle down the hall to the bathroom. It's cold and empty, just like the rest of the house seems to be. Once I'm in the actual shower stall, the monotonous sound of the water streaming down onto my head does nothing to quell the annoying epiphany that seems to be trying to take place, even though I'm not sure it should be taking place.

To distract myself, I start to hum softly. One of the songs Garen uploaded onto my iPod. I can't remember the name, even though I listened to it on repeat for at least an hour last night. I don't actually *care* about the name, because the only reason I listened to it that much is because the singer's voice reminds me of Garen's. My own godawful humming is bastardizing the song, but it's better than thinking.

By the time I finish my shower, get dressed, do some actual studying for my history test, and go downstairs, it's well past noon. I pop a piece of bread in the toaster and pour my pills out onto the counter to count them while I wait for it. There aren't many left, and I scrawl a note on the Post-It pad by the phone so I remember to call in another prescription. The toast pops and I eat half of it so I can take my pills. As I'm dropping the rest into the trash, my cell phone sounds off in my pocket.

"Hello?" I say.

"You know how you hate surprises?" Faye asks by way of greeting.

"Yes," I reply warily.

"Well, we're all standing on your front step. Surprise!" she says. I laugh.

"It's a good thing you guys respect my wishes. I wouldn't want you to be complete morons and do something you know I hate," I say. I head for the front door anyway. The second I open it, Faye flings herself on top of me.

"Happy not your birthday!" she cheers. I grin at her.

"Thank you, Faye," I say. Corey is the next one over the threshold, and he holds up his hands.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do that too," he says. I force a laugh and quickly shut the door after Nicole,

Blaire, and Miles all crowd in.

"So, you guys probably have something in mind for why you're here? Invading my life? Entering my home without permission or warning? And giving me no chance to actually kick you out?" I ask. Faye punches my arm.

"Shut up. We went through all this planning of how we'd actually convince you to let us in, and you shouldn't be an ass about. And of course we have plans. And here they are." She produces a boxed DVD set.

"Season one. Wow. You haven't made me watch that eighty thousand times at all," I say. I am immediately smacked with the entire first season of *21 Jump Street*. "Stop hitting me, it was a joke," I protest. They follow my escape to the kitchen and all eventually take seats around the table. I lean back against the counter instead of taking the last seat.

"How come we only ever get together to watch his movies?" Corey asks, nodding at the DVD set again.

"Because he is wonderful and perfect in all ways, shapes, and forms," Faye supplies, stroking Johnny Depp's two-dimensional face.

"...says my girlfriend as she sexually assaults a cardboard picture," Miles adds. Faye grins and tilts her head up to give him a consolatory kiss. In a stunning display of the worst timing ever, out of the corner of my eye, I see Garen appear in the doorway. Shirtless. Well, that's just perfect. He's rubbing his eyes in a way that shows he's way too tired to actually want to be up, and his hair is sticking up in slightly-curved spikes. I have to fight the urge to reach out and run my fingers through it. He looks around the room, then heads for the coffee pot. Which I quickly realize is right next to me. Garen measures out the grounds and the water, then switches the machine on and leans against me, his forehead resting on my shoulder.

"Who are they and why are they so loud at ungodly hours of the morning?" he asks.

"They're my friends, which you should know because you've met them all. And it's noon," I protest. He makes an unintelligible sound and shifts so even more of his weight is on me.

"They woke me up. Kill them," he says. The sentence trails off into a yawn, and I have to work to keep myself from grinning like a fool. He's fucking adorable. And my friends are still sitting right in front of me. I cough and shrug my shoulder.

"They're here to celebrate my birthday," I say. He leans back and frowns.

"They were going to come tonight," he says.

"They decided to surprise me," I say with a grin. He quirks an eyebrow and reaches around me for a mug.

"That was very cute of them," he says. He stirs a spoonful of sugar into the cup of coffee and takes an experimental sip. He seems satisfied, because he touches my stomach once and heads for the door. "I'll be upstairs. Don't burn the house down, children."

"We're not children," Blaire says. I look over at her, but she's not looking at me. Her gaze is fixed on Garen, her eyes squinted slightly. Fuck. She must know. She wouldn't be looking at him that way otherwise.

"Right, you're all seventeen. I remember now. I just gave Travis his present last night," he says. Blaire's

eyes narrow even more, and Garen flashes her a bright smile. "Call if you need me," he adds, and heads back upstairs. As soon as his bedroom door slams, everyone turns to me.

"What the hell?" Corey asks with a laugh. I grin as well. That's right, laugh it off, make it go away.

"I have no idea. He's been doing shit like that since we moved--"

"Wait, so he's gay? Like, seriously gay?" Nicole interrupts. I glance around at them, but they're all watching me, so there's no way I can get out of answering. Slowly, I nod.

"Uh, yeah, I guess. Gay, bi, something," I say. Nicole wrinkles her nose.

"Wow. Definitely never would've figured him for a homo with biceps like *that*," she says, laughing. I feel my reaction all over my face. I have no idea what the hell it is, or what I might actually look like, but I know I'm practically contorted with whatever I'm thinking.

"Nicole!" Faye hisses. When my eyes snap over to meet hers, I realize she's looking at me without trying to look at me. And that's when I realize that if Blaire didn't know before, Faye definitely does now. And how could she not? Everything I spilled to her that day in the cafeteria, what she must've heard on the phone, and what Garen was just acting like? She knows. Oh god no.

"Are you alright, man?" Miles asks. I wait for whoever he's addressing to reply, but there's silence. I finally look at him and realize he's staring back at me.

"What, me? Yeah, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" I ask. He shrugs and gets up. Faye quickly follows suit and grabs the DVDs.

"Let's go upstairs, okay?" she says, and leads us all up the stairs and into my room. My hand is gripping the railing, then pushing my door open, then grabbing a pillow off my bed to toss down to Corey as he sprawls across the floor. I know my hand is moving, and I know it's making contact with things, but I don't feel it. I don't feel anything, because my entire body is numb. My mind too, apparently, because I can't really distinguish the difference between Faye putting the first DVD in the machine and her boxing up the set, even though there must be at least nine hours between the two. I watch in silence as everyone gets up and stretches and makes their way to the door. Faye hesitates right next to me, and then reaches out.

"Happy birthday," she says. I stand up and let her fold me into her arms. "Do you want me to stay?" she whispers in my ear. I nod without even realizing it, but I can't just take it back as she turns to the others and tells them to go ahead, she's going to stay behind and hang with me some more. It takes another five minutes of coaxing before they finally leave, and once they do, I walk past Faye and shut the bedroom door.

"So do you want me to say it, or do you want to say it for yourself?" she asks. I can't help but laugh.

"Am I really that transparent?" I ask. She shrugs and crosses her arms.

"No. But I've known you since I was about five, Travis. I think I can read you better than most people can," she says. It's true. And fucking annoying. I clear my throat.

"Do I get to say it anyway?" I ask. She nods. I swallow and shrug helplessly and clench my hands into fists and then there's nothing to do except say it.

"I think I'm gay."

It's the first time I've said it out loud. It's the first time I've even really thought it so definitively. But the second it's out, I know it's true. Maybe not all the way, maybe I'm bisexual, but I'm definitely into guys. There isn't really any escaping that.

Faye just looks at me, like she wants to wait to make sure I'm not going to add anything else. When she can tell that my throat has officially closed up and there won't be anything following it, she takes a few steps forward and hugs me again, so tightly I think I'll break.

I do. Faye is at least five inches shorter than me and I'm still leaning at least half my weight on her. My entire body is shaking, and I'm sure she must think it's because I'm crying. I sort of feel like I might, but I don't. I just stand there shaking, clinging to her, until we both step back and sit down on the bed in unison. I turn my head to look at her just as she looks at me, and that's when I see that there are tears in her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" I ask.

"The same reason you are," she replies. I immediately drag my sleeve across my face. I guess I wasn't as good at that "not crying" as I thought. Faye laughs, and so do I, and she shakes her head and shifts so she's completely facing me.

"So this changes everything," she says.

"I know," I say. It comes out much quieter and hoarser than I'd intended. I know it changes everything. I'm not stupid.

"But it'll be okay," she adds. I nod.

"I know," I repeat. No it won't be. We're both aware of that, just like how we're aware of the fag joke Nicole made tonight, and that now I'm going to be the subject of those.

"He's really hot," Faye says finally.

"I know," I say for a third time, and she laughs. She wipes her eyes and takes a deep breath before planting her elbows on her knees and leaning towards me.

"So, I've known for like, weeks that he likes you. And now you like him?" she asks. I feel my face heating up before I even look at her, so there's already no point in lying.

"It's sort of more than that," I say. Her eyes widen to almost twice their natural size.

"What? Uh, details now, please," she orders. I cough.

"He kissed me on Halloween. At Blaire's party. I mean, he didn't know it was me, and he left as soon as he figured it out. But then I went home and we um... sort of made out on his bed for a few hours. And then last night, we..." I trail off, hoping she'll get it. She doesn't, just makes a gesture for me to continue. I gesture back. She stares and shrugs at the same time. I shove her backwards so she flops over onto the pillows. "He blew me, okay?"

Faye flails and practically flies off the bed. "Oh my god!"

"Shut up! It's not that big of a deal!" I hiss.

"Travis, you're doing your freaking stepbrother! I think it's a big deal!" she says. It takes another five minutes for her to calm down.

"It's not that big of a deal," I repeat.

"This is huge. So are you guys like, a couple now?" she asks. I shake my head quickly.

"No. Not at all. Not even a little bit," I say. She gives me a look and I throw my hands up in surrender.

"Well what do you expect? That we do it once and we're suddenly a couple?"

I realize two things immediately after I say this. One, I am speaking way more loudly than is necessary. Two, the door just opened behind me. Garen is standing in the doorway, blinking at me, his eyebrows raised.

"You guys did it?" he asks. I shake my head vigorously.

"No!"

He looks from me to Faye and back again, and then his eyes widen.

"Oh," is all he says. He makes a short "you told her?" type of gesture, and I nod.

"Are you mad?" I ask.

"What? No, of course not," he says quickly.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Travis, it's your choice, I don't care who you tell. I promise," he says.

"Oh, yeah, you guys aren't a couple at all," Faye murmurs.

"Shut up," I say to her, and she grins down at my comforter. I look quickly back at Garen, who is grinning as well.

"Am I the only one who doesn't find this funny?" I ask.

"Um... yeah," Faye says.

"Pretty much," Garen adds. I shake my head and he laughs. "I'll uh, leave you two to your big talk, okay?"

I wait until I hear the door shut behind him and then look back at Faye. She shrugs and looks down at the floor.

"What can I say, Travis? I'm happy for you. If you're happy, that's all that matters. But I can't lie and pretend everything is going to be just fine when the rest of the group finds out. I mean, I think you can guess what Nicole will say to you," she says.

"Does it start with a 'y' and end with a 'ou're a fag'?" I mutter.

"Pretty much. And Blaire is pretty much obsessed with you, so she'll go kill herself, if we're lucky," she

continues.

"Faye," I warn.

"Sorry," she says. I lick my lips and ask the question she's waiting for.

"What do you think Corey will say?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. I don't... I don't think he'll get it. And once he does, I'm not sure he'll be too thrilled about it," she says slowly. I nod. I figured that out for myself. It's one of the things I've been obsessing over lately. My best friend Corey and how he'll react to my queerness. He's completely unpredictable about shit like this; his reaction could be anywhere from never speaking to me again to joining PFFLAG. I have no idea, and I'm not about to try to find out.

"Please don't tell them," I say. She nods quickly.

"Oh, obviously. You'll tell them when you're ready," she says.

"Faye..."

"If you're ever ready," she amends. She stands up and snatches the Jump Street DVDs off the bed. "You know, I really should be heading out now. I'm supposed to be spending the night at Miles' house," she says. I raise my eyebrows and she swats at my arm. "Not like that, pervert. Well, okay, yeah, like that maybe, but that's not the only reason why."

"Yeah, sure. Slut," I say.

"Like you can talk. I'm not the one banging my stepbrother," she says, shoving me back onto my bed.

"That doesn't make me a slut. It makes me open minded," I say.

"Yeah, open minded to having sex with a super hot musician," she says.

"...basically."

Faye laughs, picks up her bag, and heads for the door.

"Faye?" I say just as she opens it.

"What?" she asks, spinning back to face me. I shrug slightly.

"Thanks," I say. She pauses, and I half expect her to ask what for. But after a moment, she just nods once.

"No problem," she says.

Chapter Ten

"Travis, you're not working on Friday, right?" Nicole demands, slamming her tray down onto the table. I look up slowly. It's Monday, and therefore way too early in the week to be slamming shit around and snapping at your friends. Nicole apparently didn't get that memo though, because she just widens her eyes at me a little more.

"Uh, right. Why?" I ask.

"You're going to Junior Ring with Blaire," she says, and she pops open the top of her soda like the matter is settled. I stare.

"What? No, I'm not. I don't even want to go to--"

"Travis! You have to! She doesn't have a date because she's been waiting around and hinting to you, but you haven't noticed because you're retarded. I told her I'd get you to finally ask her," she interrupts.

Shit. The junior ring dance is basically the most important social event of eleventh grade. The entire school goes, paired off like Noah's ark, to spend an entire night trying to catch some of the "best days of our lives" fever the seniors have, and then there's some huge graduation-wannabe ceremony to pass out class rings. Exactly why I didn't want to go. Besides, this is the first Friday night I've had off from work in months, and I'd been planning to spend it pretending to watch a movie with Garen in my room. And now I'm supposed to spend it pretending to give a shit about bonding with my classmates? No fucking way.

"I have plans," I finally say.

"What plans?" Nicole demands. Again. God, take a fucking pill. It works for me.

"I promised Garen I'd hang out with him. Brotherly bonding and all that shit," I say. Faye chokes on her sip of soda, and I kick her under the table.

"You've got the whole rest of the weekend to do brotherly bonding with him. But not Friday. I promised Blaire you'd take her, and if you don't already have a date, you have to," Nicole says.

I do have a date, just not one I can tell her about. Fucking Sophie's choice. I can say fine and condemn myself to a hellish night of pretending to be okay with Blaire trying to make out with me, or I can say no and have everyone in my grade wondering why I'd rather spend time with my mom's boyfriend's gay son than go to a dance with someone who is probably supposed to be one of the hottest girls in school.

"Fine. Fine, whatever. I'll go with her," I say. I hate myself.

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"This entire concept makes me wanna kill myself," I announce. Faye punches my arm hard.

"People with your track record don't get to make those jokes," she says.

"I'm not joking, Faye, look at what I'm wearing!" I say.

"I like the tie," Garen adds. I look over at him. He's lying on his back on my bed, his head hanging off the end of it.

"Shut up," I order.

"No, I'm serious. You look like this waiter I fucked one time," he says. Without even meaning to, I make a low sound in the back of my throat. Garen bursts out laughing.

"Did you just growl?" Faye asks.

"No!" I say, but that's a total lie, so I add, "Shut up."

"Come here," Garen says, beckoning me forward and still laughing. I take a few steps towards him and he stretches his hand out until he can grasp my shoulder and pull me down towards him.

"Faye, turn around," I say. She shakes her head, grinning, but does it anyway. I kneel down so I'm level with Garen, who still hasn't moved, and kiss his upside-down lips. His fingertips sink below the collar of my shirt to stroke the back of my neck, and I shiver and lean back.

"What time is everyone getting here?" I ask.

"I can turn around?" Faye asks. I glance over at her. She's watching us in the mirror with a would-be innocent look on her face.

"Pervert," I say. She smiles.

"I know. They should be here soon. Miles said sometime around seven thirty," she says. She turns around and sits down on my desk chair.

"I still feel sick about this entire situation," I mutter. Garen sits up and spins around to sit Indian-style facing us.

"Come on, it'll be fun. I mean, first of all, you get to spend time with all your classmates, and I know you love them. And second of all, you get to drink spiked punch, which is probably going to lead to much inebriated dancing from Corey and at least two catfights from Nicole. Oh, and third, your favorite part, you get Blaire hanging all over you and acting completely desperate and disgusting because she's a fucking obsessive *whore* who will do anything to get her crazy, sickening, skanky hands on you, and--"

He stops abruptly, looking from me to Faye and then at the floor. "That ended up being more of a rant than I intended."

"Bitter much?" Faye asks.

"Not bitter," Garen says loudly, "just... apprehensive."

"About what?" I ask. He blinks.

"Okay, Travis, did you miss the big speech about the slut-faced whorebag you're bringing around as your date?" he asks.

"She's not... *that* bad," I say. Even as it comes out, I shake my head and change tactic. "Okay, so the whole dance is going to blow, but whatever, it's only a few hours, right?"

"God, Travis, why didn't you just ask Garen?" Faye mutters. I snort and move to stand in front of the mirror.

"That'd go over well. Although I'd definitely be the first guy to bring his stepbrother who he's sleeping with to Junior Ring," I say.

"Point taken," Faye concedes.

"Plus, I have other plans," Garen adds. I frown at his reflection.

"What plans?" I ask. He rolls off the bed and comes to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me back against him.

"Moping," he says, kissing my neck to punctuate the word. "And sulking. Maybe writing some screamo songs about the agony I feel inside because I was abandoned for a school event, of all things. You know, 'Travis left me for a dance, and now I can't get in his pants.'"

"Shut the fuck up," I say. He grins and kisses my neck again.

"I like it, though. I could keep going with that one. I think emo is my calling. 'He left me here, I'm so alone - _'"

"Oh my God, shut up now," I say. The doorbell rings downstairs, and I duck out of his arms. "I hope I wasn't supposed to get her a corsage or something, because I didn't."

"Nicole probably handled that two," Faye says.

"You ever think maybe Nicole is vicariously living out her secret passion for Blaire through you?" Garen asks. Faye and I both stop halfway down the stairs and turn to stare back at him. He shrugs. "Just a thought."

It turns out somebody already supplied all the corsages, so the first problem really encountered is everyone handing their cameras off to Garen and begging him to take a thousand group pictures. He does reluctantly, and ten minutes later, we're all piled into Miles's car and heading towards the school.

"I'm really glad you decided to come tonight," Blaire says to me, smiling brightly.

"Yeah. Me too," I say. It's not that I hate Blaire. Sure, she's annoying sometimes, but she seems sweet enough, I guess. I'd just rather be anywhere else than here having her hold my hand. Luckily, my phone buzzes in my pocket, so I extract my hand from hers and check the newest received text message.

To: Travis

From: Garen's Cell

Message: He left me here, I'm so alone, but luckily he brought his phone / So mopey texts he will receive as I sprawl across his bed and grieve.

I grin. Tonight might not suck that badly after all. *Cute. You spend all this time coming up with that?* I type back. The reply comes a minute later. *No, I spent all this time weeping in a corner. Come home?*

I don't reply, but the texts keep coming for the rest of the car ride, little dirty rhyming phrases. 'Right now you could be getting head / But you went to the dance instead.' And as we arrive at the school and pass through the front doors, I get one last message saying 'I'm betting Blaire is having fun / But I'm also

betting you should run.' So true, I realize as Blaire laces her hand with mine. To her, this dance is the final affirmation that she and I are a couple. To me, it's something that had no real alternative.

She pulls me into place to get our picture taken. The photographer positions her in front of me, and drapes my arms around her waist. She leans back into me and we both grin for the flash. If two years of medication has taught me one thing, it's how to lie.

This is so fucked.

Our group filters into the gymnasium, and I want to be sick. The lights are off, but there are a few colored spotlights stolen from the drama club. A giant disco ball is rotating slowly on the ceiling, the world's tackiest spider in a web of black and white crepe paper streamers. A DJ is set up in the corner of the room, and he puts on some disturbingly romantic Lonestar song. Blaire leans her head on my shoulder.

"Thank you for asking me tonight," she says. I want to point out that I didn't ask her, but instead I just smile at her. She keeps her eyes open too long when she looks at me, and I can just tell she's wondering if she can get me to kiss her yet. Shit.

"Let's dance," I mutter, pulling her out onto the floor. I know how girls like Blaire dance, and once we're on the floor, it's exactly what I'd hoped. She doesn't really put her arms on me. Instead, she sort of curls up against my chest and leans her head against my collarbone. From this angle, there's no way she can kiss me. Now it's just a matter of getting her to stay like this. I turn out to be surprisingly adept at that. Every slow song, Blaire leeches onto my chest. Every fast song, Corey, Miles, and I all protest that we can't dance because we're guys, and we shift back to a table on the side. Two hours into it, the lights come up and Principal Hammond calls us up alphabetically to receive our class rings. When my name is called and Vice Principal Davies slides my ring onto my hand, I guess I should feel some sort of school spirit. I don't at all. I just feel... fake.

"Jesus Christ, is it almost time to go?" I say, moving so only Corey can hear me.

"Dude, I hope so. I've got so many other plans, and they all involve not being here," he says. I nod in agreement. Finally, some sanity. The rest of the names are called in the most mind-numbingly dull non-ceremony ever, and the lights click back off for the last song. Blaire's back in my arms, not even waiting for me to ask this time.

"It's exciting, isn't it? I mean, getting class rings is one of those big high school moments," she whispers after a few minutes.

"Yeah," I reply quietly. "It's great."

This entire night is complete shit. The fact that I'm standing here actually pretending to like Blaire is shit. Having to cancel my original plans is shit. Not being where I want to be and with who I want to be with is shit.

In one swift movement, Blaire picks her head up off my shoulder and presses her mouth to mine.

Shit.

I panic, not knowing if I should pull away or kiss back. I settle for not moving at all, and then she leans all her weight into it, for reasons I can't comprehend. That's not passion, that's force, and she's *forcing* me to make up my mind. Tentatively, I kiss back. Woah, fuck, bad move. Blaire's mouth is open in a second, her tongue probing the inside of my mouth like she's trying to count my teeth. The song ends, the lights flicker

on, and I ease her off of me. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to say something, or at least make some sort of specific gesture. Luckily, I don't have to. Faye appears at my side, her face contorted with emotion.

"We have to go now. It's an emergency," she says, grabbing my elbow. My heart slams.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Come on, I'll tell you on the way," she says. I glance back at Blaire, whose eyes are widened to four times their usual size.

"Bye, Blaire. It was... fun," I say, and I follow Faye out the front door. She races to Miles's car and I clamber into the back seat.

"What's going on?" I demand. Faye glances back at me.

"I was rescuing you," she says. Miles pulls out of the parking lot and stares at me in the rearview mirror.

"Either of you gonna tell me what the hell just happened?" he asks. Faye twists around in her seat to face me, her eyes wide. *Are you telling him?* she mouths. I widen my eyes and mouth back, *Now?* She half-shrugs. Okay. Okay, breathe.

"I'm sort of gay. And sort of sleeping with Garen," I say. Well that's... one way to say it. Miles laughs.

"You serious, man?" he asks. I stare.

"Um, yeah. Thanks for laughing?" I reply.

"Nah, I don't mean it like that. It's just... what do you expect me to say?" he asks. I shrug.

"I don't know. Well... I'm pretty sure you can guess what I thought you'd say," I say. The grin lessens, and he fixes his eyes back on the road. There are a few minutes of silence, then Miles clears his throat again.

"Lakewood's got like, less than eight thousand people. And me, my mom, my dad, and my two sisters... you ever notice we're the only black family in town?" he asks. Of course I noticed. How could I not? It doesn't even have anything to do with racism, as far as Lakewood is concerned. We've got Miles's family, three Hispanic families, and one couple with an daughter they adopted from Beijing. Other than that, the entire town is white. It's impossible to not notice that Miles is black.

"Yeah," I say. Miles shrugs.

"Yeah, I figured you know that. But you know how many times I've been called nigger?" he asks. I stare at him. "A lot. So I'm not gonna act like it's okay for me to be mad when people call me that and then turn around and hate you for just being who you are. I'm not that kind of person. None of us are."

Those last four words are total bullshit, and all three of us know it. Regardless, it helps. I nod.

"Thanks," I say hoarsely.

"I told you everything would be okay," Faye says softly. I nod again.

"But I gotta ask, man. Did you have to pick your damn stepbrother? There's nobody else it could've been?" Miles asks. I grin and shake my head.

"No. Nobody else," I say.

"Then what the hell you doing kissing Blaire Kennedy?" he demands. I groan and lean forward against the headrest.

"I couldn't stop her! One minute we're dancing, then next she's got her tongue down my throat. It was fucking... she's just... she's a *girl*," I say.

"Excuse me?" Faye says loudly, and I roll my eyes.

"You know what I mean. It's just she's not..." I trail off and make a sort of gesture. I can't say it, but I know they both get it. We make the rest of the drive to my house in silence, and once we pull into my driveway, I pause at the door.

"Thanks again," I say. Miles waves me off.

"Don't even play like you still wanna be out here talking to us. You've got a stepbrother to go mess around with," he says. I roll my eyes but head inside anyway.

The house is dead quiet. It's a bit disconcerting after the noise of the dance, so I take the stairs as slowly and quietly as possible. Once I'm at the top, I can hear the faint sound of the television from Mom and Bill's room, coupled with Bree's voice from hers. I pause with my hand on my doorknob, then slowly turn to face Garen's door. It's shut, and there's, surprisingly enough, no music seeping out from underneath. Maybe he's asleep. And maybe I don't care. I need to see him. Right now. After all of the shit of tonight, I need to know I spent the entire time feeling guilty and shitty for a *reason*. I hesitate a moment, then knock softly. A few seconds later, it opens a fraction of an inch. Recognition flashes across the sliver of Garen's face I can see, and he pulls me in, shutting and locking the door behind me.

"How was the-- oh," he says abruptly as I more or less tackle him onto the bed. I plant my knees on the mattress on either side of his hips and lean down to kiss him. It lasts about a minute before I pull back to rest my forehead against his, his face sandwiched between my palms.

"Only you," I say in an almost inaudible voice. He touches my hip in what I'm sure is supposed to be a reassuring way, but it just starts an uncontrollable trembling.

"Only me what?" he asks. I close my eyes.

"Only you... do this," I whisper. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Even once I got involved with him, I was never supposed to think of us like this. Like a couple. Like I was cheating on him if Blaire grabbed me and kissed me. Garen clears his throat, jolting me back to reality, and moves both his arms up around my waist.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course. Likewise," he says. I don't know what to say, but I must make some sort of sound, because he grips me a little tighter and sits up. "Hey. Just you, Travis. I promise. No one else, okay?"

"Okay," I say in something halfway between choking and laughing. He kisses me once more, and I shift off to lie next to him.

"How was the dance?" he asks. I snort.

"Do you even have to ask after that?" I demand. He props himself up on his elbow and widens his eyes at me.

"She tried to kiss you, didn't she?" he asks. I stare, and his eyes widen a little more. "Oh, she succeeded?" I nod. "How was it?"

"Are you kidding me? First, she puckers her lips like a fucking fish, and then she doesn't *kiss* me. Oh, no, because there's a chance that might've actually been good. No, she slams her lips against mine and leans all her weight into it. And don't even get me started on her tongue, because-- it's not funny, so stop laughing right now."

He doesn't, and I try to smother him with a pillow. He finally stops, and I relent, settling comfortably into the crook of his arm.

"So am I better than her, then?" he asks.

"Obviously," I say, and he decides to demonstrate. I yank my school ring off my finger and drop it on the bed.

"Oh, right. That was the whole point of this night of torture," he says.

"Torture for me," I say.

"And me. You think you're the only one who wished you were here instead?" he asks. I smile slightly, and he extends his hand. "Let me see it." I hand him the ring and he examines it carefully for a few minutes.

"I can't picture you wearing a school ring," he says with a slight laugh. He drops it onto my stomach and covers it with his hand. I add my hand to the pile.

"No one even wears them anyway. Or at least, no one wears their own. Just their boyfriend's or girlfriend's or whatever," I say. Garen nods slightly.

"You know Blaire is going to expect yours. And Nicole will beat you to a pulp to get it for her," he says. I smile slightly, but shake my head.

"She can't have it," I say.

"Yeah, maybe then that'll get her to back off," he replies. Slowly, shakily, I slip my hand under his to retrieve the ring and grab his left hand off the mattress to slide it onto his ring finger.

"No. There... there are other reasons," I say. Garen stares at his hand for at least a minute. Fuck. Was this completely wrong? Am I that retarded that I thought this was okay to do?

He untangles himself from me and gets up, heading for the closet.

"This--" It comes out hoarse, and he clears his throat while rummaging around on the top shelf. "This was going to be my present for you. For... for Hanukkah. But I want..."

He trails off and returns to the bed, a small white box in his hand. He holds it out. I take it and open it.

It's a ring. A thin silver band, engraved with some symbols.

"It's Hebrew. It says 'ani l'dodi, v'dodi li'," he says slowly.

"What does it mean?" I ask. He's silent for a second, then shrugs slightly and shifts so he's sitting across from me.

"It means uh... I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," he says finally. I have no idea how to describe the reaction I have to that. My throat constricts so I can't breathe, and my heart starts pounding. I slide the ring onto my finger and grab his hand.

"Kiss me," I say. He does.

Chapter Eleven

"Garen?" I say.

"Yeah?" comes the absentminded reply.

"I'm glad we..." I trail off and hope that my eyes boring into the back of his head will convey everything I'm too scared to actually say out. I see his hands come together and I know he's twisting the ring around his finger yet again, just like I've watched him do every night all through dinner.

"Yeah. Me too," he says. I trace the inscription on the ring. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

"Garen?" I say again. He hums slightly in acknowledgement. "I'm also glad that if I had to hook up with a guy, it was at least a really hot one who gives amazing blowjobs."

He laughs. "Thanks. I think you'll like your bicurious routine even more once we get to the real sex."

It feels sort of like the floor drops out from under me then, like I'm paddling in mid-air while my stomach plummets downward. I swallow hard, wait until he's gone back to his work at the computer. A few minutes later, I say his name again and close my notebook and put it on the floor next to my bed. Garen spins the chair around.

"Yeah?" he says.

"How old were you your first time?" I ask. He smiles slightly and stands up.

"I thought you were gonna end up asking something like that. I should think more before I speak. My first time doing anything, or my first time I officially had real sex?" he asks.

"Real sex," I say. He lies down near me, using my legs as a pillow for his head.

"I was fifteen. Why?" he asks.

"That's young," I say, widening my eyes at him. He nods.

"I know. Why do you ask?" he repeats. I shrug.

"I don't know. Will you tell me about it?"

He's silent for a few minutes, then pulls me down so we're side by side, sharing a pillow.

"It was in April. My freshman year at Patton. My best friend James was my roommate at the time, and we were outside all day, you know, screwing around with a football or whatever. We were both covered in mud, and when we got back to the room, we had a fight over who got to shower first. I won, so in retaliation, he tackled me when I got out. We went from playful wrestling to me fucking his brains out, and I'm not quite sure how we made the leap. But it's not like I regret it, 'cause he was the best person I guess it could've been with, otherwise I probably wouldn't be the same as I am now," he says. I roll onto my stomach and mumble it into the pillow.

"What?" he asks. I lift my head up.

"I said, I want you to be my first," I repeat, and I drop my head back onto the pillow.

"Seriously?" he says. I nod, and he kisses my cheek. Surprise, surprise, he doesn't get it. I sit up.

"Garen?" I say.

"Yeah?" he replies. I straddle his hips and brush my fingertips against his belt buckle.

"I don't want to wait anymore," I say. He stares up at me.

"You're not serious," he says. I reach down to shakily push his hair out of his face.

"Yeah, I am. Why, do you not want..." I falter. He rolls out from under me and stands up.

"What time is Ev getting home?" he asks. I shrug.

"A few hours, I guess. Around nine thirty."

"And Bree?"

"She's at her boyfriend's house until curfew. So, elevenish."

Garen nods, then adds, "Dad's out of town."

I shrug. He takes my hand and pulls me across the hall into his room.

"I want to know if you're positive you want this," he says.

"I am," I say firmly. He reaches back and grabs the back of his t-shirt, pulling it up and over his head.

"Still?" he asks. I nod, and almost to confirm, I pull off my own shirt. This is real, this is happening. Garen steps forward so we're almost touching.

"Still?" he asks again. I nod again. He kisses me, just barely, and reaches for the button of my jeans. Fifteen seconds of fumbling later, and the button's undone, the zipper is down, and I'm painfully hard.

And he's shaking all over.

"Fuck," he breathes. I stroke his jaw gently.

"What's up? I thought I was supposed to be the nervous virgin here," I say. He nods.

"I know, I know," he mutters. I cock my head to the side.

"Then why are you shaking?" I ask. He swallows thickly, then forces a weak smile.

"Because I'm afraid you won't respect me in the morning?" he says. I stare. I can't tell if he's kidding or not, so I just reach around him to turn on the stereo.

"What's this?" I ask. He grins, back to normal, back in his element.

"'How to Be Dead' by Snow Patrol," he answers, backing me towards the bed. I bob my head like that means anything to me.

"Good song to lose my virginity to?" I ask. He kisses me.

"Yeah. But this one's better," he says. He turns to the computer and starts up a song on iTunes as he turns off the stereo.

"What's this?" I ask, lying back on the bed.

"'Love Song.' The Cure," he replies. He leans over me and I pull him down on top of me. The feel of his skin against mine is entirely new, even though I'm familiar with him just being on me. He kisses me lazily, his hips grinding down against mine in slow, agonizing, perfect circles. I might whimper, but I'm not exactly sure. I stroke his chest down to his jeans and undo the zipper. He tugs on my beltloops and I raise my hips so he can pull the jeans down and off. I push at his jeans with trembling hands.

"Are you okay?" he whispers. *Déjà vu*.

"Why do you always ask that when we do anything for the first time?" I ask.

"Because you shake so much it looks like you're having a seizure," he replies. I snort.

"Trust me, I'm not. Can you stop ruining the moment and fuck me now?" I ask. He nods and rolls off the bed, and I raise my eyebrows. "Um, Garen? I don't doubt that you've got a big cock, but I think you're gonna have to be a little closer if—"

"You know, you can fuck *yourself* if you don't stop giving me mouth," he interrupts. he opens his desk drawer and rummages around in it.

"I thought you'd enjoy getting mouth," I say. He smirks at me and finally finds what he was looking for. He returns to the side of the bed with a small tube and a square foil packet.

"You know, the best part about having sex with you is going to be finally getting you to shut up," he says. Off come the jeans.

"If that's going to be the best part, you're doing it wrong," I reply. Off come his boxers. I stare.

"Trust me, Travis. I definitely do it right," he says. I nod.

"I'm gonna believe you with that," I say. He grins and climbs back onto the bed.

"Also, I think you underestimate how much you talk. You need some help with those, or can you handle it yourself?" he asks, nodding to my boxers.

"I can handle it," I say.

"Then I guess you don't need me," he shoots back. I stick my tongue out at him and shift so the blankets are covering me before I slip off my boxers. Garen rolls his eyes.

"Travis, I've had it in my mouth and now I can't even see it?" he says.

"Well, sorry if I'm not an exhibitionist like you," I retort. "You know, if we had sex even half as much as we fight, we'd be a lot better off."

"I think my dad once said the same thing to my mom," he says. I wrinkle my nose.

"Okay, you do not get to mention Bill while I'm naked. Are you *trying* to make me soft?" I demand. He grins and slips under the blankets next to me, kissing my collarbone softly.

"I haven't had sex under blankets in like, two years. I can't believe you're making me do this. You're such a girl," he says. I wrestle him down onto the mattress and pin his arms above his head.

"I am not a girl," I say firmly. Garen's eyes slide shut and his head lolls back.

"Mm, you keep wriggling like that and I'm gonna come before we actually get anywhere," he murmurs. I hook my legs around his and roll onto my back, pulling him on top of me and settling him between my knees.

"Then let's get somewhere," I say.

"Are you sure?" he asks. As he says it, he grabs the condom and the tube of lube from off the blanket next to me. I nod and close my eyes.

"Just do it," I say. He kisses me, whispering against my lips, words I can't listen closely enough to hear. The lube, I immediately discover, is freezing fucking cold. I inhale sharply.

"Relax," Garen whispers in my ear, one, then two fingers in me. I feel myself tensing up automatically, and it hurts about as much as I'd suspected having someone's fingers up my asshole would. "I'll stop if you want me to."

"No," I say quickly. "don't stop. Just go slow."

"Okay. I-if I hurt you, just—"

Right in the middle of his sentence, his fingers do something or touch something that just *clicks*. I throw my head back and let out a groan from deep in the back of my throat.

"Oh fuck, whatever you just did, fucking—unh— do it again," I breathe.

"I can think of something better," he murmurs. I concentrate on trying to keep my breathing steady – which is almost impossible, and just succeeds in making me light-headed – and nod.

"Okay," I say. He tears open the condom wrapper with his teeth and kisses me as he rolls it down over his cock.

"Are you ready?" he asks. I lick my lips and nod, reaching up to grip the headboard.

Slowly, he pushes in. I start breathing in time to the rhythm of his hips. In, out, in, out. I relax as much as I can, which is still almost not at all, and after a minute, the dull pain starts to lessen. I hesitantly open my eyes, and... oh God. Garen's hands are braced on the pillow on either side of my head, his arms straight so he's leaning over me. His eyes are squeezed shut, his lips slightly parted, his hair forming a messy halo of spikes around his face. I grab his shoulders and pull him down to kiss me. "Harder," I whisper. I wrap my legs around his waist, thrust up to meet him. He pushes the hair away from my face and kisses me again, still whispering into my mouth. I release the headboard to wrap my arms around him. My nails are digging into his back, probably leaving long red lines that would be impossible to explain if anyone saw them. He lets out a deep gravelly moan against my mouth, and he's hitting me at just the right angle.

I come and less than thirty seconds later, he follows, his whole body shaking and tensing. The movement of his hips doesn't stop immediately; it slowly lessens until it just sort of dies down. I'm still trembling, and I'm soaked in sweat, and I know that tomorrow I'm going to be so fucking sore. It all feels sort of perfect, and I'm pretty sure it must be unreal. Garen carefully pulls out of me and shifts off. He stands up after a minute to get rid of the condom, then returns to sprawl down next to me.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? I mean, hurt you too much," he says softly. I shake my head and shift to rest my forehead against his shoulder.

"No. It... It hurt, but it's not like it was unbearable," I say. He nods and kisses the top of my head. It's so... intimate. I sit up. "No offense, but do you mind if I, you know, shower?"

He grins and gestures to the door. "Go ahead."

I head for the bathroom and start the water. I'm about to step under the spray when the bathroom door opens. I smile.

"Decide to join me?" I ask.

"I thought you might get lonely," Garen says. I pull him into the stall with me and kiss him. We both wash off the sweat and cum, and right as we're about to get out, we make the entire process pointless. He fucks me a second time, my chest pressed against the tile wall, and after we both come, we finish the shower for real and head back to his room. I pause in the doorway.

"I'll be right back. I should get dressed. It's late," I say. After slight hesitation, he nods. In my room, I quickly pull on clean boxers and sweatpants. I head across the hall with my sweatshirt in hand. Garen is back in jeans and a t-shirt, and he returns to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Blow-drying my hair. Evelyn's coming home soon, so I figure at least one of us should look like we didn't just shower together," he replies. Sure enough, Mom's car pulls up twenty minutes later. But when she opens the front door and I look up from the TV, I see she's with Bill.

"I thought you were out of town," I say. They're both smiling, almost glowing. Wait. Stop. Don't tell me, because I know it's coming.

"We wanted it to be a surprise," Mom says. No no no. She looks around. "Where's Garen?" No.

"Garen!" I yell, and to me, it sounds petrified and needy. I wonder if Mom and Bill notice.

"What, babe?" Garen calls from upstairs. They don't seem to notice the term of affection, so I doubt they noticed my tone.

"Mom and Bill want—" I stop. Garen's at the top of the stairs. We stare at each other. "They want to talk to us."

"What?" he says, sitting down on the top step.

"Come down," Bill says. Garen doesn't move. None of us do. Then, suddenly, Mom's hand flies up. There's a huge diamond glinting on her finger.

"We're engaged!" she cries happily. I stare. Garen stares. In the back of my mind, I realize this is hell.

Chapter Twelve: Part A

"You're what?" I say flatly. Mom wiggles her fingers at me.

"Engaged!" she repeats.

"Please tell me this is some sick joke," I say.

"Now, Travis, we know this is sudden. It's a surprise for us too. It's a very big change. But we're hoping that you'll learn to accept me as your stepfather. I don't want to replace your real father, but I do want you to consider me your family. Garen too. Your mother and I hope that one day you can think of him as a brother," Bill says. I'm going to throw up all over Mom's shiny new ring.

"Fuck that," I say shortly, and I take the stairs two at a time. Mom and Bill call for me to come back and talk about this with them, but I can't. This is just too fucked. I hear Garen right behind me, so I leave my bedroom door open. He shuts it behind himself.

"Th-This is so fucked up," I say. Garen flops down onto my bed.

"Points for timing, right?" he mutters. I point at him.

"Shut up. Shut up with your stupid jokes, because it's not funny. 'I hope you can think of him as your brother.' How sick, Garen. How fucking sick." I'm officially into rambling mode.

"It's not like they knew," he says gently.

"And it's not like it matters. You are going to be my stepbrother, and you just got through fucking me. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" I demand.

"Yeah, it means we'll figure it out. But you freaking out right now isn't going to help anything," he says. He's calm. Too fucking calm. I grab my Microbiology textbook off the desk and throw it across the room as hard as I can.

"Nothing can fucking help anything!" I shout. Garen stands up abruptly.

"Travis—"

"Stop it! Nothing you say can change it! Nothing you say can make it better! Nothing—"

He pulls me forward by my shoulders and kisses me hard on the lips. I let him, maybe even reciprocate a little, and then he pulls back and rests his forehead against mine.

"If nothing I say can change anything, then nothing they say can change anything either," he says. I shake my head.

"Wrong. They've got two words on us, Garen. 'I do.' That changes everything. We've got nothing to compete with that," I say. He pulls back a little more and fixes his eyes on mine like he's trying to decide what to do. Finally, he brushes his palm over my cheek and shuts his eyes, inclining his head slightly.

"Then what about three?" he asks. I stare at him.

"What are you talking about?" I ask. He squeezes his eyes shut a little tighter, if possible.

"I lo—"

"Travis? Garen?"

Garen's eyes fly open, and we both push away from each other in unison as the door opens.

"Evelyn and I really would like to discuss this with you," Bill says. He's smiling slightly, almost apologetically. No. Fuck you, asshole.

"I'm tired," I say flatly. "Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

I don't realize that I'm staring at Garen until his eyes lock on mine. We stare at each other for God knows how long before he turns away.

"Yeah. I'm tired too," he says. Bill frowns.

"Boys, avoiding this discussion won't help anything," he says. I grab the remaining notebooks and papers on my bed and throw them across the room as well. Garen and Bill both flinch.

"I'm not avoiding anything. I just want to go to fucking bed," I say. Bill stares at the mess of papers all over the floor and slowly nods.

"Alright, Travis. We'll talk tomorrow," he says, and he slowly turns around and heads back downstairs. I want to look at Garen, but don't want to see the look on his face. I curl up in the center of my bed and stare straight ahead at the wall. I can hear Mom and Bill arguing downstairs already, their voices just barely muffled by the floor.

"—out of control, Evelyn."

"He is not out of control, William! You know what a tough time he had with the divorce, and I doubt that he's looking for a father figure now, after the experiences he had with that deadbeat bastard he calls a father."

"That doesn't mean anything and you know it. Bree had to go through your divorce too, and we both know she won't react like Travis did. The boy is unstable—"

"He's a teenager, for God's sake, Bill, they're all unstable—"

"Not like that, they aren't. If you ask me, he needs more counseling, if this is him when he *is* medicated—"

"But I *didn't* ask you, did I?"

"You damn well should've, if you can't see that he's got problems!"

"Don't you tell me how to raise my son, if yours has turned out like that!"

"*Our* sons, Evelyn! They're supposed to be our sons!"

I feel myself choke and press my palms down hard over my ears. So fucked. The bed shifts as Garen crawls across it to lie down behind me. He carefully pries my hands away from my ears and folds them across my chest. He tugs my blankets up over me and kisses the back of my neck.

"Stop," I say through clenched teeth. He doesn't move for a second, just kind of pauses with his arms draped around me. Then slowly, he leans forward so his lips brush against my ear.

"I love you," he whispers. I can't breathe. Even if I could, I wouldn't want to, because surely death is preferable to this living hell. I don't say anything, just tuck myself into an even tighter ball surrounded by blankets. After a minute of silence, Garen rolls off the bed and crosses the room. He turns out the lights, and I can feel him pause in the doorway before he heads back to his own room.

I love you too, I want to say.

I stay silent.

Chapter Twelve: Part B

When I finally find Garen in the lunch room the next day, he's surrounded by at least half a dozen people from his Musical Theory class. A small guy with thick black eyeliner applied raccoon-style is leaning his head against Garen's shoulder, and somehow my brain decides I'm interrupting something. I stand there completely still, my face getting hotter by the second, until I finally decide it's time to turn around and walk away. It's at that second that Garen looks up.

"Travis. Hey," he says. I shove my hands in my sweatshirt pocket and twist the ring around and around my finger out of sight. "Uh, guys, this is my... friend. Travis," he says slowly. The guy in eyeliner sits up a little straighter.

"Hey. I'm Ben. I think I've seen you around. You're a sophomore, right?" he asks.

"Junior," I say. "Garen, can I--"

"Why don't you join us?" Ben interrupts. I don't want to. It's pretty obvious from the look I give him, but then Garen shifts down the bench a little and I take the space next to him.

"Any interest in helping me study for Chemistry?" he asks. I extract my hand from my pocket and bite down on my thumbnail.

"Didn't you just have a test like, a week ago?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"No, that one was my French test," he says. I remember now. He wrote French phrases on my bare chest in felt-tipped marker. I asked him to translate for me since I take Spanish instead, but he refused, so later I copied down all of the phrases onto a piece of paper that's now folded up in the back of my Pre-Calculus notebook.

"Oh," I reply. I take his notebook and flip through his notes. "Do you have a pen?" I add. He holds one out, and I take it, underlining all of the main topics in the section.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asks. I glance up from the notes, and he's staring at me, almost accusingly.

"Since when are you my dad?" I ask.

"Since you now seem to like me about as much as you like him. And that's a 'no,' I take it," he replies.

"Very nice. Are you going to ask me about my pills too?" I demand. On his other side, Ben suddenly snaps his fingers.

"That's where I know you from! You're the guy who tried to kill himself that one time, and then they had all those assemblies about dealing with depression because of it!" he says. I snap my eyes back to the notebook, and the guy across from Ben shoves at him with one hand.

"God, get some fucking tact, dude," he hisses. They start bickering back and forth, and I flip to a new page in the notebook and scrawl *Can we talk alone?*

Garen stares at it, then takes the pen from me. *It'll be obvious if we leave together now. Just tell me what you have to say.*

Fuck. This isn't part of the plan. This isn't even Plan B, because that plan was only created after I fucked

up Plan A, which was basically centered around being straight. This is Plan C, in which the entire world is against me, Garen thinks I hate him, and some guy in eyeliner can barely keep his hands off him. In Plan C, I am pretty much going to be screwed by anything I say or do, so I might as well stop pretending that I can make things normal again.

I grab the notebook, uncap the pen, and carefully print *I love you too* in small letters underneath the previous two lines. Garen stares at it, then at me, then at the words again. Finally, he shoves the notebook into the bag under the table and grabs my hand, yanking me to my feet and dragging me out of the cafeteria into the hall. As soon as the door shuts behind me, he spins around and opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

"I'm sorry," I say finally, if only to fill the silence. He almost-laughs and shakes his head.

"Please say anything except that," he says. I reach out and wrap one arm around his waist and press my face against his neck. I pray to God the hall is empty.

"I love you. I fucking wish I didn't, because suddenly being gay and in love with you is the last thing I need in my life right now, but I can't help it. I just can't. I try to be around you all the time, and then when I can't be, I'm thinking about it, and I'm thinking about you, or us, or what the fuck this means about who I thought I was. This isn't what my life is supposed to be like, but I don't want it to stop."

"It doesn't have to stop," he says, almost on reflex, and then I swear I feel him flinch. I laugh slightly.

"Yeah, it fucking does. Do you forget the part of last night where our parents got engaged?" I point out. He shakes his head.

"And do you forget what you told me the first time we talked? You told me it wasn't going to last. You told me it would be fine. And I'm holding you to that, whether you like it or not," he says. I readjust to I can stare over his shoulder at my hand and the tiny silver band circling my finger. *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

"Fine. Then I'm holding you to everything *you've* told me," I say.

Chapter Thirteen

When the phone rings halfway through dinner, Mom jumps up and attacks it, yanking it from the cradle like everyone in the world should have gotten the memo about the McCall-Anderson household's six thirty dinner.

"Hello?" The greeting comes out as an accusation, and then she tenses a little more. "Oh. Oh, hello, I didn't know you'd be calling back so soon. No, it's no trouble at all. Do you want to talk to him? He was just eating dinner." A short, strained laugh. "Don't worry about it. I know the difference between here and Oregon."

"Fuck," I say. Garen nudges my elbow.

"What's up?" he asks.

"It's my dad," I say. I push to my feet, but Mom snags my arm before I can escape. We argue silently in a series of frantic gestures, but after a few seconds, I yank the phone away.

"Hi, Dad," I say flatly. The word is like a rock rolling around in my mouth. Hank McCall hasn't been my dad for years, but we keep it up so as not to hurt his ego.

"Your mom says you've been acting out," he replies. No greeting.

"Yep. I have. Did she tell you she's getting married?" I ask, taking my seat again.

"She did," Hank says carefully.

"Did you start throwing shit too?" I ask. He sighs heavily.

"Have you been taking your medications?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you doing this? For attention? Because I missed your birthday? I know I told you last year that I'd come out to Lakewood for it, but I got tied up with work," he says. I pin the phone between my ear and shoulder, and cross my arms.

"Don't worry. I didn't miss you much," I say. There's silence on the other end.

"I'm trying to be a good father, Travis," he says finally.

"Well, you're failing. You can't avoid me three hundred and sixty-four days out of the year and then decide to be daddy for twenty-four hours every time a birthday rolls around. So do me a favor, and the next time I scare the hell out of Mom and she calls you, tell her that she should try using someone who actually means something to me," I say, and I drop the phone on the counter on my way out.

"Can you go after him?" I hear Mom implore behind me, followed by the scrape of a chair. As I reach the foot of the stairs, Garen cuts in front of me and steers me towards the front door.

"Come on, let's go," he murmurs. I let him pull me outside and then into his car. It's ten minutes before I think to ask where we're going.

"Coffee, I guess. Anywhere is better than there," he says. A few minutes later, he pulls into a Starbucks parking lot, and shortly after that, I'm settled into an overstuffed loveseat, chai in hand.

"I'm a traitor. If Jerry knew I were here, he'd fire me," I say. Garen's head settles against my shoulder, and his eyes fall shut.

"I can keep a secret," he says softly. Probably against my better judgment, I cast an eye around the café and drape an arm across his shoulders. I half-expect some overly-caffeinated barista to pop up and tell us to get out. But nothing happens. Eventually, the place gets emptier and emptier. I know how it feels to be stuck behind the counter when people just won't finish the cold remains of old coffee, so I gently shake Garen's shoulder.

"You asleep?" I whisper. His wispy spikes tickle my neck as he shakes his head.

"Nah, I'm good. You wanna go?" he asks. We unfold ourselves from the loveseat, stretch, and head for the parking lot. Across the street, a guy and girl about our age are leaving the Olive Garden. That's when I realize that we are them right now. A random, anonymous couple. No one who can see us right now knows who we are or how we know each other. I'm stunned for a minute by how normal it all feels. How I'm just somebody leaving a goddamn Starbucks with their boyfriend. I pull Garen into the glow of the nearest street lamp on blind impulse.

"Come here," I say. He kisses me like he knows that was my intention, and we return to the car, our fingers laced between us.

The next morning, I know something is wrong as soon as I reach my locker. The hall is eerily quiet around me, even though it's as populated as usual. Just as I'm jamming my backpack onto the hook, Garen appears at my side.

"I'm about to tell you something, but you need to be all poker-face about it and act like it's nothing important, because people are watching," he says in a voice so low I can barely hear. I stare at him, a rising feeling of panic boiling inside me. Slowly, I nod and turn my attention to my locker.

"Someone saw," he says. I shrug, even though I think I already know the rest. "Last night, outside the coffee place. A girl who recognized me from my World Civics class. She took a picture of us kissing on her phone, and it's all over school now. With the angle and the shitty light quality, I was able to convince some people that it's not you, it's a guy named Seth Hayden who I went to boarding school with. It's definitely me in the picture, though, so if anyone asks, tell them Seth Hayden is staying with us this weekend, and that's who is in the picture, okay?"

My head is kind of exploding, but I stare into my locker until I think I can speak without having a complete mental breakdown.

"Can I see the picture?" I ask finally. My voice is shaking and I clear my throat to try to get rid of it. Garen pulls out his cell phone and flips it open.

"That looks nothing like me," I say with a pretty convincing laugh.

"I know. People are just twisted fucks," he replies. We're just loud enough to be heard, still quiet enough to seem real. It's not real, though, because the picture is definitely me, the way I see it. My track hoodie (even though the logo isn't visible), my messy dirty-blond hair (even though it looks sort of dark in the grainy picture), my hand curled around Garen's bicep (even though I think I'm the only one looking hard enough to see the ring). The picture is replaced suddenly by a call alert.

"That's Nicole's number," I say, frowning. Garen doesn't move to answer, so I take it instead. "Nicole? How did you get this number?"

"Ugh, of course you're with him. I got it from Faye. Listen, Travis, what's going on?" she demands. "Did you suddenly go fag and decide we didn't need to know?"

"The picture isn't of me," I say numbly, "it's of Garen and some guy from his old school. He's staying with us for the weekend. Seth Hayden."

"Bullshit, that's definitely you. Look at the track sweater," Nicole snaps.

"So I'm the only guy in the state with a gray hoodie? Look, for all I know, Seth borrowed it last night. I have no idea, I was in my room all night, studying for the Brit Lit quiz today. You know me. You know I wouldn't be out when I've got so much work to do, especially—" It catches in my throat chokes me. I swallow it and move on. "Especially out fagging it up with my stepbrother in a parking lot."

Garen looks sharply away and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"You're right. It's so not like you. Just so not you. Want me to put the truth out on the grapevine?" Nicole asks.

"Do whatever you want. It doesn't matter," I say. I hang up and hold out the phone. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's true. No way in hell would Travis McCall, honor student, sports star, straight boy extraordinaire, be caught *fagging it up* with a flaming homosexual such as myself," he says.

"Fuck off. I had to say it. If it got out, if people know about us, I—"

"Stop it, Travis. You wanna keep it quiet? Then shut the fuck up and let me walk away," he mutters. And then he's gone.

Chapter Fourteen

When I first see Garen's tattoo, I choke on a mouthful of coffee for two reasons, the first of which is obvious. I've never seen it before, and I took for granted the idea that maybe I'd know if the guy I was fucking had any tattoos. The second reason is that we haven't really spoken much in the past two weeks, and the tattoo just so happens to be a small letter T on the inside of his right wrist. Again, I took for granted the idea that I would've been in on this decision.

Garen looks up with mild interest from the book he'd been reading as a few of the customers warily back away from the line. The worst publicity at a coffee house is one of the employees standing off to the side and choking on the house coffee. I gesture at Garen, and he hops off his stool and comes around to join me on the working side of the counter.

"When did you get that?" I force out when I can finally breathe. His brow furrows as if in confusion, but he looks immediately at his wrist and tugs his sleeve down over it.

"None of your business," he says, and I think my head completely implodes.

"The fuck it's not! It's for my name, right?" I say, and he rolls his eyes.

"No, it's for 'tasty' because I'm T to the A to the S-T-E-Y. Yeah, it's for your name. But that doesn't mean you can act so indignant about it. It's my body," he snaps.

"But it's about me. I would've thought you'd at least bring it up at some point. You haven't even spoken to me since that day at school, and now you're going and mutilating your body in homage to me," I say. His eyes snap up to mine, and I feel a comment coming before I hear it. I have no idea what it is, but I know it's going to hit hard.

"I thought the self-mutilation thing was your area of expertise," he says. It's more of a punch than I thought it would be. My whole body tingles, and I pray my face isn't turning red.

"Who the fuck have you been talking to?" I demand in a harsh whisper. Been here, done this, and I know what'll happen if the wrong person overhears. Jerry could fire me, if he wanted. Miles could tell Faye, and she would--

"Faye told me." She would fucking betray me, apparently. I whirl around and yank open the coffee machine behind me. The filter doesn't need to be changed yet, but I have to do it anyway.

"It's none of her... It's not her place, it's... Fuck you *both!*" I abandon the coffee filter right in the middle, and the grounds spill all over the floor as I shove Garen backwards. Miles tosses me a wary glance and speeds up his service. He's trying to get the customers out before I cause a huge scene, but I can already tell the odds of this actually working out are slim to none.

"Oh come on, Travis. You never tell me anything, so someone had to. How could you decide to leave something like this out? You fucking told me about the suicide attempt the night we met, but you pointedly leave out that it was way more than an isolated incident?" Garen hisses. The door opens and another group rushes in, and Miles turns to me with round, pleading eyes.

"Trav, can you please take this to the back room or the alley or something? If Jerry catches you fighting in front of customers, he'll have both our asses," he says. Pissed as I may be at Garen, Miles is my friend. I throw open the door to the alley, and Garen follows me outside.

"I can't believe you couldn't even ask me about this. You act like I'm so bad about keeping up the talk between us? Then how come you went to Faye? How come you didn't ask me?" I demand. He laughs harshly.

"Like you would've told me," he says.

"Tell you what?" I'm practically screaming at this point, and my voice reverberates off the brick walls around us. "Tell you about this?"

Theoretically, I could've just pulled up my shirt sleeves. But part of me is aching for something just a bit more imposing, something that shows how fucked it all is to justify keeping it quiet. So instead, I untie the apron and throw it aside, then yank my shirt off. The moonlight hits the scars in a pretty impressive way, highlighting slightly raised white marks that criss-cross all the way up and down both arms. They look worse right now than they ever do, especially since they're barely noticeable in normal lighting, but I don't point that out. I don't do anything to try to make him think it's more or less than what it is.

"Oh god," Garen forces out through clenched teeth. Please God, don't let me start crying. Let me do anything right now, but do not let me cry.

"Is this the moment you were hoping for? When you went to Faye, had you been hoping that instead, you'd get some big huge revelation and we'd fucking weep together over all the marks I've got from fucking cutting myself for two years?" Yeah. Still almost screaming.

"If you think I wanted any part of this, you're so wrong it's not even funny," he says. His voice, his body, his everything is shaking.

"Bullshit, Garen. If you think you can be my white knight or whatever, it's not going to happen, because you know what? Even in the weirdest of fairytales, the princess isn't a seventeen-year-old fag with suicidal tendencies. You don't get it. You hear it all from her, and you know the story, but you don't get it. You can't get it," I say. My voice is breaking now, and the screaming is slowly dissolving into what I know will soon be something a hell of a lot worse. If only for something to do to try to resist it, I pull my shirt back on and tie my apron up again.

"Then tell me, Travis. Make me understand, if I can't from what Faye told me," he says. He takes several steps towards me, so he must know it's coming.

"I wanted to fucking die!" The sentence is the meeting point between the screaming and the crying. It must be, because it comes out so loudly it feels like my throat is tearing open, and then I can feel tears streaming down my face. "And if I weren't medicated to the point of barely feeling anything, I probably still would want to. That's what I am, Garen. I am a fucking walking zombie. And you have no idea what it's like to have to choose between not feeling anything and feeling like you want to kill yourself. There is not a single person on this fucking planet that you can talk to that can make you understand that."

At first, I think his eyes are glassy because he's widening them to the point where it must be painful. Then a tear catches on his eyelashes, hovers there for a few seconds, and then falls onto his cheek.

"I can talk to you," he says softly. His voice comes out scared and young, and I have to sit down heavily against the building wall before I completely collapse. I haven't cried like this in years, and now I remember why I fucking hate it. It feels less like a gentle way of expelling my emotions, and more like I'm choking and gasping and trying to force out everything I'm feeling through any way it can escape, no matter what it does to me physically. It's completely losing control, and completely losing my grip, and completely the last thing I want to do. But it won't stop. It *doesn't* stop, not for at least ten minutes. Garen

is right next to me the entire time, pinned against my side and stroking my hair while I more or less sob into his chest. When I finally get a grip, I try to pull back as much as possible and drag a sleeve under my eyes as an almost overwhelming sense of shame spreads over me.

"Fuck. How can you... How can you deal with this?" I ask.

"How can you?" he shoots back, and I glance over in time to see him wipe his eyes hurriedly. "God. I mean, you constantly feel like this, and you just bottle it all up all the time. How can you not be completely insane?"

"Where have you *been* for the past twenty minutes? I *am* completely insane. Which is why I don't get why you're still here. How can you still want me after that? How can you still want me now that you know I'm a complete and utter psycho?" I ask. He furrows his brow again and looks down, watching the progress of the ring he's twisting around and around on his finger.

"I'm gonna be in love with you whether you're a psycho or not. I'm gonna be in love with you forever. I might as well just accept that now, and accept you too, because no matter who you turn out to be, I'm gonna love that guy. I can't help it. I'm glad I can't," he says. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"If you make me cry again, I swear to God I will punch you in the face," I say. He's silent until I open my eyes again, and then he locks his onto mine.

"Being with you makes me feel like a better person," he says. Another minute of silence.

"Being with you makes me feel like a sane person," I say finally. Then, a second later, I add, "usually."

He smiles slightly and looks away. "It's kinda fucked. That whether you hate yourself or you hate me, I'm still going to be yours."

"I don't hate you. I never have. Fuck, I've wanted to, but I haven't," I say. He shrugs and shoots me a vaguely nervous glance.

"You did that day in the hall. I know you didn't do it intentionally," he says quickly when I open my mouth. "I get that now. I know you were doing what I told you to, and I know you were doing it because otherwise things would get so fucked up with your friends and your school and your life in general. But you still said it, and it still hurt both of us. Because even if it was just then? You hated us. You hated yourself and you hated me and you hated that there's something between us. I know it went away right after that. But it was still there for a minute. And I couldn't handle it."

"So you avoided me for two weeks," I say. It's not meant to be an accusation, and I'm relieved to see he doesn't react as though it was.

"Basically. I know it's a shitty thing to do, but it's... it's not like I wasn't thinking about you the whole time," he says. I take his hand and stroke the T on his wrist gently with my thumb.

"Obviously," I say, and he laughs a little.

"Yeah. It uh... it was kind of a whim. And then it wasn't. I thought of it a few days after the thing in the hall. And then I got it that Friday. Do you... want to know why?" he asks. Nervous again. I meet his eyes, and I can tell he's given this a lot of thought, just in case I ever wanted to know. I nod.

"Yeah. I do," I say.

"Because... I've had relationships before. Albeit shitty ones, but they still count. You're not the first guy I've called my boyfriend, you're not the first guy I've slept with. But you're still the first guy I've been in love with, and you're still the first guy I've ever wanted to let fuck with my head as much as you have. And I kind of figured that I want to remember that. Even if you had never spoken to me after that, even if everything ended right then, I would still want to remember what I had – or, I guess, have – with you. So I got this," he says, kind of raising his wrist at me. I nod.

"Understandable," I say, and we leave it at that.

The next night, I fish out the fake ID I got made with Corey a few months ago. He wanted to see a Something Corporate show in a bar in Boston, so we went over to his cousin's friend's girlfriend's brother's sleezy apartment to get the IDs made. After the show, mine retired to my sock drawer. Except for this moment, as I present it to Lizzie, the smiling brunette behind the counter at Four Aces Tattoo Studio. She doesn't examine it too closely, which I'm thankful for, even though it's relatively well-made.

"There are some forms for you to fill out. Do you have a picture of what you'd like done?" she asks. I accept the clipboard from her and dig in my pocket for the slip of paper.

"I want a letter done in this style," I say. She examines the single letter on the page, then nods.

"Should be simple enough. Ten minutes, maybe? I could draw this right on, if you want. It's not even big enough to bother with a stencil," she says. I nod like it's no big deal.

"Yeah, okay," I say. I sit down in one of the chairs to fill out the forms as she fills up a tiny little thimble of ink and pulls on her latex gloves.

"When would you like to get it?" she asks. I stretch my left forearm out across the arm of the chair and tap my wrist.

"Right here," I say. She talks me through it at first, tells me to breathe and try to relax, that she's just going to do one small line at first. I nod, and it hurts a lot less than I thought it would. Not really a pain, more of a grating rawness. About as comfortable as getting fucked up the ass, but I doubt this will suddenly morph into pleasure decent enough to make me come.

"So, who is G?" Lizzie asks. "Your girlfriend?"

"Um, no. My boyfriend," I say. I wait for the reaction, for her to dig the needle deeper into my wrist. She just glances up long enough to shoot me an apologetic grin.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize. What's his name?" she asks.

"Garen," I say slowly. I can't actually believe I'm having a normal conversation about this. Lizzie tosses her head back to get her bangs out of her eyes.

"Been together long?" she asks. I almost shrug, but stop myself when I realize it's probably not the best idea to move around when someone is that close to major veins and arteries with several sharp needles.

"Probably not long enough for me to be getting his initial tattooed on me," I say, and she laughs. "He got mine done, though. He doesn't... he doesn't enter into stuff like this lightly, I guess. Neither do I. Not usually. So I'm kind of praying that this isn't a big mistake."

"The relationship or the tattoo?" she asks.

"The tattoo. I know the relationship isn't a mistake," I say. She looks up again with another smile.

"All done. The tattoo, that is. Your relationship is still going strong, and hopefully will be for a long time, because that letter is never coming off." After I pay, she talks me through the after care, tells me to keep it wrapped for a couple of hours and to apply an antibacterial ointment that night and before every time I shower for the next week. I nod along, thank her, and head outside and down the street to the Grind, my head still reeling from the fact that I just had a normal conversation with a normal person about my completely abnormal relationship. Garen's car is parked outside, and I see him leaning against the hood.

"Hey," I say. I spare a very small glance around the parking lot before stealing a brief kiss.

"Hey. Where were you?" he asks.

"Off being stupid and reckless and illegal," I say as we both climb into the car.

"Really? Funny. You'd think I'd remember it if we had sex on the way over here," he replies.

"Ha, you're so funny. Um, do you promise not to get mad at me?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Not for a second. That question has never been followed by something good," he says. I extend my arm, baring the white strip of gauze around my wrist. He stares at it. I stare at him. And then I realize.

"No! No, it's not that. God," I say.

"Oh fuck," he says, visibly deflating. I shake my head.

"I'm sorry, I-I didn't know you'd think that, which is fucking retarded, after last night, but it's not, I... look," I finish lamely, and I pull back the edge of the bandage, just enough to expose the letter. He bursts out laughing.

"Are you for real?" he asks. Slowly, I reapply the bandage and cross my arms.

"I thought you'd appreciate it. Because you got one too," I say. My voice is the bastard child of false calm and actual confusion. He nods.

"I appreciate it. Probably more than everyone else who sees it will," he says. I shake my head.

"I don't care about everyone else who sees it. They don't matter to me," I say. He raises his eyebrows at me, and I shake my head again. "They don't. Fuck them. Fuck all of them. Fuck everyone."

"Fuck me?" he asks, with an almost hopeful quirk of an eyebrow. I fake a laugh.

"Again, you're so funny. Pervert," I say.

"Yeah. It's one of the first things that attracted you to me," he replies. I nod slowly, thoughtfully.

"Yeah, actually, it is. Since I'm not a pervert, what first attracted you to me?" I ask.

"Everything," he says, and he catches my smile with his lips.

Chapter Fifteen

"Oh God, what took you so long? She's been alternating between babbling about the party and babbling about the wedding, and I'm fucking caught in this garland so I can't even get away!" I hiss. The expression on Garen's face doesn't change as he unwinds the garland from me, then imitates the movement with the scarf around his neck. I finish tacking up the string of fake holly around the door to the dining room, then follow him into the kitchen.

"Before that, it was putting spray snow on the insides of the windows to make them feel a little more 'festive.' She wants you to return to third grade and stick a bunch of cloves in some oranges, so if you want to hide, you'd better do it now," I say. Garen sits down at the counter, and I station myself in front of him, between his slightly parted knees. He twists away, and I blink.

"What's wrong?" I ask. He shrugs. "Did something happen? Did... did you and Ben get in a fight while you were at his house?"

No reply.

Slowly, I turn his face towards me and with one last glance around to make sure we're alone, I kiss him. He doesn't move voluntarily, but his lower lip twitches slightly. I pull back and lick my lips.

"Did he kiss you?" I ask. When he finally looks me in the eye, he might as well just punch me in the stomach. I sit down heavily on the stool next to his. "Oh."

"I didn't ask him to. I didn't *want* him to. He just kind of... did it," he half-whispers. I nod.

"Yeah, I get it. No need to explain, really," I say. The world is full of people like Ben and Nicole, crossing personal space boundaries and jumping to conclusions. "And it's not like you kissed him back."

Silence.

Talk about jumping to conclusions.

"You *did* kiss him back," I say flatly.

"Not because I wanted to," he says quickly, and I laugh.

"Oh, okay. At first I thought you did, but now I understand that you voluntarily made out with someone against your will. That always makes perfect sense."

"What about you and Blaire? You're practically fucking dating her, the whole school knows it," Garen snaps.

"I don't give a shit about Blaire and *you* know it. What's Ben to you? Honestly," I demand. He shrugs after a minute. "He's your best friend, huh? He's like James the sequel."

"Don't talk to me about James. Just don't, because you don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he says, on his feet in an instant.

"Exactly how many other guys *are* you in love with?" I snap. I turn and head for the door, but Garen grabs my arm and spins me around again.

“Just you, and you know it, so stop playing games. I know you’re afraid to actually be happy or normal for once, but give it a shot for a few minutes and accept that I’m not going anywhere,” he says. Halfway through, his grip tightens slightly on my arm.

“Well, maybe I wish you would, if you’re so interested in Ben anyway. Do you wish I could be him for you? Do you wish I’d dye my hair dark and cut it so *scene* so you could pretend I’m him while you’re fucking me?”

“What is *wrong* with you? I told you it was just one kiss. I told you it didn’t mean anything to me. Why are you trying to make this into something it’s not? I love you, Travis. Not Ben, not James. You. Can you just fucking accept that?” he asks. His hand is almost clenched in a fist around my arm now.

“Let go of me right now,” I order. He looks down at his hand, like he didn’t know it was there, and immediately releases it. There’s a faint red handprint encircling my forearm.

“Oh, fuck. T-Travis, I didn’t—”

“I know,” I say. I lift my arm up to examine it. The mark feels kind of hot right now, and is turning a deeper shade of red by the minute. I don’t say anything as Garen fumbles around under the counter for a dish towel, which he soaks in cold water from the faucet and then wraps gently around my arm.

“I swear, I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even realize—”

“Stop it,” I say. He yanks his hands back and the dish towel falls onto the ground between us with a loud plop. I pick it up and toss it in the sink. “I meant stop talking. I’m not some battered housewife, Garen. I can handle myself.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. I tug my sleeves down and hug my sweatshirt closer around myself.

“Don’t worry about it. Really,” I say. I raise myself up slightly to kiss him, then head back out to finish decorating the foyer. He trails after me hesitantly, but manages to keep his distance for the rest of the night, up until the guests for Mom’s Christmas Eve party start to arrive. Then, we’re both banished upstairs for our first break in decorating to get ready.

“Wanna save some time?” I ask, nodding to the bathroom and shucking off my sweatshirt and t-shirt. Garen opens the door, eyes averted, and I edge past him to turn up the shower. He shuts and locks the door behind himself, and we both strip down. I step into the shower stall and pause, the water pouring over my scalp and running down my body in hot snaking lines.

“Are you coming in?” I ask. Garen continues to stand there in front of the mirror, naked, staring at his reflection. After a minute of motionlessness, he turns to me, eyes on the floor, and steps into the stall with me.

“Sorry,” he says under his breath.

“Hey. Hey, Garen,” I say. He looks up at me.

“Yeah?” he says. His voice is hollow, flat. Slowly, I turn him around and slide a hand around to settle just below his jaw.

“Tilt your head back,” I whisper. He obeys, and I rake my fingers through the damp spikes until they’re soaked flat against his skull. He remains still, eyes closed, as I wash his hair, then my own, and soap us

both down. Ten minutes into the shower, he finally turns around to face me.

"His name was Dave," he says hoarsely. His name was... what?

"Who?" I ask. Garen's eyes dart around the room, but finally return to my face.

"My first real boyfriend. At Patton, in my sophomore year. His name was Dave," he says. I stare.

"You... told me that you'd never done this before," I say.

"Because I haven't. I wasn't in love with Dave. We were... a couple though. He was a senior, and I met him one day in the weight room. We dated for four months," he replies. My stomach turns slightly. Why the fuck is he telling me this?

"Okay," is all I can manage.

"Two months in, though... he and I were arguing. We, we argued a lot, so it wasn't anything new. But I told him I hated him and wished I'd never met him, because he was ruining everything in my life," he continues. I nod once. "And he punched me."

My heart drops straight through my body and hits the shower floor.

"What?" I say.

"He punched me in the face. He didn't move away after he did it, so I tried to shove him back, so he wouldn't again. So he hit me, and he hit me, and he hit me. And then once I finally hit the ground, he kicked the shit out of me until I passed out. I ended up in the hospital. Broken ribs, broken nose, concussion."

My mouth is sealed shut. My throat is closed up. My mind is blank. And then I realize.

"You... you said that was two months in," I say. Garen nods, sending drops of water flying everywhere.

"You *stayed* with him? After that?"

"I told everyone that I didn't know who had done it. That it was someone I'd never met before. He told me he was sorry and he'd just let his anger get the better of him. I believed him. And I... *kept* believing him. And he kept doing it. Not... never that bad again. Just black eyes, split lips, cuts and bruises. He said he wouldn't have to do it if I would just stop doing things to make him angry, and I tried, I tried so *fucking* hard not to make him angry, but no matter what I did, I still got my ass kicked about once a week."

I squeeze my eyes shut and yank him forward into my arms, crushing our soaked bodies together.

"Garen..."

"I don't want to be like Dave, Travis. I don't want to end up doing that to you," he hisses, pulling back just enough to look at me, my face sandwiched between his palms.

"You're not going to do that! You're not going to hurt me! You just, you got carried away, one time," I stammer.

"Yeah, and so did he. One time, and then one more time, and one more—"

"Stop it," I order. "You are not him. I love you, and you love me, and you're *never going to hurt me*. Please forget about him. Please *believe* me."

"Fuck," he mutters, and he reaches around me to turn off the water. I grab two towels off the stack next to the counter and hand him one, which he wraps around his waist.

"Garen," I say, and he begins to towel-dry his hair with another from the stack. "Garen," I repeat, louder.

"Yeah," he says finally, opening the bathroom door and peering into the hall to check if the coast is clear.

"I love you," I say. He seems to slump against the door frame for a moment, and I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly cold. He eventually turns to me, though.

"I wish you wouldn't say that," he says. I can feel my heart hammering through my chest against my crossed arms.

"Why not," I demand, and he closes his eyes.

"Because it's hard for me to think about what's probably best for you when you're in the middle of making me fall more in love with you every second," he says. Before I have time to reply, he reaches out and brushes his thumbs against my eyelashes so my eyes flutter shut. He kisses each of my closed eyelids, then my forehead, then my lips. He lingers for just a minute, then pulls back.

"I love you too. No matter what, okay?" he says softly. I nod.

Chapter Sixteen

"Travis."

"Garen."

"Traaaaaavis..."

"Garen, stop it."

"I'm *bored*."

"So stop staging epic battles with your gummy bears and study."

"I'm studying for English. I'm reenacting the battle scene from Red Badge of Courage. See? There aren't gray bears, so it's blue versus clear-ish. And this one is the narrator. Hence, red bear."

I close my British Literature notebook. "While your excuses are cute, they're complete bullshit. You have your Calculus midterm today, not your English. That one's not until Friday."

"All work and no play makes—"

"Have you done any work?" I ask. Garen snaps a tine off of a plastic fork and stabs it into a blue bear, dropping it onto the cafeteria table.

"Look. I ran him through with a bayonet," he says. I sigh, and so does he. "Travis, you are being exactly like my mother. In fact, you're being worse. And you know what? My mother is a *lawyer* and a *Jew*. So you being more overbearing than her is a real accomplishment. I understand all of my Calculus well enough to pass my exam. I don't need a perfect score. It's just a midterm."

"It's important. It goes on your record, and all your colleges will see it when you apply in a few weeks. If you fail it, it could wreck your future. Your entire life can be decided by how you do in school, and if you fuck it up? No second chances, no way to make it all better."

"Travis... you're shaking," Garen says softly.

"No, I'm not," I protest. Garen raises my trembling hand to eye level. I tug it away. "I have to do well. Failure isn't an option for me."

"You're a junior, Trav. You're not even applying to colleges for another year," he says. I trace the lines on my palm with the tip of my pen for a few moments before replying.

"Do you know how much a year at Stanford costs?" I ask finally. He shakes his head. "A little over thirty-six thousand each year, not including room and board. Do you know how much I make at the Grind?" Another head shake. "Seven sixty an hour. Those numbers don't equate, trust me. If I want to go anywhere other than community college, I need almost a full-ride scholarship. I can't get that with bad grades. I don't really have a choice here. Mom doesn't make enough, and Dad will pay when Hell freezes over."

Garen is silently lining up gummy bears to cover the title of the chapter his book is open to. "They didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I ask, frowning.

"Dad... sort of might be paying your college tuition. As in all of it," he says. "He and Ev set up an account a few weeks ago. Ev had been saving up for years, but it wasn't much. A couple thou, maybe? Dad um... Dad put some in."

"Some being how much?" I ask. Garen's brow furrows.

"Enough," he murmurs.

"Garen," I say warningly, and he glances at my face.

"Two hundred thousand," he says. The bottom of my stomach drops out.

"As in two, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero? Are you fucking kidding me?" I say. He shakes his head. "He can't afford that."

"Travis... my father makes about one fifty K per year, and he's been saving a quarter of his post-taxes income since he left college in seventy-eight. Not to mention the fact that he inherited well when his dad died. Do the math. I don't... I thought you knew."

"Is this the face of someone who knew he was living with millionaires? Twenty-seven years of that income is over *four million dollars*. You're telling me he has a million dollars just lying around in savings?" I demand.

"Actually more like two million. You forgot the inheritance," he says softly. Then, sharply, "Stop looking at me that way."

"What way?"

"The way that says 'Holy shit, my boyfriend is a spoiled little rich boy.' It's *true*, but you shouldn't *judge* me for it."

"I'm not judging you for anything! It's just... you must think I'm so pathetic," I say. True. So true. I can't buy him iPods and sterling silver rings. I can't even afford to take a weekend off work to go on a date.

"Why would I think that?" Garen says.

"Because I'm poor."

"I'm not dating you for money, Travis."

"Obviously. You never had to."

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could swallow them again. Garen's eyes flash down to my ring, then back up to my face. His eyes are burning with a mixture of curiosity and hurt that makes my stomach churn.

"And you do?" he says softly.

"That's not what I meant. I just mean that money's not something you have to worry about. Not like I do," I say.

"You *don't* have to worry," Garen protests.

"Yeah, because you took care of it. I don't want to be a charity project. I don't want you to try to buy my affection," I say.

"My favorite part of this conversation is probably how blindly insulting it is," Garen murmurs. He places one of the bears on the table and whacks it hard with his book. He glances around the empty cafeteria, then whacks it again.

"Garen," I say. He raises the book surreptitiously, and I pluck it from his fingers, offering my hand to him as a replacement. He kisses my palm and twines our fingers together. "I'm not trying to insult you. I just don't know how to react. I would've thought someone might let me know if that's how well off you guys are."

Garen leans his elbow on the table and twists sideways to face me, his hand coming up to brush the side of my face.

"Do you love me any more, less, or differently than you did ten minutes before this conversation started?" he asks. I duck my head to kiss the tattoo on his wrist.

"I love you more than I thought I could love anybody ever in my life," I say. "Just like I did ten minutes ago, and just like I will ten lifetimes from now."

He kisses me, and I slide my hands out of his to tangle them in his hair. A moment later, someone drops onto the bench on the other side of our table. Garen and I jump apart.

"Hi," Corey says. His voice is cautious, his eyes are wide. My whole body suddenly feels like it's on pins and needles, and I'm sure my lungs have collapsed.

"Shit," I manage to gasp out.

"What, um... what the fuck is going on? Just out of curiosity?" Corey asks. I look to Garen for help, but he seems unsure of what to say.

"Corey," he says. "We didn't..." The sentence trails off there.

"Corey," I echo, "I'm gay."

"Oh really? I hadn't noticed. No shit, T, we've passed that page in the book. I've only known since we were like, eleven," Corey says. I stare at him. He stares back.

"What are you talking about? I haven't even known for six *months*. How can you have known for six *years*?" I ask. He shrugs, looking uncomfortable.

"I have no idea. I just knew. It's just who you are, and I figured you'd tell me when you were ready. I kind of... I assumed you were going to tell me after you tried to kill yourself," he says, and I inhale sharply. "Don't get pissed at me. I thought that was why you did it. Because you thought we'd reject you or whatever? So uh... you're my best friend, no matter if you're gay or not. Just so you know."

"Thanks," I say softly. Corey snaps out of it.

"But your fucking stepbrother, dude? How twisted are *you*?" he says. Garen bites his lip and looks away, grinning.

"Pretty twisted, but not because of that. He's the one who went after me!" I say. Corey rolls his eyes.

"Oh, okay. Then it totally doesn't count at all. What are you smoking, Travis?" he says. I shrug.

"What would you recommend I do instead?" I ask.

"Well, not fuckin' your brother could've been a cool place to start. Beyond that?"

"Corey."

"What do you expect me to say, Travis? It's a shitty situation. What are you going to do if your parents find out?"

"My dad won't care. Mom... she's not really a huge disciplinarian."

Corey shakes his head. "Bill? Do you really wanna piss off an ex-Army man?"

"Marines, actually," Garen corrects quietly.

"Oh, even better. Instead of shooting you, he'll eat your heart out of your chest and stick a grenade in the hole," Corey says. He turns to Garen. "Not to mention, dude, rape much?"

"I'm only a year older than him. I don't turn eighteen until March. Besides... I'm not, you know, *forcing* him. It's only a technicality."

"The technicalities matter in these cases. I'm not gonna tell anyone, but you guys need to get real and think about this. Garen, you could end up in jail as a legal sex offender. Travis... fuck, man, no offense, but you're one step away from getting sent to an asylum as it is. If your mom decides you're being molested by your stepbrother, she'll say you're traumatized and have you committed so fast your head will spin off into the next county."

"They won't find out. Or if they do, I'll make sure it's not until I'm eighteen and out of state. Everything's gonna be fine," I say softly. I glance at Garen. He's cradling my hand in both of his and staring at me, his brows drawn together in worry. I look back at Corey, who sighs.

"Then I guess I'm happy for you," he says. Then suddenly, he jerks his head at Garen. "I need to talk to you, though."

"Corey—"

"Shut up, Trav, I know what I'm doing."

Garen kisses the back of my hand, stands, and follows Corey across the cafeteria. In less than a minute, Garen returns. Corey waves goodbye and takes off out the side door.

"What was that?" I ask warily. Garen shrugs.

"He told me that if I hurt you, he'd hurt me back. He was just a little more graphic," he says. Dread creeps into my veins.

"How graphic?" I ask. He flashes me a brief smile.

"He said he'd cut off my balls, rub them in chili powder, sew them back on, and set them on fire. Sweet guy, that Corey."

"Um. Ouch," I say. "What'd you tell him?"

"I told him I swear I will never love you any less than I do right now, so he doesn't have to worry about that," Garen replies. He kisses my forehead, and my eyes flutter shut involuntarily.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," I say softly. Garen is silent. I finally open my eyes and see him twisting my ring around my finger, a strange look in his eyes.

"Garen?" I say. He looks up at me suddenly, green eyes piercing my blue, and I'm thrown by the intensity painted on his skin.

"Marry me," he says. I stare.

"Are you high?" I ask.

"Travis, I'm serious. Will you... will you marry me?"

Chapter Seventeen

"Hey Trav. Do you need a ride home today, or are you getting one from your uh, brother?" The words seem to catch in Corey's mouth, like he's not sure which word to use in the mostly empty locker room. Brother or boyfriend, family or lover. One, both, all of the above.

"He's supposed to drive me, but if it's not out of your way..." I say slowly. I focus my gaze on the t-shirt in my hands so as to avoid Corey's stare.

"What's up, man," he says quietly. I tug on the shirt, followed by my sweatshirt, followed by one shoulder-strap of my backpack.

"If I tell you, will you promise not to lose your shit?" I ask. He nods. I pause and wait for the locker room door to slam behind the last members of the rest of the track team. Once the sound is finished reverberating around the tiled walls, I throw my backpack onto the floor again and sprawl across the bench.

"Garen proposed," I say. Corey blinks.

"Proposed what?" he says. I raise my eyebrows at him, and he copies the movement. "You mean like..."

"Yeah," I say. "He asked me to marry him."

"What the fuck?" Corey says. "Are you joking?"

"Not even a little bit. And he wasn't either. I don't know what to do," I say. Corey slumps against the lockers and sinks onto the floor. We both stay where we are for several minutes, the silence thick between us. Finally, Corey speaks again.

"What did you say?" I shrug.

"Nothing, I guess. It was really sudden and I had to go take my English exam, so I didn't get a chance to answer—"

"Wait, your English exam was on Monday," Corey interrupts. I nod. "Today's fucking *Friday*. You're telling me that in the past four days, you didn't have enough spare time to accept or decline a marriage proposal? Are you shitting me, Travis fucking McCall?"

"I didn't know what to say, Corey! I'm seventeen years old, and it's not like it's even legal here," I snap.

"He... he said afterwards that he didn't mean now, necessarily. Maybe not for a long time, even, because it would make more sense to wait until we're out of the house, or out of college, or whatever. So it's not like he expects me to run off to Vegas with him or something, but come on. It's... he wants to be my *husband*."

"Well, you love him, don't you?" Corey asks. The concept of him even needing to ask that makes my heart twist, and I feel myself nodding before I can even really formulate thoughts.

"God, more than anything," I say. Corey shrugs.

"Then *talk* to him about it. If you actually do love him, then you should talk to him, because otherwise it's just gonna fuck everything up for you two," he says. "Now, you said he's supposed to give you a ride home, so he's gonna give you a ride home. I'll see you Monday, okay?"

I nod and watch him shut his locker and head for the door. I can only bring myself to sit there in the silence for another minute before I collect my duffel and backpack and head out too. The second I push open the door, I wish I hadn't. Garen is seated halfway down the hall, on the floor in front of the music room. His guitar and Ben are both with him.

"It's the bridge that's fucked up, you know? The chorus is fine, but the bridge just sounds like it doesn't belong."

Ben nods along, tapping the sheet music spread out in front of them. "Yeah, the tune is fine, but the lyrics are wrong here. It sounds like a chorus in itself, and it throws the whole thing off."

"Exactly. That's exactly it. And I don't want to play it if it's just going to sound like shit. It's too important for that," Garen says. Ben blinks, then smiles slightly.

"I know. You've made that abundantly clear. And he's a lucky guy," he says.

"I know I am," I say before I can stop myself. Garen stuffs the papers in his guitar case and jumps to his feet.

"Travis. Hi," he says. "Just let me get my stuff out of the room, and we can go, okay? Okay." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys which he uses to unlock the music room door. Seeing my surprise and noting Garen's lack of explanation, Ben shrugs.

"All of the Musical Theory students have copies of the keys. Jeff— that's our teacher— thinks we should have full access to it whenever we want to use it," he says. "Garen might abuse the privilege, however."

"Yeah," I say with a small smile. "He's... pretty amazing. When it comes to the music, you know?"

"I figured it was like that," Ben says flatly. "It was obvious he was into someone from the start, and a live-in fuck toy can't be beat for convenience."

My face burns, and for a second, I want to deny it. I want to tell him he's all wrong about everything, that Garen and I aren't what we are. Instead, I close my eyes and ball my hands into fists at my sides.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I say softly. "I'm not just a fuck toy, and I'm not just convenient. He loves me."

"Sure he does. Just like how he *loved* me, right? Before you?" Ben says.

"That's bullshit. Stop," I order. He doesn't, though. Instead, he stands up, brushes off his jeans, and takes two large steps forward so we'd be nose to nose if not for the five inch height difference. Then somehow, his hands are on my stomach, tugging my shirt up just enough to let his fingertips settle on the skin right above my jeans.

"Isn't it funny," he whispers, "how Garen fucks you like he plays his guitar? Eyes closed, hands everywhere at once... lips parted... and that *look* on his face. You know the one. Like he just stepped into fucking Xanadu."

"You're full of shit," I say. He scans my face for a moment, almost as if trying to decide if the conversation is worth pursuing. His gaze hesitates at my lips, then finally locks onto my eyes.

"He has a scar. A little half-moon, about half the length of my little finger. Right here." His hand slips into my jeans as he says it, but stays at my hip instead of straying towards my cock. His middle finger traces the shape onto my skin, but I don't need him to do that. I already know the scar he's talking about. It's small, invisible while he's dressed. But it's very, very real.

"When?" I say hoarsely.

"A week after he moved here. Do you remember the weekend he spent with me and Alex? Friday night at Alex's house, Saturday night at mine."

"Which day?" I ask.

"All three. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. First at the party at Alex's, in a spare bedroom, then at my house on Saturday night and Sunday morning. And again the Thursday after," Ben says. Four days. At least four times, and I heard about... zero. "Are you going to cry?"

"I don't know. Probably," I croak. Ben's face softens, and behind him, Garen returns from the music room, backpack in hand.

"What uh... what's going on?" he says. After a moment, Ben stuffs his hands in his pockets and turns around. He and Garen stare at each other for several seconds, until finally, Ben turns back around and heads down the hall for the stairs. Garen lowers his backpack slowly to the floor next to his guitar case and crosses his arms.

"You gave me such shit for kissing him. And then I find you with his hands down your pants," he says flatly.

"Hand. Singular. And it's pretty fair, seeing as how they've apparently already been down yours," I say. His face doesn't change. Doesn't morph into some horrified mask of mortification at the idea that I know about it. Instead, it remains exactly the same, like he expected this to happen.

"You knew I wasn't a virgin. I never pretended to be," he says. Rage is boiling beneath my skin.

"I didn't think that meant you fucked some random guy and didn't tell me about it!"

"It wasn't while we were together. It wasn't even close, so I didn't think it would matter to you. Do you really want a list of every guy I've ever fucked around with? Fine—"

"Garen, don't."

"Ben's the most recent, other than you, and James was first, but fuck if there weren't a few in between. Dave, Matt, Patrick, Chris, Shawn, Drew, Brian, Jeff, Scott, Mike— actually, there were two Mikes. Then if you wanna count everyone I fucked in *Europe* when I spent the summer there before junior year, we've got Jacques, Thomas, Luc, and Guillaume, all from France. And then Diego and Eduardo from Spain, and Anthony, Vin, and Mario from Italy."

He stops there, breathing hard. It takes me a minute to realize that air is only entering my lungs through short, sporadic gasps as well.

"Is that it?" I say. He shakes his head and steps towards me, but can't seem to decide where to put his hands. They eventually settle on my shoulders.

“No, it’s not. Because the thing I really have to tell you is a lot more important. I’ve had sex over a hundred times, with nearly thirty different guys. I’ve done some weird stuff, some kinky shit, too. I’m the polar opposite of purity, okay? But none of it... fuck, none of it *meant* anything until you. I started fucking just after I turned fifteen, and for almost three years, I thought I got it, I thought I knew everything there was to know about being gay and having sex and every combination of those two concepts. But when you touch me, Travis... God, I feel like I’m a virgin all over again, like this whole thing is uncharted territory. And it’s fucking terrifying, partially because you are just a mildly psychotic choice of mine for a boyfriend—”

I laugh, and his hands shift up to my face.

“—but also because, you... you make me into someone worlds better than I ever thought I could be. You make me into a real human being, instead of just some cocky little rich boy with an expensive guitar and fancy lyrics. You make me into a man. The best man I could ever be.”

I’m unable to open my eyes for several minutes, certain that if I do, I’ll start crying and ruin this whole thing with big, embarrassing crocodile-tears. It’s with my eyes closed that I find his lips with mine and whisper against them, “Okay.”

“Okay what?” he asks, stroking my hair.

“Okay. I’ll marry you.”

Chapter Eighteen

The time it takes for us to get from school to home is the same as always, possibly even less since Garen seems to be speeding more than usual. It feels like it takes hours though, and by the time we clear the front door, I am shaking all over. Garen calls out for our parents once, twice, and then pulls me towards him, nearly crushing me in his arms.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe you said yes," he whispers against the top of my head. My whole body feels limp, like I'm made of clay, and when he backs me up against the wall, I let him hold me there, ground me.

"I can't believe I said yes either. How did we *get* here?" I ask. "We met three months ago, back when I still thought I was straight, and since then, we've become like, this... help me out. What *have* we become?"

He touches his forehead to mine and raises one of his hands to my face, stroking my cheekbone with his thumb. "We've become a force of nature."

I cannot believe that this man is in love with me. That this is the person I will kiss, fuck, love, be with for the rest of my life. I push away from the wall and back towards the stairs, my eyes still on Garen's face. I never want to look anywhere else.

"Come on. I wanna go up to your room," I say. He nods and follows me. My legs still feel like jelly, but at the top of the stairs, he hooks an arm around my waist, somewhat supporting me until we reach his room. He flicks on the lights and goes about his usual routine, dropping his backpack by the desk, hanging his jacket on the hook on his closet door. I kick off my shoes and crawl into his bed under the covers.

"How was track practice?" he asks. I yawn.

"Long. But good. It's been a while, and I missed it," I say, and I stretch a hand out towards him. "Come here."

He pauses near his dresser to toe off his sneakers and empty his pockets of phone, wallet, and keys, then joins me under the covers. I pull him onto me, and he kisses me softly, barely more than a slight brush of his lips to mine. I thread my fingers into the soft spikes of his hair as his mouth travels down my throat. As he presses a gentle kiss to my collarbone, I attempt to stifle another yawn. He looks up.

"Travis?" he says. I shake my head quickly.

"It's fine, it's nothing. Keep going," I say, and he laughs and rolls off me.

"You're about to pass out. Have you been sleeping okay?" he asks. I shake my head once more and stretch.

"I started a new kind of medication last week, and it's been fucking with me a little. I can't sleep at night, and it's all I wanna do during the day. I'm fine. Just a little tired," I say. He gestures for me to sit up, and when I do, he removes my belt and sweatshirt. I lean down to kiss him, but he shakes his head.

"No, not for that. Go to sleep," he says. I frown. "Really, Travis. You need it, and it's fine, I really don't mind. I can do my homework or something." He shifts towards the edge of the bed, but I grab his shoulder.

"Can you stay instead? Please?" I say. He nods and rolls onto his side to face me. I settle back down into

bed, my back pressed against his chest, and he kisses the back of my neck.

"I love you, T," he says.

"Love you too," I mumble. Within minutes, I am asleep, locked in his arms, his heartbeat steady against my back.

The next time I open my eyes, the room is completely dark and Garen is gone. I wait for my eyes to adjust, but before they can, the door opens.

"Garen?" Mom whispers. I freeze. Fuck. "Garen, honey."

The blankets are still drawn up to my shoulders, hiding the differences between my build and Garen's. But my skin isn't pale enough, my hair's all wrong, and if the lights come on... She closes the door, and I hear her open mine across the hall. What will she do when she finds my empty bed? Will she bolt back here to question Garen and find me here instead?

"Travis," she says. I sit up, tensed, waiting. But there is no explosion of terror in her voice. There is simply a sigh, and then the sound of her retreating to her and Bill's room down the hall. A few seconds later, the door opens again, just as I'm lying back down. Garen heads for his dresser without looking at me. When he turns away, I realize he's wearing my sweatshirt, a hoodie with LHS Track Team printed on the back. He strips off the hoodie, as well as his own shirt and jeans, and pulls on a pair of sweatpants. He arches his back and yawns, then joins me in the bed again. I immediately wrap my arms around him and settle into the crook of his arm. He kisses my forehead.

"Didn't realize you were awake," he says.

"Yeah, just got up. Where were you?" I ask.

"Your room. I heard the parents get in about ten minutes ago, so I borrowed your sweatshirt and went to go take your place. The same way you took mine, I imagine," he says.

"Sneaky," I say, yawning.

"You really should talk to your doctor, if you're still tired. You just slept for eight hours."

I twist to look at the clock. "Shit."

"It's fine. Not like you had anything else to do. It was your night off, remember? Just go back to sleep," he murmurs. I sigh.

"Fine. I should go back to my room, though," I say. He nods. "Night." I shift so I'm on top of him and kiss him. One of my hands is braced on the bed, and the other is flattened on his bare chest. Within thirty seconds, he's hard against my leg. The hand on his chest trails lazily down his body and begins to rub him through his sweatpants. He grabs my wrist.

"Thought you were going to bed," he whispers.

"I thought I was too. Guess I got distracted," I say. I lean back and he tugs my t-shirt over my head. As he reaches for the zipper on my jeans, I slip a hand into his boxers. The hand at my jeans begins to shake violently, and I pause.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and he nods, eyes closed.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine. I just... it's been a few weeks. I'd forgotten how much you affect me," he says.

"As opposed to the twenty-three other guys before me?" The words are out before I realize how insanely stupid they are. Garen blinks at me. My face feels hot, but those aren't the type of words you can take back. So instead, I can only wait.

"You're... you're different. There's a big distinction between sex with someone you barely know and sex with someone you barely know how to live without. And in case you haven't noticed... I'm engaged to you. Not any of them," he says. He reaches down and pulls my hand out of his sweatpants. "If you've got a problem with what I've done, then we have to talk about it."

"Twenty-three guys, Garen? I've been with you, and that's it. You've been with *twenty-three other guys*," I say. From then on, my mouth is running independently from my brain. "How am I supposed to compare to all them? I was just this pathetic little virgin, and I doubt all of *them* were. Some of them must have had experience, and I've got none, and then, you know, you have to consider the fact that a lot of them were guys from your military school, and like... how many push-ups can you do in a row?" I demand. His brows are crinkled together, as if he's trying very hard to see my point.

"I don't know. Sixty-ish before I start to get tired?" he says.

"See? I have track practice three days a week, sometimes more, and I can still only do half that," I say.

"I don't—I don't get where this is going, Travis."

"Tell me the truth. Were all your friends at Patton built like you? Six feet or taller, with perfect hard bodies and about two thousand extra bulging muscles?"

"No. Well, I mean, we all had to keep in shape, with all the workouts they made us do, so yeah, I guess *some* of them were built like me, but not *all* of them," he says. I sigh and roll onto my back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Garen. In the past three years, you've fucked twenty-three hot, experienced guys. And in the past three years, I've... let's see. Made the honor roll at school. Attempted suicide. Worked. That's pretty much it," I say.

"It doesn't matter. Fuck. It's not like I asked you to submit a résumé and list of references before I'd be your boyfriend. I wanna be with you for you, not for what you have or haven't done. That doesn't matter to me. And I... I think you should treat me the same way. I think you should realize that what who I've been doesn't matter as much as who you make me want to be," he says.

"I don't... I'm scared, okay? I want to be good enough, and I'm not. I know I'm not. I don't measure up," I say. Garen's eyes, of course, flicker down my frame.

"I think you measure up really well," he says. I shove him off the bed, and he clamps a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter, peering over the edge of the bed at me.

"You're an ass, you know that?" I say.

"I was giving you a compliment! And it's true! I could go get a ruler, if you—"

“Garen!”

He sobers immediately. “Please don’t worry? You’re the one I’m with. The only one I really want. Ever. So of course you measure up. You’re what everyone else was supposed to be measured *against*,” he says. We look at each other in silence for several minutes, both waiting for the other to speak. Finally, I roll out of bed and head for his dresser to dig in the top drawer for another pair of sweatpants. I find a pair of blue drawstring ones that ride low on my hips and pool around my feet.

“I wanna stay here tonight,” I say. “I can set the alarm so I wake up in time to get back to my room before Mom or Bill get up. I just wanna be with you tonight. If you want me to.”

“Of course,” Garen says. “I want you to be with me every night.”

I crawl back into bed, and he gets up off the floor to join me. We settle under the covers together, face to face, and when my eyes finally drift shut, he draws me closer and kisses the top of my head. “Goodnight, Travis.”

Chapter Nineteen

I'm alone in the bed again when I next wake up. My sense of déjà vu is corrupted completely by the fact that there's sunlight pouring in through the window, and the soft whisper of counting coming from the foot of the bed.

"Fifty-six... fifty-seven... fifty-eight... fifty-nine..."

"Sixty," I announce. The counting stops immediately, and Garen appears near my feet, his elbows braced on the edge of the bed.

"Morning, sunshine," he says, his breathing only slightly labored. I sit up, stretch, and shift onto my knees.

"Morning. Push-ups?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Push-ups were earlier. I was doing crunches just now," he says. I wrinkle my nose.

"Sixty of them? In the morning?" I say. He grins.

"I was going to do a hundred. You interrupted me," he says. I brush the sweat-dampened curls off his forehead and kiss him softly. He pulls back very slightly, just long enough to wipe his face with the hem of his t-shirt, then joins me on the bed. We lie there for a while, kissing lazily and touching each other with some unusual kind of feather-soft intimacy. Eventually, Garen settles for just pressing his forehead to mine and gazing at me.

"I could get used to this," I whisper. "Waking up like this, I mean. Having you here with me like this, all the time."

"I know. Guess it's not really that long, either. I mean, assuming I don't fuck up my grades too much more, I graduate in less than five months, and then I'm going off to college. A year and a half from now, you'll be out of this house too, and we could... I don't know. Find someplace of our own. For real. It could be like this every day."

"Sounds like a plan," I say softly. I don't mention that the idea of a year without him, while he's off at college with plenty of older, hotter guys around him, starts to rip a hole in my chest. I brush my palm against his cheek, watching the sunlight glint off the silver on my finger. He reaches up and covers my hand with his, nuzzling it slightly, his eyes fluttering shut.

"Garen, do you think you can move your car? It's blocking mine in."

Bree's voice only gives us enough warning to push slightly apart before the door opens. It doesn't give enough time for us to sit up and untangle our legs, or for me to put on clothing that is *not* just a pair of Garen's sweatpants. My sister freezes just inside the doorway, her huge blue eyes looking impossibly round. I move backwards so my spine is straight against the headboard, and Garen scrambles off the bed.

"Yeah, of course. M-My keys are right uh... right here," he stammers, snatching them off his dresser. I tug on the shirt I abandoned on the floor last night and duck around my sister.

"I need to take my pills," I mutter.

"Uh, yeah, clearly you fucking do," Bree says. I can hear her footsteps behind me on the stairs, and

Garen's behind her. I make a bee-line for the kitchen as Garen heads for the front door. Bree stalks after me.

"What did I just see?" she demands. My hands are shaking as I stuff two slices of bread into the toaster.

"I don't know," I say. She appears at my side suddenly, leaning around me to get in my face.

"Don't fuck with me, Travis. Not about this," she snarls. I dry-swallow two pills and turn to face her.

"Fine. What do you think you saw?" I ask.

"I think I saw you half-naked, cuddled up in bed with the guy who is supposed to be our *stepbrother* in a couple of months. I thought you were dating that Blaire chick. I thought you were *straight*," she says. I lick my lips, even though my tongue is dry.

"Believe what you want to believe, Bree," I say. I try to move past her, but she grabs my arm and hurls me back against the counter with surprising strength.

"Don't you fucking dare say that about this. Give me an answer, and do it now," she says. God, where the fuck is Garen right now?

"It's none of your fucking business!" I snap. As if in answer to my prayers, Garen appears at my side, gripping Bree's shoulder firmly.

"Bree, let go of him," he says. Bree shoves him off her, but releases me nonetheless.

"Don't fucking touch me, Garen. I'd say I can't believe you, but honestly? I'm not surprised. It was so obvious from the first day we met you that you were going to try something with my little brother, but I don't know how you got it to this point. This is so fucked up it's not even funny. You're supposed to be his *brother*, not whatever the fuck else you want to be," she says.

"It's not about what I want to be, it's about what I am," Garen says. Bree's response is directed towards me instead.

"What is he, Travis? Tell me the truth."

The room is completely silent. My refusal to answer is answer enough, but it seems like I have to really say it. Garen and Bree are almost comical opposites. His eyes are shut tight and he is shaking all over; she is staring me straight in the face, perfectly still. My fingers are itching to hook through Garen's belt loop and drag him towards me, my body aching to have his arms around me right now. I lick my lips again.

"He's my boyfriend."

"What did you just say, Travis Daniel?"

This has got to be a fucking apocalypse or something.

"Oh, fuck," Garen murmurs, spinning around and bracing his hands on the countertop. Bree whirls around towards the door, staring wide-eyed at our mother.

"M-Mom. I thought you and Bill had already gone to meet with the caterer," she says.

"Our appointment isn't until two o'clock. We were in the den," Bill says. There is a minute so silent that all I can hear at all is Garen's shaky breathing from behind me. The bread pops up in the toaster. And then my mom explodes.

"What did I hear you say, Travis Daniel McCall?" she demands.

"Nothing," I utter, on reflex.

"Don't you lie to me!" she shrieks. I flinch. "Your *what*?"

There is no possible way out of this. I want this to end. Even if it *does* require an apocalypse, even if I have to die right now, I want this conversation to not be happening. But apparently it's not my choice. "My boyfriend."

"What are you talking about?" Mom says. "What kind of joke is this?"

"I'm not... it's not a joke, Mom, I'm... I'm gay," I say. My face is on fire, but it's not out of embarrassment. A foreign terror is running through my veins, heating my whole body with panic. Mom's eyes are round and blazing.

"You are not," she says.

"Stop it, Mom. I really am. Why the fuck would I lie about this?" I ask.

"Don't you swear at me!"

"Mother! I just fucking told you I'm gay, and your fucking problem is with my fucking *swearing*?"

Behind me, Garen chokes on a laugh. Bad move.

"You!" Mom shrieks at him, and I feel him spin around. "This is all your fault! You came here and poisoned his mind! He would never be saying this if you hadn't stormed in here and made him consider all these horrible ideas! Who is it, Garen?"

"Who is what?" Garen asks softly.

"Which one of your disgusting friends did you set him up with? I know it wasn't one of *his* friends! I've met them all, and they're all perfectly respectable, perfectly *normal*. It was one of those disgusting little freaks you hang out with! The blonde or the short one, or one of those other faggots!"

I feel a stab of pity for Alex and Ben. They don't belong in this conversation.

"I didn't set him up with any of my friends, and they're not freaks. 'The blonde' isn't even gay!" Garen snaps.

"Then who is it? I want this boy's name! I want his name, and his phone number, and his parents' names!" Mom orders. Garen doesn't reply. I turn my eyes to the floor, willing myself not to move. I will not say anything. I will not betray this one necessary secret. After several minutes, Bill speaks.

"I believe... that the boy's parents' names are Bill Anderson and Marian Weisman-Anderson."

My head snaps back up. Bill is staring at Garen, who is staring back. Mom turns on Bill.

"What are you talking about?" she demands. Bill ignores her.

"I honestly can't believe you could do this," he says flatly. "After everything that happened at Patton, particularly. Every stupid stunt you pulled. Do you know how it feels, Garen? How it feels to be in my position?"

"I can imagine," Garen mutters.

"No, no, I don't think you can. You wouldn't know what it feels like to get a letter from a headmaster, telling you that your son has set a building on fire, or punched a teacher. And you wouldn't know what it feels like to see your son stumbling home drunk at four in the morning when he's fourteen. Or what it feels like to find coke in his room when he's sixteen. Or what it feels like to find out that his yearbook is a tally, and that all the boys circled in red are the ones he's slept with. And if you can't imagine any of that, I doubt you can imagine what it feels like to find out that you've been wrong all along. I thought things were different here, in Lakewood. I thought that you were done acting out in school. And I thought you were done drinking, and I thought you had stopped using. I thought you were done sleeping around, too. But I guess I was mistaken.

"No, you weren't," Garen says, his voice shaking. "I'm sorry about all of the shit I put you through, Dad, I really am. I've been doing fine in school, and I passed all my exams. You know I did. And you know I'm clean and sober, too. I haven't gotten wasted since last summer, and I haven't done coke since before we moved. And I'm in love with Travis. So, I'm not 'sleeping around,' as you so politely put it."

"Don't talk about my son that way!" Mom spits. Bill just shakes his head, again not seeming to hear Mom.

"Stop, Garen. Stop turning this into something it's not. Stop lying to me, stop lying to Travis, stop lying to yourself. Stop pretending that this is more than a game to you. A conquest," he says. My heart is screaming, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"It's not a game, Dad! Look!" Garen grabs my left hand and raises it so they can see the silver band on my ring finger. "You don't know everything that happened at Patton, and I'm not going to try to convince you that it wasn't what you think. But I'm not going to let you call bullshit on the only thing I've got left that makes me happy. I'm serious about this."

Bill's green eyes flash and he lets his head roll back. For one second, he looks so much like his son that I almost can't look at him.

"Of course you're serious about it right now, Garen, because it's the exact second you're saying it. But this won't still be going on a month from now."

"Why not?" Garen challenges. "Hell, it's been going on for months without any of you figuring it out. So I guess you really have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know you better than you think I do, Garen. You'll get bored of him. Or he'll get bored of you. Things will end badly, as they always do when you're involved, and Travis will end up with his heart broken."

"I'm not going to break his heart," Garen says.

"Why not?" Bill says, echoing Garen's previous words. "You break everything else. *Everyone* else. You hurt people, usually intentionally, sometimes by accident. You destroy almost everything you touch, and

then you never stick around to bother cleaning up your messes. It's true. Don't try to tell me it isn't. And if you love Travis today, you won't a few weeks from now. You treat human beings the way some people treat cell phones. The minute you find something newer that captures your interest, you'll trade in what you have for what you want. You'll break his heart, Garen, because that's what you do. You break things. And I will not let you break this boy any more than he is already broken."

There are several minutes of silence. My ears are buzzing, and I can almost feel Garen's head spinning with all the thoughts crammed into it. Bree looks scared, and Mom is clearly still seething. Bill just looks tired. Slowly, Garen releases my hand and crosses his arms over his chest, his eyes on the floor. Bill sighs.

"I want you to get out."

All the air in the house seems to disappear. I clutch the counter, staring at him. "What do you mean?"

"I want Garen to leave. I don't know where he will go, and to be quite honest, I don't really care right now. I love you, Garen, but I am tired of being your father when it's obvious that you don't want to be my son. So I want you to get out. Take your things with you, because you won't be coming back," he says. I almost laugh. There is no way this will actually work. There is no way this will actually happen.

Slowly... very slowly... Garen leaves the kitchen and heads upstairs to his room.

"You're insane," I snarl. Bill shakes his head.

"No, Travis. I'm not," he says.

"Yes, you are. Yes, you fucking are! He's your son, you can't kick him out!" I shout. Bill doesn't say anything. Neither Mom nor Bree seem at all concerned with backing me up, and there is still no air in this house. I bolt for my room. My schoolbooks are all backed in my bag anyway, clothes can fit easily in my track bag... I don't need much else. Then, from the doorway.

"Travis," Garen says, "stop. Stop packing. You're not coming with me."

I rotate slowly on the spot. "What do you mean?"

"If you come with me, they can call the cops and have them hunt down my car. An '88 Testarossa kind of stands out around here. Besides, you're a minor. I can't take you over state lines," he says. I stare.

"State lines," I echo. "Where are you going?"

He shrugs and heads for his room. I trail after him.

"Back to New York? Back to Ohio? Doesn't matter. I'm leaving Connecticut, that's for sure. This place is fucking hell, and I don't want to be here one second longer than I have to be," he says. He dumps everything out of his backpack and starts to shove things into it. Clothes, cell phone charger, and notebook after notebook after notebook. Handwritten sheet music spills out onto the floor, and he blinks at it, but doesn't stoop to pick it up.

"Take me with you. Please. All I need is you," I say softly. He shakes his head and hoists his bag onto his shoulder.

“Goodbye, Travis. I’ll miss you,” he says. He leans down and kisses me, barely a brush of mouth on mouth. He picks up his guitar and walks out.

Chapter Twenty

Monday comes sooner than it should. I probably only think this because I spend the rest of Saturday and all of Sunday holed up in my room, buried under a mountain of blankets. I don't do any of my homework, or call any of my friends. At the very most, I peek out from under the blankets occasionally to stare around the room, or go downstairs to get a muffin or something when I'm sure no one else is home. At the very least, I lie in bed and wait for one of two things to happen; either Garen to come home, or me to stop breathing. But soon enough, my alarm clock rings and I trudge down the hall to take a shower and get ready for school. The house is too silent now. Bree is on her way to school already, and Mom and Bill are both at work. I'm completely alone.

Since I haven't seen Garen or his car since Saturday morning, my only choice is to walk to school. It feels good to stretch my legs again, since I've been lying down for nearly two days straight, but the sidewalk is still covered in two inches of stupid January snow and I'm only wearing sneakers. My feet still haven't thawed out by the time I get to school and make my way to my locker.

"So, how hard are *you* gonna bomb the Spanish test today?" Faye asks, appearing by my elbow. Corey slumps against the locker on my other side and snorts.

"Please. Travis has never failed anything in his life. He probably studied for the entire weekend," he says. I dial in my combination and swing the door open, not bothering to apologize when it bangs against Nicole's arm.

"Come on, T, give us a number. How many hours?" she asks, only frowning slightly as she rubs her elbow. I step on the neat row of books on the bottom of my locker and yank my foot back so they all scatter across the floor without me having to take them out myself.

"Zero," I say. My voice isn't used to working anymore, and it sounds strange even to my own ears. I shove my backpack in my locker and pull off my sweatshirt. I'm left wearing a plain yellow t-shirt, my arms and all their stupid scars exposed. I don't even care anymore.

"Please," Corey repeats.

"Lies," Nicole agrees. I stoop down to pick up the books for my second and third period classes, then shove the rest back into my locker unceremoniously.

"I'm not lying. I could honestly give two shits about this test. I didn't even touch my Spanish book all weekend," I say. I slam the locker door shut and head for the cafeteria, the location of my first period study.

"Are you okay? You're not really acting like yourself," Faye says, her eyes wide. "What's up with you?"

Took them long enough to ask.

"He got kicked out," I say. I don't think I can stomach saying his name. Corey grabs my shoulder to try to stop me from walking, but I shrug it off.

"Who did?" Faye asks. I glare at her, and she shrinks slightly.

"Who do you think?" I demand. Swallowing my nausea, I add, "Garen."

"Oh my god. For what?" Nicole asks, covering her mouth in shock. "I've never even heard of somebody

getting kicked out of here! What'd he do, call in a goddamn bomb threat?"

"I'm not talking about school. I'm talking about my house," I say.

"Oh, Travis. What *happened*?" Faye gasps. Her reaction makes me feel even sicker. It's almost comical, almost exaggerated. Corey, however, looks tense.

"They didn't uh... they didn't find out, did they?" he asks warily. I nod once. Nicole taps me on the shoulder.

"Um, hello? Some of us clearly aren't in the loop here. Can you maybe share what's going on?"

This should be a big moment, some huge revelation. This should make me so panicked and embarrassed that I can't even stand to stay in the school for the rest of the day, and I have to skip all my classes because I don't want everyone to stare at me, *knowing*. But it isn't like that at all. It doesn't matter anymore. I already lost what I was really afraid to lose.

"I'm dating Garen," I say. "Or at least, I was."

"What? Bullshit. You mean, *Garen* Garen? Your *future stepbrother*?" Nicole demands. I nod a second time.

"What do you mean, 'was'?" Corey asks. They follow me into the cafeteria even though none of them are in my study period, and all crowd onto the bench across from me as I slump down at one of the lunch tables.

"I mean I'm not with him anymore. Bree walked in on us just... together, not even in a sexual way, and she flipped out. Mom and Bill heard her and flipped out too, and Bill told Garen to get the fuck out. Talked about all this really bad shit Garen did at Patton, with drugs and guys and whatever. Said he didn't want me to get 'broken,' whatever the fuck that means. So Garen just went along with it, dumped my ass, and left."

"I can't believe Bill kicked him out," Corey says.

"Well, what would *you* have done? He's already not thrilled with Garen being gay, or sleeping with a lot of guys, or always doing stuff he knows he shouldn't do. I think Travis falls into that last category. I'm not happy Bill did it, but what do you expect? For him to say, 'Oh, okay, son. Let's just move you two into one bedroom, Evelyn and I will call off our wedding, and you guys can just go and live happily ever after.' Come on. I've talked to Garen since you two got together, you know. He told me Bill even warned him, told him that he had to behave himself around you. He said you were fragile, because of, well, you know. He said Garen couldn't act the same way around you that he acts around everybody else, that if he tried anything with you, it might send you over the edge. Garen knew all of this, he heard it loud and clear, and he still chose to get together with you. This was one thing Bill expressly forbid him to do, because it could really hurt you, and he did it anyway. I'm really sorry things turned out the way they did. But if I were in Bill's place, I would've done the same thing," Faye says.

"So, what, you think they were *asking* for this? What the fuck, Faye, Travis is our best friend!" Corey snaps.

"I know! Of course he is, and I'm so sorry that he has to be hurting right now. But he knew things would never work out between him and Garen," Faye replies. They launch into it, their bickering becoming more and more heated. Nicole stares at me for several minutes before slowly rising to her feet and backing out

of the cafeteria. Great. Exactly what I needed, to lose someone else. Not that Nicole was ever my best friend, but still. I can't afford to have any more people bailing on me. Not now.

I turn sideways so I'm straddling the bench seat and lean my elbows on my knees, burying my face in my hands. I can feel the blood surging in my head, and the two people arguing a foot away from me doesn't help at all. I want some way to turn off the noise, to turn off my brain. Short of dying, however, there doesn't seem to be any way to do that.

"Hey..." says a quiet voice from directly in front of me. I snap upright, my eyes flying open again. Ben is facing me, straddling the bench just like I am, his knees almost touching mine. I exhale sharply.

"Ben, if you're here to fuck with me some more and tell me all the sordid details of Garen's past, I'd really appreciate it if you could just... not. I cannot deal with that right now," I say.

"That's not why I came over here," he says.

"Then why did you come, Ben?" I ask. I am suddenly so tired that I can't even force any venom into my voice. "Are you here to throw this all in my face? Or do you not even know what happened?"

A strange look comes over his face. "Travis... where do you think he *went* Saturday after his dad kicked him out?"

My muscles all lock into place as soon as he says that. I want to reply, to order him to tell me everything, but at the same time, I am glad I'm paralyzed now. I don't want to ask him, because I don't really want to know what the guy I'm in love with did in the hours immediately after breaking up with me. After several seconds, Ben seems to correctly interpret my silence.

"He was a mess when he showed up at my house," he says finally. "It took me half an hour to get the full story out of him, because he kept breaking off in the middle of it and pacing around my room. After he eventually finished telling me, he just sat down in the corner and hugged his knees to his chest. I was terrified to leave him alone because I didn't know what he'd do. It didn't help that his phone was ringing every ten minutes. Every time, it was the same ringtone, and every time, he'd just say, 'It's Travis, it's Travis,' and ball his hands up in his hair. At first I tried to convince him to answer it, but he just said he couldn't talk to you, that you couldn't ever hear from him again. After a while, I just turned the phone off, because he really seemed to be coming even more undone because of it. We stayed up until two in the morning, when he finally fell asleep right there in the corner."

"What happened on Sunday?" I ask hoarsely. Ben semi-shrugs.

"He was still asleep when I woke up around noon, and he stayed out until about three-ish. I went upstairs to make us both some food, and when I got back downstairs, he was awake and had changed his clothes. He told me he was leaving, that he couldn't stay in Lakewood anymore because he knew he'd try to see you if he was still nearby, and that that would ruin everything for you. He was going back to New York, probably, but wouldn't tell me anything more specific than that. He said it didn't matter... because he wasn't going to come back here ever again. He said that he might be in touch with me, but he wouldn't make any promises. Then he hugged me, and he told me goodbye, and that he'd miss me. He said that... if you ever asked me about him, I was supposed to just tell you that his dad was right about him, and that it's for the best. He asked me to tell you to forget about him."

"He wouldn't... he wouldn't say that," I say softly. Ben's eyes move slowly down to my hand, and he reaches out to touch my ring.

“He figured you wouldn’t believe me. So he told me that if that was the case, then I should tell you that he wanted you to get rid of the ring. He said it means ‘I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine,’ and that he gave it to you on your birthday. He said... he said you’re not his anymore. And that he’s not yours.”

My whole body – my heart, my head, my stomach – feels completely empty. I am entirely hollow. Ben hesitantly moves from brushing one finger against my ring to covering my whole hand with his. It’s obvious he’s uncomfortable, but his skin grounds me, and I’m grateful. I swallow.

“So he’s uh... he’s really not coming back, is he?” I ask. “Ever, I mean.”

Ben looks away and after a moment, shoves his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. “I don’t think he is. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I’m not going to lie to you. I think he’s gone for good.”

Why can’t the earth just open up and swallow me? I’d rather be six feet under than have to feel what I am feeling right now.

“I’m not taking off the ring. Whether he wanted me to or not, I’m not going to fucking do it. He can’t say I’m not his anymore and then go and try to make that choice for me,” I say, almost daring Ben to protest. He doesn’t, just nods instead.

“I figured that’s how you’d react. I don’t blame you,” he says, standing up. “I need to get to my Government class... if you need to talk, though, um...” He leans over and grabs one of my pens off the table, and scribbles seven digits on my palm. I’m suddenly forcibly reminded of the second day with Garen, of him scrawling his number down the length of my arm, right over the scars that never bothered him until the day in the alley behind the Daily Grind. “This is my cell number, okay? You can call me whenever you need to... I know we’re not friends. And I don’t expect us to suddenly *become* friends. But I can probably relate a lot better than they can—” he jerks his head towards Faye and Corey, who are still snapping at each other “—and I... I don’t know. We might be more alike than you think we are.”

I nod without really making the conscious decision to. My brain seems to be independent of my body now. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry, Travis. Even back when I wanted him, I never wanted you to get hurt like this. To be honest? I never really thought it could *happen*. I sort of thought that once he finally got you, that that would be... I don’t know. It. That you’d just be this forever thing,” he says quietly.

“I know,” I say. “I sort of thought so, too.”

Chapter Twenty-One

"Alright, boys, make sure you take everything with you! I don't want to hear any complaints on Monday that somebody lost their damn iPod, we clear?" Coach bellows at us. As a general rule, most of us on the team assume that the constant bellowing is a result of way too many steroids in his college years.

"Clear!" we all echo. Corey turns to me and nudges my arm.

"You wanna come over tomorrow? Miles and I were gonna watch a shitload of movies and eat our weight in nachos," he says. I grin, but shake my head.

"Can't. You know I've gotta work my ass off now, since I've been dicking around in school lately. If I don't get Caldwell's project done by Sunday night, there's no way I'll be able to finish all my other assignments due next week," I say. Corey rolls his eyes.

"I thought we were done with losing you to schoolwork," he says. I shrug.

"Guess not," I say. As the bus turns into the school parking lot, we all lazily collect our belongings and start to filter down the aisle. I have to grip the overhead bin as the bus lurches to a stop in front of the main entrance, then sling my duffel over my shoulder as I file out past the rest of the team.

"Nice time tonight, McCall," Logan, the Varsity team captain, says, clapping me on the shoulder. I flash him a brief smile.

"Thanks, Lo," I say. "I'll see you at practice Monday."

"Damn. I was hoping you'd hang out with me on Monday instead."

I turn very slowly, not daring to believe that that voice could be real. Never in my wildest fantasies could I have hoped for this. But it's real; Garen is leaning against the building, fifteen feet away. His backpack and guitar case are on the ground near him, and his eyes are on me.

"Garen?" I say. He bites his lower lip to hold back a smile.

"Come on. Don't tell me you forgot about me already," he says. I shake my head.

"Of course not. I never could. Not even if you wanted me to," I say. The smile disappears as he begins to walk towards me.

"I couldn't forget you either. I tried. Believe me, I tried. I thought it was for the best, but the second I was away from you, I realized that the best place for me is with you. That's the only place for me," he says.

"Don't say that unless you mean it," I force out. He shakes his head and touches my cheek.

"I've never meant anything more," he whispers, and he presses his lips to mine.

"Travis? Travis, wake the fuck up! God, I've been saying your name for almost five minutes!"

My eyes snap open, then blink repeatedly to adjust to the darkness. "Huh?"

"I said, I've been trying to wake you up for five minutes. We're at the school," Corey says. I rub the sleep from my eyes and stretch as much as the cramped seat allows.

"Right. Thanks. Sorry," I mutter. The disappointment is already starting to make my heart sink, but I clear my throat and turn to face Miles in the seat behind me. If I really work at it, I can fight this off.

"Do you know if Faye is still planning to come over my house on Sunday to work on our project?" I ask. He shrugs and stands up.

"Not too sure. She didn't mention it, but she's coming over tomorrow. I can ask her to call you when she gets home," he says. I nod.

"Thanks, man," I say. I stand up as well and grab my duffel from the overhead bin. Waking up from a dream about getting off the bus makes actually getting off the bus seem surreal in itself. I should be used to this shit by now, though. I've been having them for almost three weeks now, almost every night since Garen left. Not usually in regards to track practice, but in regards to almost everything else. I come home from school, and he's playing guitar in his bedroom again. I turn to the next customer at the Grind, and it's him. He comes into my Pre-Calculus class, my Brit Lit class, my Spanish class. The fantasy itself doesn't matter, because every time I wake up, the reality is the same. Garen is gone. He has been for almost a month. And he will be forever.

"Nice time tonight, faggot," Logan, the Varsity team captain, says, clapping me on the shoulder so hard my knees almost buckle.

"Thanks, asshole," I reply, gritting my teeth.

"That was... charming."

I rotate carefully on my heels, keeping my head down until my eyes hit the speaking person's shoes. Slightly faded red Converse, not pristine white running shoes. Very slowly, I raise my eyes to Ben's face.

"It's been like that for a while now. I guess Nicole figured if I was open with her about... you know... then she could be open with pretty much everyone else in the school. Logan's reaction was actually one of the more favorable ones," I say.

"Really?" Ben says. I nod.

"He threw me into a row of lockers two weeks ago. And Will Bernard tries to trip me every day in the cafeteria. Jack Thorne did this," I say, holding my bag up so he can see the word "cocksucker" scribbled across the side of it in permanent marker.

"Shit. Well, believe it or not... it gets better," he says. "I speak from experience. I came out freshman year, and at first, it was so shitty I wished I'd just stayed a closet-case until college. My real friends were cool with it, and I guess my parents took it okay. The rest of the school, though... that was the real problem. Everybody started giving me so much shit. None of it even started to calm down until I was a sophomore, and even now, it's still fucked up sometimes."

"You're not making me feel any better," I say.

"I wasn't really trying to," Ben says, shrugging. I sigh and sit down on the sidewalk, slumping back against the side of the school. After a minute, Ben sits down next to me.

"You wanna talk?" he asks. I shrug half-heartedly, but he doesn't seem too eager to leave me alone, so finally, I look at him.

"I hate this," I whisper. "I don't even get it. How is it possible that just a few months ago, things were so easy? It should've been more complicated back when I was in the closet and had a boyfriend, but now I'm out, and I'm single, and it should be okay, but it isn't. I wasn't prepared for any of this."

"That's because it's a lot easier not to give a shit what people think when you've got somebody going through it with you. Being gay with a boyfriend and being gay when you're alone are completely different things. If you'd come out back when Garen was still around, do you honestly think people would've started shit with you? The guy was over six-feet tall, completely jacked, and had military training. Nobody was going to pick a fight with him. But now, you're just you," he says.

"I hate being just me," I sigh, letting my eyes drift shut.

"Like I said, it gets better eventually. It's probably never gonna be a walk in the park, as long as you're in Lakewood, but it'll get easier," he says. We sit in silence for several minutes before a sudden thought occurs to me.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I ask, opening my eyes again. "It's like, ten o'clock. Normally nobody's around when we get back from our away meets."

"They leave the school open late when sports teams have away meets, and I told you a few weeks ago that Jeff gives us all extra music room keys. I'm actually here working with Alex, Jeremy, and Mason. They're all still putting their stuff away. I came out when I saw the bus pull in. I wanted to check up on you," he says. I can't help but smile a little at that.

"Thanks, Doc, but I already have one shrink," I say. Ben nudges my arm with his.

"Then you should think about getting your money back, 'cause obviously it's not working," he says, and I push him lightly. The front doors to the building open a few feet away from us, and his friends from Musical Theory come out. He stands up quickly, brushing off his jeans, and takes one step towards them before he pauses and turns back to face me.

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the night?" he asks. I shrug.

"Not really. Mom never knows what time my meets are gonna run until, so she just leaves the porch light on and tells me to make sure I lock up again whenever I come home," I say. Ben shoves his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and jerks his head towards his friends.

"Wanna come out with us? We're only headed to Taco Bell, no place interesting, but..." He hesitates. "I don't know. It probably beats going home, for you."

It only takes me a few seconds to decide, even though those seconds are tainted with a little bit of apprehension. How do I expect hanging out with Garen's old friends to make it any easier to get over him? But regardless, I stand up and shoulder my duffel again.

"Yeah, sounds cool. Thanks," I say. The next thing I know, I'm sitting next to Ben in a Taco Bell booth, with Alex, Jeremy, and Mason wedged into the other side.

"You ever wonder what's actually in this stuff?" Jeremy, a scrawny blonde with a five o'clock shadow, says, waving his quesadilla. A chunk of what might be chicken drops onto the wrapper.

"Fried rat's ass," Alex says.

"Baby livers," Mason, a guy in a hat who smells faintly of weed, adds.

"Wildebeest," Ben says. I push the final few bites of my soft taco away.

"Okay, I think I'm done," I say. Ben laughs. Almost as if they choreographed the movement, Alex, Mason, and Jeremy all lean forward slightly.

"So, Travis, what are your intentions with young Benjamin?" Mason asks. Ben aims a blind kick under the table at him, possibly getting Jeremy as well. I tense slightly. Is this whole thing a set-up?

"W-What?" I stammer.

"You guys are assholes," Ben says. "I didn't ask him to come with us as my *date*. This is Travis *McCall*. As in Ev McCall's son? As in *Garen*'s Travis?"

Garen's Travis. Yeah, right.

"No shit, man," Mason says, looks surprised. "Sorry."

"It's fine," I mutter.

"So, how is he anyway? We haven't heard from him since he left for wherever." Jeremy adopts a grating New York accent at least one octave above his own voice. "What's this? He doesn't call, he doesn't write. Weeks, we wait, and nothing!"

"I uh... I actually haven't heard from him either. Not since the night he got kicked out and broke up with me," I say. I reach down to twist my ring around my finger, almost out of habit. There's a brief pause.

"Wow, Ben, you sure know how to lead a conversation into a misinformed and awkward silence," Alex finally says.

"Yeah, because it's definitely my fault," Ben says, rolling his eyes.

"So, not that we don't love your company, Travis, but if you're not here because you wanna get in good with Ben's friends, and subsequently get in his pants, then why are you coming out with us tonight?" Mason asks. I glance around at them all, then focus on the tabletop. I have no idea what to say. Probably because I don't *know* why I'm here. Ben reaches under the table and taps the back of my hand, as though absorbing the tension from my body through the single point where his skin touches mine. For a second, I'm comforted.

"I asked him to come out with us because he's been going through some shit lately. You guys remember what people were like with me when the rumors first started going around," he says. The others murmur in understanding. I clear my throat.

"If you guys don't mind me asking... are any of you, um..." They seem to understand without me having to finish my awkwardly phrased question.

"Mason and I are both straight," Jeremy says. "And well... Alex is straight too, I guess?" Alex nods in confirmation.

"Except when he's drunk and ends up making out with Ben. Which actually happens pretty frequently,"

Mason says.

"Is it my fault if he's a good kisser?" Alex asks. "Strictly above-the-waist kind of bisexual, though. I have no interest in touching any dick that isn't my own."

"Your journey to the land of too much information can stop immediately," Ben says.

"What about your friends?" Mason asks, nodding to me.

"What about them?" I ask. He raises his eyebrows at me, but I still can't understand where he's going with this. Ben leans back in his seat and stretches his arms out over the back of the booth.

"He means, are they breeders?" he asks.

"Hey!" Mason says, frowning. Ben flashes him a dry, unapologetic smile.

"Um..." I say. "They're all straight, yeah. Faye and Miles have been together for like a year and a half or something, and Corey's really into girls but doesn't date seriously too much. No, it's uh... it's only me."

Ben shifts his arm from the back of the booth onto my shoulders and gives them a slight squeeze. "Of course. Ten percent, my ass. Looks like it's just the two of us in this pathetic waste of a town. Well, us, and Alex when he's wasted."

"Hey, I don't hear you complaining when it's happening," Alex says.

"That's because it's hard to complain when you've got somebody's tongue in your mouth," Ben points out. Jeremy snorts.

"I have to admire your tact, Ben. Talking about Frenching the dude across from you when you've got your arm around the dude next to you," he says.

"Come on, it's not like I'm hitting on him," Ben says, glancing at me. His arm suddenly feels heavy on my shoulders. *This is not Garen's arm* part of my brain seems to be screaming at me. Garen's arm is longer, and has more muscles, and isn't swathed in soft black fabric, and is connected to Garen's body, which is definitely not next to me right now. Which will definitely never be next to me again. Ben must feel me tense up under his arm, because he suddenly withdraws it and almost shrinks in on himself, drawing his legs up from under the table and hugging them to his chest.

"What time is it?" Mason asks. I push my sleeve up to check my watch.

"A little after eleven," I say.

"We should probably head out," he replies.

"Yeah, you and your fucking curfew," Jeremy snorts as we shovel our empty wrappers and soda cups into the trash and head out to the parking lot.

"I told you, it's only for another week. And it's your fault anyway, you're the one who convinced me to stay out until three last week. You know what my mom's like," Mason says. Ben snorts.

"Yeah, a fuckin' Nazi is what she's like," he says. "Where'd you park?"

"Over by the dumpster, 'cause I'm classy like that. Jer, you want me to drive you? I'm gonna pass by your house on the way to Alex's anyway," Mason offers. Jeremy nods.

"Yeah, thanks. Travis, are you gonna ride with Ben or us?" he asks. Ben shakes his head.

"I live like, ten minutes away from their house. I can take him." I wonder if he notices that he automatically referenced the boy who is not here.

"Alright, that's cool. See you Monday, then," Mason says, ducking into the driver's seat of his sedan.

"It was cool hanging out with you, Travis. I'll see you both in school," Alex says. He claps me on the shoulder, punches Ben on the arm, and follows Jeremy to Mason's car.

"Wish you hadn't come out with us?" Ben asks with the smallest hint of a smile as we both get into his SUV.

"No, no," I say quickly. "The guys are great. I actually... had a much better time than I'd anticipated. It helped keep my mind off of... him. And stuff. So uh, yeah, thank you."

"Any time," he replies, but he doesn't look at me again before pulling out of the parking lot. I reach out and run my hand across the dashboard.

"No offense, but uh... you're kind of a small guy. Do you really need a car this big?" I ask. He laughs.

"I've five six. And it's a family car. We've got this, my dad's Saturn that he uses to drive to work, and my mom's minivan. We need a lot of space. I've got four sisters and one brother."

"Shit. Really? Are they all younger?" I ask. He nods.

"Yep. Rosie is ten, Jane is eight, Izzy is five, and Madison is three. And my brother Asher is four months," he says. I twist as sideways as I can in my seat and let the side of my face fall against the headrest.

"So do you do a lot of babysitting, then? Herding all the little ones around like some kind of midget rodeo?" I ask.

"That is probably the weirdest description of my family that I've ever heard. But it's not entirely inaccurate," he says. He falls silent after that. The next song that comes up on whatever mix he's playing in the stereo is loud, and sounds somewhat painful, but somehow, I drift off anyway. When I actually come to, the car is pulling into my driveway. I blink a few times.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it. You looked like you needed it anyway," Ben says, shrugging off my apologies.

"Thanks again... for inviting me out tonight. It was fun," I say. He nods.

"We should uh, do it again sometime," he says. Something from his tone of voice gives me the impression that despite his words, he'd rather not. In a way, I'm not surprised. I wouldn't want to be around me too much right now either.

"Thanks for driving me home. I'll see you Monday," I mutter, seizing my duffel and hopping out of the car.

He doesn't pull away until I'm done unlocking the door. Once I'm inside the house again and the sound of his tires on the pavement has faded, everything is all too silent again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Hello?"

"What are you doing tonight?" Corey asks without preamble. I sigh and shift my phone to my other ear so I can roll back into the same position I always sleep in, curled up on my left side.

"Nothing. Are you surprised?" I say dully.

"Not really. Listen, Susan Baxter is having a party tonight," he continues. I yank the blankets up over my head.

"I hate Susan Baxter. She sexually assaulted me when we were five. You know this, so why are you asking me to go to her party?" I ask.

"She didn't sexually assault you, you drama queen. She kissed you. It's not like it even counts."

"The next time I see you, I'm going to do to you exactly what she did to me, and then you can try to tell me that it doesn't count," I say. I'm in my now typical pissy mood, and the last thing I need tonight is to go to a party.

"That's completely different. For one thing, we're seventeen now, not five. And for another, I don't like guys."

"I don't like *girls*."

"Dude, I didn't like girls when I was in kindergarten either. Five-year-olds are like, asexual. But that's really not the issue. You haven't really hung out with anyone since... you know. We miss you, man. It's not healthy for you to be such a hermit all of a sudden," he says. I feel a twinge of guilt at his words, and decide not to point out that I hung out with Ben, Alex, Jeremy, and Mason last week, since I doubt it'll help my case much. I peek out from under the blankets to check the time. Eight o'clock. It couldn't hurt to go out tonight. I could be back by ten, if I really wanted, and then I could count that as my social interaction for the month. But my bed is warm and comforting, and high school parties are pretty much boring as shit when you can't get drunk because alcohol counteracts your antidepressants.

"I'm really not up to it tonight. But we'll hang out sometime this week, for sure, for February break," I hedge.

"And what better way to kick off February vacation than a party?" Corey says, but I can already tell that he's going to let me off the hook. I can relax.

"I don't consider vacation started until I'm actively sitting on my ass on a school day. Talk to me on Monday or Tuesday and *then* we'll kick off vacation," I say. He snorts.

"Yeah, Trav, because you're exactly who I wanted to spend my Valentine's Day with," he says. I bury my head under the pillow, only taking the phone with me as a second thought.

"Christ. Valentine's Day. Am I pathetic for wishing I'd gotten more time to deal with all this shit before this stupid fucking Hallmark bullshit holiday came around?" I grumble.

"You're not pathetic. But think of it this way. After next week, you can just be done thinking about him. You don't have to have some random day reminding you of him in any of the months looming towards

you or whatever,” Corey points out. I unearth myself from the mess of pillows and blankets, and sit up.

“He turns eighteen next month. Month after that is his prom, which we both know he would’ve somehow convinced me to go to with him. Month after that, he would’ve graduated. Also, did you honestly just use the word ‘looming’ in casual conversation? Who does that?”

“I do, apparently. But come on. At this point, you’re just coming up with excuses to think about him for the rest of your life. I mean, yeah, okay, you’re going to feel like shit on his birthday, because wherever the fuck he is, he’s still turning eighteen. But prom, graduation, all that shit... it’s not like he has a monopoly on the date. Especially considering he won’t be attending either,” he says. I stand up and stretch before heading over to my computer to check my email, which is of course empty.

“I know. I’ve been thinking about that lately—”

“Of course you have.”

“Bite me. Anyway, I’ve been thinking about that. If he’s really gone...” Please, God, don’t let him be gone anymore. “I mean, he can’t graduate with the credits he has. He’s missing everything after exams, so he’s a full semester short. It’s kind of fucked to think of him as a high school drop-out, you know?”

“I like how that’s what you choose to focus on. The guy is completely AWOL, without the slightest hint to where he is, and you’re worried about his *studies*? Do you honestly work at being this much of a nerd? Forget it, I already know the answer.”

“Did you seriously call me just to make fun of me when you know I’m in a bad mood?” I demand. He snorts.

“You’ve been in a bad mood since the day I met you,” he says. “And no, actually, I called you to invite you to a party, but you turned me down, you antisocial little twat.”

“Hang up, Cor,” I say.

“Really, Travis, at least *try* to do something social this week?”

“Corey, I’m serious. I’m not in the mood to do anything tonight. And I’m not going to promise to be in a better mood later. I don’t want to go to a party just so everybody can call me a faggot and a freak, and I don’t want to hang out with Faye and Miles, since they’re both just going to tell me how justified Bill was in kicking my boyfriend out. So unless you can somehow make it possible for me to be around people without having to be social, be happy, or be sane, I’m probably going to just spend this entire week right where I am now. At home.”

There. I said it. Never mind the fact that Corey probably already knew everything I was going to say; it feels good to actually just get it out there regardless. He’s quiet for almost a minute before I finally get any sort of reply.

“Five, five, five, eight, four, six, three,” he says finally. There is that telltale pause after the first three digits, the same pause everyone uses when they say a phone number. Problem is, I don’t recognize the number.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“I copied it off your arm that Monday during your study period. You were pretty out of it, and I figured you

might need it at some point. I think he's the closest you're gonna get to being around someone without having to be social or happy or sane, so... five, five, five, eight, four, six, three," he repeats. I don't have a pen near me, so I type the numbers into a blank email window.

"Thanks," I say after a pause. I can almost picture him shrugging.

"Just trying to help, man," he says. "I gotta go. Call me if you need me, though, yeah?"

"Yeah," I say before disconnecting. The call is over for about ten seconds before I'm dialing in the new number. He picks up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Um... it's Travis," I say awkwardly. Shit. Why didn't I stop to think about what I would actually say before I called?

"Travis," he echoes, obviously surprised. "Hey. I figured you lost my number by now."

Figured as in hoped, most likely. Big shock. If I were him, I'd hope for that too. I don't want to irritate him any further by admitting that Corey gave me the number, so, of course, I lie. "No, um, I still had it."

"Oh. So, what'd you call for?" he asks.

"No reason," I say, as casually as I can manage. "I just wanted to say uh... say hi and stuff."

"Travis? You're really shitty at this 'play it cool' thing. Just so you're like, aware of that."

Ugh. Fuck it.

"My best friend, Corey, told me I've been really distant lately, and that all my friends are worried about me because of it. I guess they think I'm going to have a repeat of freshman year or whatever." Did I really just say that out loud? "I'm not, but I thought I should maybe do something social just to prove to everybody that I'm not completely insane. Only the problem with that is that I'm actually really, really close to losing my mind, and you're the only person who I think I can stand being around right now, because you're the only sort-of-friend I have who doesn't expect me to be Shiny Happy Travis all the time, since you're the only sort-of-friend I have who doesn't actually really like me all that much."

There is a very pronounced pause, and then he laughs.

"I never said I didn't like you, Travis," he says.

"Well, you imply it a lot," I argue. He snorts.

"When?"

"The... the day in the hall. When you told me about, you know, you and him sleeping together."

"What, you mean the day I had my hand down your pants?"

There's another brief silence.

"Yeah, that one."

"You're a freak, Travis. You really, honestly are," he says. I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off and forget I ever called, but he speaks before I can. "You should come over. I'm in the middle of doing something, or I'd offer to come there. But you can help me, or watch, or bug the shit out of me, or whatever. My house is only ten minutes away from yours. Fifteen Emerson Circle."

I know the street. It's close enough that I can walk with no problem even now, when there's still snow on the ground. "Okay. I'll leave soon. If, you know, you're sure you're not too busy and stuff."

"Like you give a shit whether I'm busy or not. You're just worried that I'm only inviting you over because I don't wanna be responsible if you kill yourself," he says. How the fuck can he read me this well? It's starting to get obnoxious.

"This is true," I admit.

"I wouldn't have invited you over unless I wanted you to come over. Just, when you get here? Don't go up the walk to the house, just come around the back to the sliding glass door. I live downstairs, everybody else is up on the main floor or second floor. You don't have to knock either, I'll leave it unlocked."

"Okay. I'll see you soon, then," I say. I hang up, wondering how the hell I went from burying myself alive under all my blankets to actually having plans in the course of fifteen minutes. Who is actually running my life, anyway?

It only takes me twenty-five minutes to walk to Ben's house, but I stand in the driveway for at least another five, trying to convince myself that it's not weird to sneak around the back of some guy's house and let myself in. Eventually, I realize it's even weirder to spend an unnecessary amount of time leaning against the basketball pole in his front yard in the dark. I make my way around to the back of the house and push open the sliding door. It leads into some kind of rec room, but a door on the adjacent wall is open, letting faint music seep out to greet me. I knock on the door frame before I enter.

Like Garen's room back at the house—the room I've refused to go in since the night he left, after I managed to pick myself up off the floor hours after he had peeled out of the driveway—Ben's bedroom is almost dripping in personality. The real shock is the personality it's dripping in. I half-expected his room to be covered in posters of emo bands, plastered in pictures of his friends from Musical Theory, and mostly buried under piles of black clothing and band t-shirts. It's almost the exact opposite. The room itself is somewhat small, with dark blue walls and polished wood floors. A queen-sized bed is pushed up into the far corner, where it takes up at least a quarter of the room. There is a normal desk, a normal dresser, a normal nightstand, a normal stereo. The thing that really shocks me is the wall opposite his bed, which is crammed with shelf upon shelf of books. Some of the books are newer ones that appear to only have been read once, some are modern novels with worn spines from repeated openings, and some are cracked old volumes that are almost falling apart with age. There can't be less than a hundred books against that one wall.

"Wow," I murmur. I see a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye, and only then do I realize that Ben is sitting on his bed, sprawled back across the pillows. He's surrounded by books as well, most of which look like encyclopedias and reference textbooks, and has a legal pad perched on his knee and a pen in his hand. When I finally get around to meeting his eyes, he smiles slightly and reaches up to remove a pair of glasses with dark red rectangular plastic frames.

"Hi. Took you long enough to get here," he says.

"Sorry. It takes a while to walk. I don't drive," I say. He frowns.

"I thought you were seventeen," he says. I shrug.

"I am. I just don't drive," I say. He shifts a few of the encyclopedias around to make room for me on the bed, and I sit.

"Do you want something to drink? I can make you some coffee, or something. You've gotta be freezing after walking over here," he says. I shake my head.

"No, I'm fine. I don't drink coffee much, anyway. My psychiatrist says I should avoid having too much caffeine because of my medication," I say. I have no idea why I keep saying stuff like this to him. Repeat of freshman year, my psychiatrist, medication. I don't talk about this stuff, ever. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off with a gesture to the books scattered all over the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Researching," he says, tipping his notepad towards me so I can see that the page is almost full of neat, tiny writing. I flip open the book nearest to me and read the title page. It's a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

"Is this for your English class?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"A few months ago, I submitted some story to an art festival. When I won, the guy giving me the award said that reading my story 'was like reading a Lewis Carroll novel that featured interjections from Oscar Wilde.' I've studied both of them, so I think I understand what he was saying, but I'm just doing a little research now to make sure," he says. I reach over him to pick up another book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

"So, what was he saying?" I ask. He snorts.

"That I'm a flaming homosexual with a penchant for writing caustic, drug-induced children's stories," he says. "As far as literary compliments go, I guess I could've done worse. But I'd rather he hadn't compared me to a guy who may or may not have been a pedophile."

"Do you write a lot?" I ask. I see him tense slightly as I reach for his notebook and flip through the pages without really reading anything. He doesn't relax again until I hand it back.

"I guess you could say that. Now, do you wanna tell me the real reason you wanted to see me tonight?" he asks. I blink at him.

"I already told you. Corey said I should get out more, but I didn't want to go to a party or something big like that," I say. Ben sinks back onto the mess of pillows behind him and tosses his notebook on the floor.

"Do you have something *against* parties?" he asks. Of course not. The last party I went to, I hooked up with my ex-fiancé while he was dressed like a raccoon. I love parties.

"No, I just didn't feel like going to one tonight," I say.

"Will you feel like going to one next Tuesday?"

"I won't know that until next Tuesday," I say, and then I freeze as something clicks in my memory. "Wait, you mean Valentine's Day?" He nods. What the fuck? He cannot be asking me out. He cannot be doing that right now. If he is, I'm going to punch him in the face.

"Every year, Alex throws a 'Love Sucks' party at his house. Sort of the anti-Valentine's Day party, I guess. It's usually between fifteen and thirty people, all of whom are single and therefore have no other plans for the day. I figured you would think the theme was fitting right now. So if you don't have anything better to do, maybe you could stop by," he says. I let my breath out slowly, trying not to drown him in my relief. I really hadn't wanted to have to punch him.

"Maybe, yeah. What time?" I ask.

"It starts around seven thirty, and ends whenever you feel like leaving. A lot of us just crash at his place and head home sometime the next day. But if you wanted to leave that night, I could always give you a ride, since you don't drive," he says. I want to make myself agree to go, but the threat of another night like how tonight started keeps me silent. I can't make promises that I can't keep. I can't swear to him that I'll go if there's a chance I'll spend next Tuesday curled up in bed just like I have been so much lately. Instead of nodding, I shrug.

"I'll try."

Somehow, it still feels like an empty promise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I hate parties. No matter what I thought, no matter what I had convinced myself of before, I hate them. Especially when the first thing I see upon entering one is a couple kissing. On Valentine's Day. Of course.

"Travis! You made it!" Alex calls from across the room. The entire party seems to be centered in his basement, which is huge enough to be divided into different sections. Most people seem to be in either the section devoted to a TV playing some soppy romantic comedy, or in the section devoted to... beer pong. Alex is in neither. He's stationed in front of an old refrigerator, talking to Ben, Mason, and Jeremy. I weave my way through people to point at Ben.

"You said this party was about love *sucking*. Not about love *being awesome and a reason to make out in front of me*," I accuse. He glances over to the couple I passed.

"That guy's actually cheating on his girlfriend right now. He's supposed to be dating a girl from another school, and that chick's in my math class. So, see? Love *does* suck," he says. Alex pushes off the refrigerator and wraps an arm around my neck in a very unexpected hug.

"I'm really glad you made it. Ben said he invited you, but the party started at like, seven, and it's like, ten o'clock right now. I was afraid you wouldn't make it. I was *terrified*," he says. This hug has lasted way too long. I untangle his arms from me and guide him back to the refrigerator after helping myself to a beer from it.

"Let me guess. He started drinking around seven?" I say. Mason snorts.

"More like six thirty. He likes to pre-party," he says. Alex tries to fill me in on the events I've missed, which mainly seem to include a lot of music, a lot of drinking, and a lot of talking. The party itself is a pretty mellow one, mellow enough that I don't feel bad about helping myself to a second beer once my first is gone. I'm not supposed to drink, of course, and if any of my regular friends were here to see this, they'd have a shit fit. I've gotten about a thousand different "don't mix antidepressants with alcohol" lectures, but I feel fine. I don't feel any different from usual, really.

"Do you guys have parties often?" I ask. Ben shrugs.

"Not, you know, once a week, but I guess we have them... once a month, maybe?" he suggests. The others nod along.

"Alex doesn't usually get this plastered, though. I mean, he'll have a beer or whatever—"

"Beers are plebeian and I am like unto a god and shit. I've been doing shots of tequila," Alex interrupts.

"To being plebeian," Jeremy announces, tapping the neck of his beer against my third one.

"Anyway... he doesn't usually get like this, but he decided to go overboard since it's a holiday," Ben finishes.

"I'm doing this little thing I like to call 'drowning my sorrows.' I'm mourning my loveless Valentine's Day," Alex says.

"Dude, you *love* being single. Who are you trying to fool?" Mason says. Alex shakes his head.

"I *usually* love being single. But what's the fucking point of being single on Valentine's Day? I get that it's

a shitty Hallmark holiday, but still. Nothing like being alone on a day like this to make you realize how truly horrible life can be. Why do you think we have this party every year?" he says.

"If I remember correctly, it started in eighth grade because Jessica Spring had just broken up with me, and I was really depressed," Mason says.

"And why do you think we continue to have them?" Alex prompts.

"Because we're pathetic trolls who will all die alone?" Ben suggests. Alex points at him.

"Exactly," he says. "I mean, we all know this year round, but it's never thrown in our face like it—"

"Faces," I say quietly. "Plural."

"Whatever. Same thing. Anyway, it's never thrown in our facesssssss—" Alex draws it out into a hiss "—like it is now. This is the time of year when all of us realize just how pathetic our love lives are, and just how much it sucks to not have anybody to be spending tonight with instead."

Ben glances at me, but I try to ignore it. This night was supposed to be fun, but it's turning into the exact opposite. I know why I jumped at the chance to go to a Love Sucks party. I don't need anyone to give me a speech about it. I came here for a distraction.

"You alright?" Ben says to me. I nod once before I decide that I had it right. Distractions are unfortunate, but necessary.

"Alex?" I say, barely loud enough for him to hear. He pauses halfway through the act of opening the refrigerator and turns to look at me.

"Yeah?" he says. I get the feeling that he already knows what I'm going to ask, but I take another sip of my drink anyway. Liquid courage, right?

"Are you drunk enough for your 'bisexual above the waist' thing to kick in yet?" I ask. He throws back his head and laughs, nearly cracking his skull against the refrigerator door.

"Travis, I'm so drunk that if you play your cards right, you might be the first guy to get me to be bisexual *below* the waist," he says. I finish off the rest of my drink and toss the empty bottle into the trash can. It barely makes it in. I shake my head a couple of times and lean back against the counter. I'm not drunk, I'm just a little fuzzy around the edges. My hand is slightly damp from the condensation on the bottle, so I wipe it off on my jeans before reaching out to Alex. He plants his feet as firmly as he can and leans over to grab my hand without really coming any closer. Mason shoves him lightly, and he stumbles towards me. It happens too fast. One second, Alex is several feet away, and the next, he's pressed right up against me, his lips inches from mine.

"Jesus Christ," I hear Ben mutter, but then I have to focus all my attention on the fact that Alex is kissing me. It's nothing like kissing Garen, and for the first few seconds, I can feel the alcohol turning in my stomach. I never wanted this to happen, never wanted to have to kiss anyone who isn't him. But then it really seems to hit me that this is all I've got left. Kissing Garen isn't an option anymore, and it never will be again. I am kissing Alex right now, and I am kissing him because he's the only person I *can* kiss.

"So, Al, who's better, Travis or Ben?" Jeremy asks loudly. Ben hits him, and Alex bursts out laughing, staggering away from me. He seems ready to stop, but I am not ready for him to. I shadow the three stumbled steps he takes back to his previous location, and when he looks at me again, I slam him back

against the refrigerator and kiss him again. I half-expect him to shove me away, laughing, but instead, he grips the back of my t-shirt and opens his mouth under mine.

"Oh, wow. I thought they were done," Mason says softly. Jeremy and Ben both hum in agreement. I twist my arm behind me to give them the finger, but Alex almost yanks it out of the socket in his attempt to get my hands back to him. I might smile, if I were capable of feeling right now, at how eager he suddenly seems to be. He tastes unfamiliar, sort of like tequila, and that's a good thing. This new taste, this new feeling, is helping me forget.

"Do you guys uh, wanna stop?" Jeremy suggests. Alex pulls away and leans slightly past me to address him, which puts my mouth about an inch away from his throat. I kiss right over his pulse.

"No, I think we're cool with keeping going," he says, nudging me. "What about you, T? Wanna stop?"

T. I have a sudden flash of the letter, tattooed on Garen's wrist, but I'm able to squash the image with a shake of the head. "No."

"Okay, well in that case, do you wanna at least not dry-hump each other in front of the drinks? 'Cause Amy Tremont just almost had an aneurysm when she came in here for another Corona," Jeremy says. Alex laughs again, but his voice is softer, breathier. I don't listen to his response, instead trying to focus all my attention on the mark I know I must be making on his neck by now. I can feel him slowly starting to get hard against my hip. So much for only being bisexual above the waist, I guess.

"My room's upstairs," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. "If I were sober right now, I'd have a really good excuse for why you should come check it out."

"I can pretend you want to show me your CD collection, if it makes you feel better," I say. He laughs again.

"Yeah, that works. Wanna?" he says. I nod, and he heads for the door, towing me by my hand. I glance at Ben, who looks stunned.

"Are you shitting me?" he says flatly. Alex doesn't seem to hear him, so I pretend I don't either. I almost feel bad for him. He wanted Garen; I got Garen. He wanted Alex; I'm getting Alex. Not in the strictest, most eloquent sense, but in an inebriated, half-assed sort of way.

Alex's room is basically the same size and layout as my room, but with pale green walls and a closet instead of a dresser. By the time I'm done looking around, he's already sprawled on his bed, watching me wander around, his kiss-swollen lips slightly parted. All in all, pretty fuckable. I join him on the bed and we resume kissing with the same drunken desperation we had downstairs. Every minute I spend kissing him feels like forgetting another minute I spent with Garen. Ten down, one hundred and thirty-six thousand to go. Alex pushes me half-off him so he can tug my shirt off, then fumbles for the buttons on the front of his own shirt. I laugh softly.

"I thought you were still claiming to be straight," I say. He sits up slightly to free himself the rest of the way from his shirt.

"I'm totally straight," he assures me. "I want to put your dick in my mouth in a very straight way."

I laugh again to cover my nerves. Garen and I only ever really hooked up about half a dozen times, and now I'm going to move on to someone else, someone who I barely know. Do I even know his last name? I can't remember, partially because of the three beers I've had, partially because now he's grinding his

hard-on against mine as he struggles to undo my belt. I reach between us to do it for him, and somehow end up rubbing his crotch instead. He makes a sound that almost seems like a sigh and drags me back down to kiss him. His mouth is so soft and warm, but all I can really think is, *Alex is just my friend. This means nothing to me.* It means nothing when he worries my lower lip between his teeth. It means nothing when he knots a hand in my hair to anchor me down. It means nothing when he slides a hand down the front of my pants and starts to stroke my cock. It means nothing when he rolls me over onto my back and pulls my jeans down to my knees, or when his lips leave mine to start their journey downwards, or when his tongue darts out to trace my hipbone, or when I glance down just in time to see my cock disappearing into his warm, wet mouth.

And then suddenly, I am not in Alex's bed on Valentine's Day.

It's my birthday, and I'm in Garen's bed, in Garen's mouth. I'm shaking all over, and under how good it feels, I'm still so nervous. My hands are clenched on the sheets, because I refuse to let them grip that soft spiky hair, refuse to feel like I'm making him do it. His fingers are caressing my hips lightly, running all over my skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. I'm whispering his name, praying to God that our parents don't come home and ruin this, praying that I can stay like this forever, never have to leave, never have to stop. He's letting his throat relax to take me in deeper, and I'm gasping out his name again, I'm so, so close...

"Stop," I whisper, grabbing Alex's shoulders, "Alex. Alex, please stop."

He rocks back. The glow from the computer screen on his desk makes his eyes look huge and glassy. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just... I can't do this. I'm sorry," I say. He shifts away from me again, and I pull my jeans back on. "Don't think that it's about you, because it's not. I mean, under any other circumstances, I'd definitely be taking advantage of you right now."

"You sure?" he asks, stretching lazily. I can't even process the idea that anyone in the entire world is calm right now.

"All I see is him," I say softly. "I thought this would distract me. And it did, at first, because you're really hot, and a really good kisser, and I bet if I hadn't stopped you, you would've given one hell of a blowjob. But you're not him, Alex. You're not Garen. And he's all I want."

I roll off the bed and search around in the dark for my t-shirt. I finally find it and tug it on. I turn towards the door, but Alex grabs my hand.

"He left, Travis. I'm not saying this because I want to be your rebound fuck, because honestly, tonight's been really weird, but I'm still not... you know, I still don't think I'm gay. So it's not that. I'm only telling you because you're tearing yourself up about this, I can tell, and it's stupid. You shouldn't waste your time holding on to someone who let you go. You're a really cool guy, Travis. You should let yourself be happy. You should get over him."

"Stop," I say hoarsely. Alex looks almost sober when I finally meet his eyes.

"Get over him, Travis. He's not coming back," he says. I yank my hand out of his and shove it in my pocket.

"Thanks for inviting me to the party," I mutter before heading back down the stairs. I don't know where the front door is, so I return to the basement to leave through the door there.

"Look who's back," Jeremy laughs, nodding to me. He's still standing around near the refrigerator with Mason and Ben.

"That was fast," Ben remarks.

"Nothing happened," I say. He snorts.

"Next time you say that, first make sure your belt's on properly," he says. I look down to find he's right. In my haste to get my clothes on again, I missed two of my belt loops. Mason laughs outright, and Jeremy elbows him. Fucking belt. I unbuckle it with shaking fingers and rip it from my belt loops, tossing it somewhere under the counter. My jeans sink a little lower on my hips, but I don't really care that much. I press my palms against my face, trying to see if I can block out all the shit I'm feeling. It doesn't work at all. I slide my hands up to the top of my head and grip my hair as tightly as I reasonably can.

"Travis?" Mason says uncertainly. "Are you alright?"

"I should go," I say. Ben sets down his water bottle and fishes in his pocket for his keys.

"I'll drive you home," he offers. I shake my head.

"I can walk," I say.

"It'll take you forever. Besides, it's snowing. Let me drive you," he says. He reaches for my arm, but I jerk away. He blinks at me for a second, almost like he's contemplating rescinding his offer, but eventually, he grabs his jacket from the back of a chair and heads for the door. I follow him out to his SUV and get into the passenger seat. He doesn't speak until we're on my street.

"If you hurt another one of my friends, I will fucking kill you."

As he drifts to a stop in front of my driveway, I finally turn to look at him. He's staring straight ahead, but after another minute, he turns his blank face to me.

"I'm not kidding. I spent all of October and November watching you hurt Garen. I watched him go through probably the worst emotional pain he'd ever been through, and it was because of you. If you do the same to Alex now, I will kill you," he says.

"Alex isn't gay," I say. "I don't know how to explain tonight to you, other than that he was wasted off his ass. But he's not gay. He and I are just friends. Whatever happened between us tonight—and I swear to you, it really wasn't much—won't happen again. And it didn't mean anything. I'm not going to hurt him."

Ben nods once. "Good."

I slide out of the car with a sigh. "Thanks for the ride," I say, slamming the door. Mom didn't leave the porch lights on for me, like she does whenever she goes to bed before I get home from work. Apparently she forgot. Or just stopped caring. I let myself in using the key we keep hidden under one of the rocks in the garden and lock up behind myself before retreating to my bedroom. The entire house is silent, worse than it has been in weeks. On an impulse, when I reach the top of the stairs, I turn left to Garen's room instead of right into mine.

I haven't been in this room in a month. It looks exactly the same as I had hoped it wouldn't. His clothes are still strewn where he left them, my LHS Varsity Track sweatshirt crumpled on the floor. The blankets

on his bed are a mess, exactly where we left them as we scrambled out of the bed after Bree came into the room. And scattered all across the floor are pages and pages of sheet music and lyrics. I pick up one of the pages and smooth it out.

Bring me all your pieces, and I will put you back together

Take me at my word, because I promise we're forever

If I bring you all my pieces, will you put me back together?

Give me one more chance, because my storms are only weather

I let the page fall onto the bed and retreat to my own room to pace. *I promise we're forever*. What a lie. What a bald-faced, huge fucking lie.

I can't feel right in my own body tonight. I feel a dozen different kinds of fucked up, and nothing tonight has made it better. If anything, all of it—going to that party, drinking, hooking up with Alex—just made my life exponentially worse. I hadn't thought it possible, but somehow, it happened. I brace my hands on the wall on each side of the window and stare out at the ground. The moon makes my skin look milky-white all over, everywhere except the little lines I made years ago. Little lines that never failed to make me feel completely worse, and completely better.

My body is moving without my mind's consent, but my mind doesn't seem to be too bothered anyway. I move across the room to my closet and dig through my still-unpacked boxes until I can find what I'm looking for. A small, slightly dented Altoid tin. I sink to the floor in front of the window and open the container, turning it over so two shiny little razor blades fall out onto my palm. I select the duller of the two and let the other drop to the floor. Now that the razor's in my hand, I realize just how blank my arm looks without all those cuts it used to have.

"I am better than this," I murmur, just like Dr. Baker always taught me. "In ten minutes, if I still want to cut myself, I can do it. But if I feel better, I have to put these away."

I let my head loll back so it connects sharply with the windowsill, but I still don't really feel it. I turn my face towards the clock and wait. Eleven sixteen. I close my eyes and try to distract myself. In my mind, I recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The Preamble to the Constitution. The beginning of the Gettysburg Address. I open my eyes again. Eleven twenty-four. I wait. Eleven twenty-five. Eleven twenty-six.

"I waited ten minutes. I can wait ten more. If I still want to cut myself then, I can do it. But if I feel better, I have to put these away," I whisper again. I don't feel better. I don't feel better at all. In my head, I try to list every amendment to the Constitution, in order. I give up, and end up mouthing the words to "Transatlanticism" by Death Cab For Cutie. *I need you so much closer*. When I open my eyes again, it's eleven forty. I still don't feel better.

"I waited twenty-four minutes. I can wait all night," I say. I squeeze my eyes shut. *I need you so much closer. I need you so much closer. I need you so much closer*. I try to make myself forget that I'm curled up against the window, but it won't work. I am still writhing in my own skin. I try to sing myself to sleep, try to at least hum the tunes where I don't know the words to every song on the iPod Garen gave me. It won't work. When I open my eyes, it's twelve sixteen. It has been an hour, and I still don't feel better. Sorry, Dr. Baker.

I twist my arm so it's illuminated by the moonlight and press the razor down onto my wrist.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I know that everything is different as soon as I walk into the cafeteria on Monday. By now, I'm used to hearing people around me muttering, or coughing out the word "faggot" to snickering friends; the shock of today has nothing to do with strangers, though. I pause by the door to scan the room for my friends, and after a moment, I see them. All of them.

At one table, Faye and Miles are seated across from Nicole, Blaire, and two other girls from their soccer team. At the table directly behind it, Mason is sliding onto the bench in between Ben and Jeremy, with Alex across from them. At that moment, two instances of one action happen in unison; one is expected, one is not, and neither is pleasant. At the same time Miles raises his hand to wave me over, so does Alex. At the table of people I have been friends with since kindergarten, Faye grabs Miles's hand and wrenches it down, glancing at me and hissing admonitions to her boyfriend. At the table of people I only started hanging out with a few weeks ago, Ben twists around to see who Alex is waving at, then whips around to yank his hand out of the air. I freeze, and someone slams into me from behind.

"Christ, McCall, *move*," Logan snaps, shoving me hard with one hand. I almost trip into a table full of cheerleaders, who all giggle loudly. I squeeze my eyes shut and only open them again when I hear my name.

"Travis!" Alex shouts. When I manage to make myself look at him, he's waving again. Ben doesn't force his hand down this time; instead, he slouches a little and pulls his hood up over his head. Very slowly, I cross the cafeteria.

"What's up?" Miles greets me cheerfully, despite the elbow Faye is trying to dig into his side without me seeing. This makes no sense. She was the one who *supported* me in all of this shit, but here she is, acting exactly like the scowling soccer players across from her.

"Nothing much. Um... I'll see you at track practice, okay?" I say. I turn cautiously towards the other table, where Alex is shifting from the middle of the bench to make room for me. None of the other guys object, so I sit down.

"I've got a story you'll get a kick out of," Alex says by way of greeting. "This morning in homeroom, Amy Tremont turns to me and goes, 'Did Garen Anderson leave the school because he was mad that you stole his boyfriend?' And I'm staring at her like, 'What the fuck,' so she's like, 'I saw you and that junior, Travis, hooking up at your party. How long have you guys been going out?' Apparently, word around the school is that you're, first of all, a manwhore, and second of all, dating me. Because I didn't know this, but I guess on Valentine's Day, you can only make out with somebody if you're dating him."

"What'd you tell Amy?" I ask. He grins.

"I told her we've been in a loving, committed relationship for several years now, and that we're adopting a baby from Cambodia as soon as you turn eighteen," he says. I laugh, but it dies out quickly when I see Ben roll his eyes. Clearly, he hasn't forgotten the lecture he gave me in the car.

"So, you never answered my question at the party," Jeremy prompts. "Who's better, Travis or Ben?"

"You're an ass," I say as Alex laughs, but Ben shrugs.

"Obviously Travis is," he says. I blink at him. He is shifting in constant, sporadic movements. He pushes the sleeves of his hoodie up to his elbows and begins to fiddle with the two black terrycloth wristbands he's wearing, then moves his hands to the string coming from the hood of his sweatshirt to pull apart the

already fraying ends.

"I don't think I ever made a ruling on that particular issue," Alex corrects, but Ben shrugs again.

"*You* didn't have to. I thought we were all pretty set in the idea that if you hook up with two people and decide to propose to one of them, that one's probably better. You forget, Alex. Somebody else got there before you," he says. My heart might stop beating for a minute.

"Shut up," I order. The last thing I need right now is for him to remind me of Garen. That's the last thing I need *ever*. Ben finally looks me in the eye.

"Somebody else got there before you," he repeats. And just like he's triggering the thoughts inside me, I can suddenly see it all over again. See him and Garen together, kissing, touching, fucking, long before I meant a goddamn thing to anybody. He got there first. There's no denying that. It took Garen a week to sleep with Ben, and a month to even get around to kissing me. It's a nice new perspective I've been trying to pretend I don't have.

"I hate you," I say quietly. I'm not sure if I'm talking to Ben or myself, but he must realize that, either way, I mean it, because he jerks back slightly as if I hit him. Fuck this. I should've sat with Miles. Or stayed in the hall. Or not bothered to come into school at all today. My words are followed by a long, awkward silence, so just for something to do, I start shifting like Ben was, though he's now frozen. I lean over and fix my shoelace, then crack my knuckles, then pull off my hoodie.

"Travis," Ben says sharply. I flinch.

"What?" I say. But he's on his feet now, coming around to my side of the table. For one wild second, I think he's going to hit me. But instead, he grabs my wrist and tries to pull me to my feet.

"Come with me," he says. "I need to talk to you in the hall."

"Uh, blow me," I say, trying to free my arm.

"*Please.*"

His voice is disturbingly urgent all of a sudden, and I feel my instinctive resistance ebbing. After a few more seconds, I allow myself to be tugged off the bench and dragged out into the hall.

"What do you—"

"When did you do that?" Ben asks. I open my mouth to ask what the fuck he's talking about, but before I can, he turns my arm over and spreads his fingers apart just enough to bare the part of my wrist that is home to a long, recently healed gash. Fuck. I'd completely forgotten about it until now. Tuesday night, I thought I'd never get over it, but by Friday morning, it was just part of my skin to me. It's fucking February, so of course I'd been wearing long sleeves ever since. My irritation with Ben had made me forget, though.

"None of your business," I say. "Don't touch me."

"It's new. I know it is, Travis, I know you didn't have it the last time I saw you," he presses on.

"Fuck you, Ben. It's a scar. Christ. Do you think you notice every little thing about me?" I say.

"I notice you a lot, Travis," he says. I try to pull my arm away again. "Did you do it after the party?"

He asked for it.

“Yes. I did. About an hour after you dropped me off, actually. And you wanna know whose fault it was?” I hiss. “I’ll give you a hint: *you, you fucking asshole*. And you’re not making me feel any better now, and you sure as shit weren’t making me feel better in the cafeteria, so why can’t you just...”

I trail off, staring at him. He’s yanking off the wristband on his right wrist and tugging both of his sleeves down so just his hands peek out. He takes my arm again and slides the wristband on over the cut.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“If you slip like you did in the cafe and someone tells a teacher, you’re fucked,” he says, his voice low and fast. “They’ll report you to the Guidance office, and then they’ll call your parents. You might get suspended, and you’ll have to start therapy. Or, I guess in your case, get a lot more of it.”

“Like you care,” I say.

“You’d be surprised,” he retorts. And then I realize what he means. What he’s been avoiding telling me since we met, but what is so completely obvious. Before he can stop me, I shove his sleeve up again and pull off his other wristband. There is a jagged cluster of fresh red scratches, barely surface wounds. Under those, there are the clear imprints of older, deeper cuts.

I stare at Ben’s skin.

Ben stares at me.

After one more horrible, endless second, I lean down and kiss him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It only takes a second for me to find out the answer to the question I didn't even realize I'd been asking myself. *His lips really are as soft as they look.* Ben is frozen, and even though my eyes are closed, I can tell his are still open. It's only when I reach up and sandwich his face between my hands, like I'm trying to draw him even closer, that he starts to respond. His hands settle on my waist, and his tongue comes out to meet mine tentatively. I shift one hand away from his face to push the hood of his sweatshirt back so I can knot my fingers in his hair, and he rocks forward onto the toes of his Converse to bring us closer to the same height. This is absolutely terrifying. He's all wrong. He's too short, not muscular enough, shaking too hard, too nervous, too unfamiliar.

But only if I'm comparing him to Garen. If I put Garen aside for a minute... if I make myself forget about him... Ben isn't too anything. He's short, yes, but he's built just like I am; too scrawny for real muscles. He's shaking like he should be, he's as nervous as I am, and he's *new*. Different. Not bad... just different.

He reaches up to catch my right hand, still caressing his cheek, and draws it forward so he can switch from kissing my lips to kissing the slash across my wrist. I duck my head to press my lips to his throat, and after a moment, he pulls my face back up to his. I let my hands drop down to the small of his back, then into his back pockets.

Suddenly, he jolts and takes a step back, holding me at arms' length. His head is bowed so that I can't see his face, but when he speaks, I can hear him clearly enough.

"Oh fuck."

I swallow hard. "Ben."

"Don't," he says quickly, shaking his head and taking another step back. "Don't say my name like that."

"Ben," I repeat. He drags his fingers through his hair almost hard enough to make his scalp bleed, then looks at me, his eyes dead.

"I know where he is," he says. I blink at him.

"Who?" I ask.

"Garen. He called me yesterday. I know where he is. Where he's been staying," he says. My heartbeat grinds to a halt.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I demand.

"He's in New York. He's been crashing in his old dorm room at PMA, with his friend James. That's where he went after he left my house. He called last night to *ask me how you are*. Because he says it hurts so bad to be away from you, he says he misses you so much he can hardly breathe without you. Because he's still fucking in love with you. So, here—" He thrusts a hand into his jeans pocket for his wallet and yanks out all of the money inside. "—this should be enough for a one-way Metro North train ticket to New York, and cab fare to get from the station to his dorm room. Go find your fucking boyfriend and *leave me alone*."

The bell rings.

"Ben!" I say for a third time, but he's already heading for the stairs. I sigh and head to the library for my

study hall, now pointlessly scheduled to be after lunch instead of first period. I collapse into a chair near the windows, and slowly, I look down at the money Ben stuffed into my hand. I count it carefully once, then a second time. Fifty-eight dollars.

Just like that, my obsessive, National Merit Scholar brain starts buzzing. I duck down one of the aisles of books and pull out my cell phone, bringing up the slow but working internet connection on it. It takes me less than a minute to find the address to Patton Military Academy, then two more minutes to figure out the train fare. Bridgeport doesn't connect directly to the station that's a mile away from PMA, but if I took a train from Bridgeport to Grand Central, and then Grand Central to the station near the school, that would still only be twenty-five. The rest of the money, in addition to whatever's in my own wallet, would cover cab fare from LHS to the station. I could be standing in front of Garen by four o'clock.

And I don't think I want to be.

The thought hits me like an eighteen-wheeler. After over a month, I finally have the ability to go find him, to pin him down and scream at him for leaving me, to make him take me back, and I don't want it. I don't want it at all, because it has been over a month, and he hasn't tried to contact me once. He hasn't had a second thought. Whatever he may say to the contrary, whatever lies he might call Ben with, he's not here. He's right where he wants to be, and if he's fine with not seeing me, then I don't want to see him. It hurts too much to hold onto him now. It hurts too much to cling to someone who walked away.

When the last bell of the day rings, I pack up my backpack and head up to the senior hallway to find Alex. He is still at his locker, frowning at the books on the top shelf. He seems to contemplate packing some of them, then seems to decide that homework's not important, and shuts the locker without taking anything from it.

"Can you do me a favor?" I ask him softly. He cocks his head to the side, which I take as a go-ahead. "I need a ride someplace. Well, home, and then someplace."

"Uh, sure, that sounds doable. You're going to have to do something for me in return, though. Come on," he says. I follow him outside to his car, a silver Honda that looks to be a few years old. He waits until we're pulling out of the school parking lot to mention his condition.

"Tell me what happened today at lunch."

I contemplate the pros and cons of jumping out of the car.

"Do I have to?" I ask.

"If you want me to drive you anywhere after I bring you home, yeah, you do," he replies. He seems much more reserved than usual, which makes me nervous. This is the wary Alex I met in the cafeteria months ago, not the in-your-face joker I thought I was friends with.

"It's a long story," I hedge. Alex shrugs.

"That's fine. I drive slow," he says. After a few minutes, I realize there's no way out of it, so I sigh and slump down in my seat a little more.

"I used to do some bad shit when things got to be too much for me. Ben realized this at lunch, so he tried to get in my face about it, but I figured out why he was freaking out so bad, so I did something I shouldn't have. He told me something I guess he thought I wanted to hear, but I think I'm realizing now that I *don't* wanna hear it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Alex asks, exasperated. "I need some specifics, Travis. This isn't Wheel of Fortune, you can't expect me to guess all the letters in this explanation."

"Christ. Fine," I say, pulling my sweatshirt a little tighter around myself. "A couple years ago, back before I tried to, you know, kill myself, I used to cut myself when stuff got really bad. And by the way you're staring at me now, I guess you know about Ben."

"Of course I know about Ben. He's been my best friend since we were twelve. We all know about it. Me, Mason, Jeremy, Garen back when he was still here. We keep trying to get him to stop, but every time he starts to get better about it, he always slips up again. I didn't know you did it too," he says. I shrug.

"I don't really advertise it, for obvious reasons. Anyway, he saw at lunch—"

"I thought you said you used to do it. Past tense."

I shrug again. "I thought it was past tense too. Surprise."

Alex is silent for several minutes. We turn onto my street and he stops in front of my house. I jog up the lawn and unlock the front door, drop my backpack just inside the doorway, lock the door again, and return to the car. Alex seems almost back to normal by the time I'm buckling my seatbelt again.

"What's the rest of the story?" he asks.

"He saw the cuts at lunch, so he dragged me out into the hall. I thought he was going to yell at me, but he gave me one of his wristbands instead, so I could cover up the marks. I kind of figured it out then, so I pulled up his sleeve and saw his wrist. And I kissed him."

Alex twists sharply to face me, clenching both his hands into fists, and I flinch. He crosses his arms quickly and looks down at the gearshift. "Sorry. That was me almost punching you in the face."

"I uh, I got that, yeah," I say warily. He lets out an involuntary laugh and shakes his head.

"Sorry. Reflex. Go on, please," he says. I don't want to, but I get the impression that he'll punch me if I *don't* tell him more.

"He was sort of into it for a minute, but then he freaked out and told me that uh... Garen called him last night. So he told me where he – Garen – is, and he gave me a handful of bills and told me to go get him. And then he stormed off."

"You'd get why if you really knew him," Alex says immediately.

"I'm trying to know him," I protest.

"I don't mean in a biblical way," he replies, and I start to get the impression he wants to punch me again. "Do you know who the first person he slept with was? 'Cause here's a hint: it wasn't Garen."

That's completely out of left field. Part of me is a little relieved, glad to know Garen's interest in me wasn't just part of an affinity for virgins. The rest me, however, is surprised.

"I thought it was," I say. Alex shakes his head.

"It was this guy he knows from church. Ethan. They were in youth group together when they were younger, and about a year ago, they hooked up. They only slept together like, twice, but now whenever Ethan sees him, he pretends like Ben doesn't exist. It's not like Ben was in love with him or whatever, but it still really fucked with his head when all of a sudden the guy wouldn't even speak to him. He got really into *that* again for a while after it happened." He nods at my wrist, which I cover instinctively, though it's still hidden under wristband and sweatshirt. "Then Garen moved here in October, and for a little while, I thought they might end up going out. They seemed really into each other, but... I guess you know better than anybody that it wasn't really like that. They hooked up, but it wasn't what we all figured it would be, because turns out Garen only ever wanted you. That's the thing, Travis. Ben is really fucking used to people hooking up with him even if they don't want him. And you're just more of the same."

"I'm not," I cut across him. "That's where I want you to take me. Ben's house. I'm not going to find Garen. I don't *want* to find Garen. And I want Ben to know that."

"But the thing that really matters is whether or not you just want *Ben*. End of sentence. Not what you want Ben to know, not what you want Ben to believe. But wanting *Ben*. Because if you're going to his house for any other reason, then you might as well get out of the car now," Alex says flatly. We stare at each other for several minutes in silence. I wonder if this is how Garen felt when Corey cornered him in the cafeteria and threatened to castrate him.

"Then I guess you should take me to his house now," I say finally. Alex nods once and starts the car again. The ride to Ben's house is completely silent until we actually pull into the driveway.

"Good luck," Alex says. I snort.

"Thanks. I'm probably going to need it, since I think Ben likes me about as much as you do right now," I say.

"Come on. I'm just looking out for my best friend," he says. He glances around. The only other car in the driveway is Ben's SUV. "Well, he's home. That's a start, at least."

I nod and climb out of the car. I want to thank him, to express my gratitude for bringing me here and not kicking my ass while doing so, but my throat is too dry all of a sudden. I settle for a very small wave as he backs out of the driveway and speeds off. I sigh and walk around the back of the house to the sliding glass door. I pull my phone out of my pocket, dial Ben's number, and wait.

"I thought we were agreed on the idea that you weren't going to talk to me," Ben says as a greeting.

"And yet you still answered your phone when you saw me on the caller ID," I say. "And yet I'm still standing outside your house."

There is a long pause. I see the blinds on his window shift only slightly. I slip my free hand into my sweatshirt pocket and cross my fingers. Finally, he sighs. "The door's unlocked."

I snap my cell phone shut and shove it in my pocket. I slide open the door and cross the rec room very slowly to his barely-open bedroom door. Ben is sitting on his bed, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. For once, he's not wearing a hoodie or his wristbands, so the cuts on his wrists are plainly exposed. I try not to stare.

"I'm not going to New York," I say. "You can have your money back."

I fish it out of my pocket and place it carefully on his desk. He blinks at it, then at me.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because you told me to go find my boyfriend, and I don't have a boyfriend. I haven't had a boyfriend for weeks now. And... part of me was hoping that the next time someone told me to go find my boyfriend, I would have someone to find. And part of me was hoping that I'd be finding you," I say. Ben crosses his arms and sinks back into his pillows.

"Fuck you," he says. I raise my hand to my mouth so I can gnaw on my thumbnail.

"So that's a 'no,' I take it?" I say.

"It's a 'fuck you.' You don't want me, and I'm not stupid enough to kid myself into believing that you do," he snaps. I roll my eyes.

"Right, I forgot, you can read my mind. Jesus, Ben. Did it ever occur to you that maybe I kissed you today for a reason?" I say.

"Uh, no, actually, because you fucking *didn't* kiss me for a reason," he replies.

"I did. It just took me a little while to figure it out," I say.

"Don't play—"

"I kissed you because you're the only person I know who doesn't try to pretend that I'm normal. You tell me I'm fucked up when I'm fucked up, and you don't try to act like you don't see slashes on my wrists when they're clearly there. I kissed you because, even though you still seem to not like me, you've looked out for me since Garen left. I kissed you because you're one of the only people I know who doesn't seem to always be putting on a fucking show, and I like that. I like that you make all your jokes in monotone, and I like that you wear eyeliner, and I like that you're like, three feet tall, and I like that you're not at all impressed by the fact that I'm a varsity runner with perfect grades. I like you, Ben. And that doesn't negate the relationship I had with Garen, or in any way diminish what I felt for him. But I haven't spoken to Garen in weeks. And I had the option to be on a train to see him right now. But instead, I am standing in your bedroom, asking you to give me a chance. And that has to count for something."

By now, Ben's arms are wrapped around his legs, hugging them to his chest. He rests his chin on his knees, staring at me with wide blue eyes, like he's trying to see if the words inside my head match the words he just heard me say. After more than a full minute, he releases his legs and stands up, crossing the tiny room to stand in front of me. He goes up on his toes so we're level and wraps his arms very carefully around my neck.

"It counts for a lot," he says, and when I kiss him this time, he kisses me back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Where are we going?" I ask for what must be the twelfth time since we got out of the car and started heading for the woods.

"You'll see, you'll see," Ben says, the twelfth and thirteenth times. He ducks under a very low fallen tree, but given the nearly half a foot height difference between us, I have to clamber awkwardly over it.

"It's cold," I say, trying not to complain. He flashes me one of his very infrequent smiles and takes my hand.

"Don't worry. I planned ahead. Come on, it's just a little further," he says.

"*What's* just a little further?" I ask, but then I see what he's referring to. As far as secret forts go, this one is top of the line; it seems to be to tree houses what my McMansion is to regular homes. It's clearly old, but it still seems to be in good enough condition that I'm not *too* nervous when Ben starts to climb the board ladder nailed to the tree.

"Come on," he repeats, and I follow him up. The inside of the tree house is surprisingly warm, no doubt due to the fact that there seem to be actual windows, instead of just holes in the walls. The trapdoor entrance also closes securely, and is then covered with a throw rug. I can't straighten up all the way, but Ben can. He crosses to the other side of the small room to open a large trunk and pulls out two very thick knitted blankets. He spreads one out on the floor like he's setting up for a picnic, then beckons me over. We sit down cross-legged on the floor, facing each other, and he smooths the blanket over both of our legs.

"This," Ben says, "is my tree house. My dad helped me build it the summer after Jane was born so that I could have some place to hang out without always having to deal with babymania. Alex and I practically grew up in this thing."

"I like it," I say, and when he rewards me with another smile, I know I've said the right thing. "Why did you bring me up here, though?"

"Because I want to talk to you about some stuff. A lot of stuff, actually. Most of it's really stupid, but a lot of it is stupidly important. And I guess I figure... if anything is going to ever happen between us, you should at least know who you're with," he says. He looks slightly embarrassed, and it makes me want to kiss him. I don't. I haven't kissed him for four days now, not since Monday at his house. Granted, Monday included making out on his bed for an hour and a half, but since then, there has been nothing, save the shy smiles he gives me when we pass each other in the hall, and the thrilling, excruciating moments at lunch when he occasionally caresses my hand under the table.

Instead of kissing him, I take his hand and intertwine our fingers. "So talk to me," I say, and for good measure, I press my lips to his wrist. That is one of the only noticeable changes since Monday; no wristbands, no new cuts.

He shivers and extracts his hand from mine. "Don't distract me and I will."

I wrap my arms around my own body and nod for him to go on. He takes a deep breath.

"My full name is Benjamin Brendon McCutcheon. My birthday is January seventeenth, I have five siblings and a dog named Lucy, and my favorite color is blue." He pauses, and I smile slightly.

"These are some very hard-hitting facts," I say.

"I'm working my way up to the big stuff," he explains. "I decided I should start small."

"That's a good plan. What kind of dog is Lucy?" I ask.

"She's a Golden Retriever," he says. "My first kiss was with Alex, when I was fifteen. We were hanging out at the playground on a Friday night because we had nothing better to do, and we were sitting on top of the monkey bars, and he just looks really, *really* good in twilight. So I leaned over and kissed him, very chaste, no tongue or anything, barely more than a peck. He let me, but I got scared and ran home right after it happened. He didn't even mention it the next day, like it never happened. My second kiss was with Alex, too, and my third. But he was never sober for any of them, except that first one."

He pauses, seeming unsure of himself. I want to find some way to show him he can keep going, so I take his hand again.

"I was ten years younger than that for my first kiss," I say, and he laughs. "It was with Susan Baxter."

"Susan Baxter's a huge slut," he says, and I nod.

"I know she is. She attacked me when we were in kindergarten, and I ran away. And then I cried so hard that my teacher had to call my mom and have her come pick me up. The first time I kissed anybody back though, I was in eighth grade. I made out with my cousin's best friend behind some trees at a family picnic. She wouldn't spit out her gum first, and it was really awkward."

"What kind of gum was it?" Ben asks. He *would* ask that.

"Cinnamon. I still can't be around anybody who's eating Big Red without feeling a little nauseated," I say. "But go on. This is supposed to be your time to talk."

"No, I like this. It makes it easier," he says. I kiss his wrist again, and he blinks at it for a moment before he starts to speak again. "I was fifteen when I started cutting myself. It was about a week after Halloween during my sophomore year. I don't remember why I started, though. I think eventually, that part stopped mattering."

I swallow. "If it was a week after Halloween... then you started a few days before I tried to kill myself."

"Two, actually. It was two days," he says. I blink.

"You remember the date of my suicide attempt?" I say.

"Sure. November eighth," he says with a shrug. "I remember because I was terrified. The school seemed like it was going to start a witch hunt for anybody with depression, and all I remember thinking is 'I can't believe I gave physical evidence right when they might be looking for it.' All of those assemblies, all the guidance seminars. It was scary. And it made me mad at you before I even knew you."

For several minutes, I have no idea what to say. Finally, though, I clear my throat.

"I was thirteen when I started," I say. "It was a couple of months after my parents got divorced. My sister was a moody bitch over it all, so she wasn't talking to me. And my mom... I don't know. I think sometimes I remind her too much of Hank—sorry, I mean, my dad. I think I remind her too much of my dad, and I think it kind of pissed her off for a while. I-I mean, I look a lot like him, you know? We've got the same

color eyes, and the same color hair, I guess. And I've got his freckles, too. And I think for a while, she just didn't wanna look at me. My friends were great, school was swell, but fuck. I was thirteen and nobody in my house would speak to me anymore. I just... didn't handle it well."

Ben leans over and presses his lips to my forehead, keeping them there until I finally manage to stop shaking so much. He presses another kiss to my cheek, then one to my lips.

"I'm sorry your parents' bullshit had to hurt you so much," he says. I nod.

"Me too," I say, and then I sigh. "I keep interrupting, and it's getting to be really obnoxious of me. Please keep going."

"I don't *want* to keep going. None of this stuff is exactly fun to say," he grumbles.

"So tell me something fun instead," I say. He pauses, then after a moment, grins.

"I can count to twenty in Hungarian," he says. I laugh.

"Bullshit."

"Egy, ketto, harom, negy—"

"Okay, okay, I believe you!" I cover his mouth with my hand, and he kisses my palm before continuing.

"I can also say 'Give me the squirrel, or I will behead your grandmother!' in Swedish. My favorite class in school is my Shakespeare elective, but my Model U.N. course is a close second. I'm allergic to cats and stupid people. I can play the piano, the guitar, a little bit of the drums, and the clarinet, but I try not to let anyone find out about that last one. I can't sing for shit, either. But I can play 'Girl At The Rock Show' on the xylophone. I've never gotten drunk in my life, because the first time I ever had any type of alcohol was a big gulp of cheap red wine at my aunt's wedding when I was ten, and it was so gross that I threw up in the garden. That sort of turned me off of alcohol right then. Instead, I drink Snapple. Like, a *lot*. I probably have two or three a day. It's sort of unnatural. My favorite animal is the otter, and I really hate mimes. I'm not scared of them or anything. They just piss me the fuck off."

"You're really kind of adorable," I say.

"I know. Oh, and lobsters creep me out," he adds. "Also, if you kissed me right now, I probably wouldn't mind."

"Just probably?" I say, raising my eyebrows. He grins.

"I just wanna see if you're willing to take your chances," he says. I am.

I lean forward to kiss him, cupping his cold face between my even colder hands, and he grips the front of my jacket, keeping me in place even though I had no intention of going anywhere. After a few seconds, the leaning feels awkward, so I shift onto my knees. To accommodate my move, Ben slips his arms around my waist and leans back slightly, tilting his face up to mine. I don't think I'll ever get over how soft his lips are.

There's a sudden buzzing from his coat pocket, and we both jump. He fishes his cell phone out and checks the caller ID.

“Alex,” he says. He presses the ‘ignore call’ button and tosses the phone across the tree house. He pulls me back down to him with such force that he ends up flat on his back with me on top of him, the blankets bunched up beneath him. We kiss slowly, lazily, for a while. I don’t want to stop – maybe ever – but suddenly, there is the sound of voices from below as people ascend the nailed-in ladder. I make a half-hearted attempt to move off of Ben, but his hands grip my jacket a little tighter, anchoring me to him. Instead, we both just turn our heads to the trapdoor, which flies open. Jeremy comes through first, though his focus seems to be on getting into the tree house without getting any slivers, as he doesn’t look up as he clambers inside. Mason comes next, his hat pulled down practically over his eyes. Alex is the last to come in and the first to see us. He pauses halfway through the act of closing the trapdoor and blinks at us.

“...can we help you?” Ben says finally. I burst out laughing. Mason and Jeremy finally seem to notice our position, and both at least have the decency to look a little sheepish.

“Uh, do you want us to go?” Jeremy asks. Ben shakes his head.

“No, it’s fine,” he says. Jeremy blinks at us.

“Then... do you at least wanna stop making out now?” he asks. “And maybe, you know, get off of each other?”

I sit up again and lean back against the wall. Ben takes a little while longer to sit up, first stretching like a cat and then pausing to fold up one of the blankets. He gathers up the other and comes to join me against the wall. I pull him down between my parted legs and he settles in comfortably with his back against my chest, the blanket spread across us.

“So, when did this charming new development occur?” Jeremy asks. “Since at the beginning of the week, you guys were telling each other how much you hate each other. Loudly.”

“Unresolved sexual tension,” Alex informs him, and Ben snorts.

“You know something kind of cool?” Mason says suddenly, turning his glassy eyes towards me. “Travis is like, this major ho-bag database.”

“Um,” I say, and Ben aims a kick at him.

“No, really!” Mason continues, warming to the idea. “I mean, if we wanted to chronicize—”

“Chronicle,” I correct.

“Yeah, that. If we wanted to chronicle the kissing technique of all the different dude-liking dudes in town, we’d just have to like, build a lab inside Travis’ head. Because first there was Garen—” Ben tenses almost imperceptibly, and I wrap my arms a little tighter around him to try to keep him calm. “—and then you hooked up with Alex—”

“I’m not a ‘dude-liking dude,’ though. I’m just an affectionate drunk,” Alex interrupts. Jeremy snorts.

“Al, if you’re getting ‘affectionate’ with another guy’s cock, you’re a dude-liking dude. That is the foundation of dude-liking. Cock-liking,” he says. Ben twists slightly to address me.

“I personally am really enjoying the objectification of everyone of our sexual orientation,” he says.

"Oh, me too," I say.

"Anyway," Mason says loudly, "first there was Garen, then there was Alex, and now there's Ben. Well, I assume. Since usually the making out comes before the horizontal gyrations."

"There was no *gyration*," Ben protests.

"There was a little gyration," I admit, and he elbows me.

"Can somebody please answer my question?" Jeremy demands. "When did this happen?"

"That's a complicated question with a complicated answer. But I suppose the abridged version is that Travis jumped me in the hall on Monday, and after a few hours of quiet contemplation, I decided there are worse guys I could get jumped by. It helped that he showed up at my house that afternoon to try to convince me he's not a complete ass. And today, I just brought him over here after school to talk."

"And gyrate," Mason murmurs.

"What is with you and gyrating, Mason? Seriously, we really were talking— Travis, that's very distracting," Ben says. I pause in the act of kissing the back of his neck.

"Sorry. Go on," I say.

"Well, now I don't remember what I was saying," he says, and I can tell he's scowling even though I can't see his face. I press smiling lips to his skin again.

"Does that mean I can go back to—"

"No, it does not, actually, because there are other people in this tree house, thank you very much," Jeremy says. His sentence is punctuated by the ringing of my cell phone, which Ben does me the favor of digging out of my jacket pocket and handing to me. I answer it without checking the caller ID, which I immediately regret.

"Hello?"

"Travis, it's Bill."

I scramble up a little straighter, suddenly feeling as though he must know where I am and who's in my lap. "Bill. Hi. What's up?" I say. Feeling my discomfort, Ben shifts out of my lap and turns around to study my face.

"I was just wondering where you were. I came home early from work tonight. Your mother and I have some things to discuss with you and Bree," Bill says. His voice is neutral, but if Bill is anything, it's emotionally controlled, so his tone means nothing.

"I'm—I was just hanging out with some friends. But I'll come home now," I say. "See you soon."

"What was that about?" Alex asks. I stuff my phone in my pocket and move to stand up.

"Watch your head," Ben says, grabbing my hand to prevent me from straightening up all the way.

"That was Bill. He said he's got some stuff to talk to me and my sister about, which can't be good. I've

gotta go,” I say. “Ben, thanks for the talk and stuff, I’ll—”

“I’ll drive you home,” Ben interrupts, following me out the trapdoor and down the ladder. I let him lead the way back to his house, trying not to hurry enough to step on his heels. Within ten minutes, we’re back in the car and on our way to my house.

“What do you think he wants to talk to you guys about?” Ben asks. I shrug.

“I don’t know. I can’t *remember* fucking up really badly lately, so I guess it could be anything,” I say. I don’t mention that part of me – some stupid, self-loathing part of me – wonders if it’s about Garen. Wonders if he’s back, or they’ve heard from him, or he turned up dead since he spoke to Ben on Sunday and the cops have only just now called. Ben parks in front of my house and turns to face me.

“I could come in with you, if you want. Moral support,” he says. I shake my head.

“Thanks, but I’d rather save *that* confrontation for another day. I’ll call you tonight, though?” I say. He nods in agreement and leans forward to kiss me. It’s a short, barely lingering kiss, but it helps calm my nerves nonetheless. I give him a small smile as I climb out of the car and head for the front door. At first, I think the house is empty, but eventually the voices drift out of the kitchen.

“I’m home!” I call.

“Hi, sweetie. Come on into the kitchen, will you?” Mom replies. I take my time hanging up my jacket and going to join them. Bill is rummaging through the refrigerator and Mom is sitting across from Bree, who smiles hesitantly at me. When I force a smile back at her, she looks a little relieved, and I feel a little guilty. I should forgive her for outing me, but so far, I still haven’t had much luck.

“What’s up?” I say.

“There are some things it’s time we discussed with you both. About the wedding,” Mom says. Fuck. I sink into the seat next to Bree and pin my arms to my sides so I won’t cross them defiantly. Bill lets the refrigerator door swing shut and comes to sit down empty-handed.

“We set a date,” he adds. I blink.

“That was... sudden,” I say.

“Actually, we’ve had it set for a while,” Mom continues cautiously. “We sent out the invitations almost two months ago, but given the situation that... arose... we decided it would be better to wait to discuss it.”

In other words, they didn’t want to risk having me put a gun in my mouth if they announced a date too soon after Garen left. Charming.

“When is it set for?” I ask, as calmly as I can manage. I can do this. I can be reasonable, I can keep my tone conversational. I have no reason to mind anymore, now that Garen’s gone and I’m no longer with him. Mom and Bill try to glance at each other surreptitiously, but it’s probably the most obvious gesture I’ve ever seen.

“Well... we want to go on a honeymoon, of course, but we didn’t want to risk leaving you both alone here during a school week. That would just be impractical. So we decided that it would make sense if the wedding was the first Sunday of your spring break. That way, we could spend the week away, but you would be able to stay home and not have any hassle,” Mom says all in a rush.

"Spring break is only seven weeks away," Bree says, staring at them. For once, she doesn't seem completely gung-ho about this whole wedding. Took her long enough.

"I know. We've been able to make most of our plans, but of course, some of them involve you two. For example, Bree, I need you to come with me to find a bridesmaid dress for you," Mom says. She seems to be gaining more excitement as the wedding talk goes on. "See, I've already chosen the color scheme, and we've got all of our reservations made. The wedding ceremony itself will be very traditional, at our usual church. Then we want to have the reception at the Lakewood Country Club. It will all be very beautiful."

"Wow," is all Bree can say. Bill turns to me.

"There's something I've wanted to discuss with you, actually, Travis," he says.

"Okay..." I say slowly.

"Your mother and I have put off telling you both about this for obvious reasons, but we do want you to be involved. Not just in the plans, but with the wedding itself. My original plan had been to ask this of Garen, but since it... it doesn't look like he'll be here for the wedding, I can't do that. So, I'd like to ask you to be my best man," he says.

I'm surprised that this doesn't make me want to throw up. In a weird, weird way, I'm actually sort of touched. In another way, though, it's just strange.

"Are you uh... are you sure?" I ask. He nods. Mom is watching me anxiously, which fuels annoyance within me. Bill wants to unite the family; Mom just wants to do her best to make sure no one remembers Garen or the tawdry affair I had with him. Or, probably, my gayness in general. Luckily, I have a lifetime of experience of pissing my parents off.

"I have a boyfriend," I say. Bill blinks at me. Clearly, this is not one of the answers he prepared himself for. Bree looks around at me curiously, and Mom's hopefulness tightens into barely contained disapproval.

"Do you?" Bill finally says. I nod.

"His name is Ben. He's a senior, but he's very short, so he looks a lot like a freshman. And he drives an SUV, which he looks ridiculous in and can probably barely see over the steering wheel in. That's where I was before I came home. With him. We were making out in the tree house he built when he was a kid. He's a really good kisser, and he's sort of ridiculously cute. And he wears eyeliner and really tight jeans and old red Converse. And he's afraid of lobsters," I say. "I'll be your best man if I can invite Ben to the wedding. I assume you guys were going to let Bree and I both bring dates. And I want Ben to be mine."

This declaration is followed by at least two full minutes of silence. Mom hasn't blinked once since I started talking, and Bree appears to be trying very hard not to laugh. Bill, however, looks pretty neutral.

"Of course you can bring Ben as your date," he says. Mom whirls on him.

"William, perhaps we should discuss this first," she says sharply. He shrugs.

"I don't see what there is to discuss. I've met Ben before. Garen introduced me to him months ago, and he's a very nice boy. I think he's an excellent choice of a boyfriend for Travis," he says. This is so fucking surreal. This cannot be the same guy who kicked my last boyfriend out of the house. Apparently, Bree

agrees.

"So, wait a minute. Travis' first boyfriend gets kicked out of the house, but his second boyfriend gets invited to your *wedding*?" she demands. "Doesn't that seem a little weird to you?"

Bill is staring at her, though, like she's speaking a foreign language.

"The problem was never that Travis and Garen are both gay. The problem was that I could not allow my *sons* to be *lovers*," he says. I'm not sure how to respond, but evidently, my mother doesn't feel I need to say a word.

"What do you expect us to tell our family, William? My *mother* is coming to this wedding, you know, and the last thing she needs is to find out that her grandchild is a... a..."

"Faggot?" I supply.

"Yes," Mom snaps. "You know, Travis, we're all doing our best to accept your preferences, but you cannot expect us to make this day all about you."

"This day is going to be all about *family*, Evelyn. And we are all a family. You, me, Bridget, Travis, and Garen, whether he's here or not. You and I will be husband and wife, and together, we have three children, two of whom are gay. And I do not intend to treat my gay sons any differently than I will treat my straight daughter. If Bree is allowed to invite a date to the wedding, so is Travis," Bill says. He is rapidly becoming my hero, and I'm not quite sure how to handle that.

"Then maybe *neither* of them should be allowed to bring a date," Mom says. Bree opens her mouth to argue, but Bill cuts her off.

"Perhaps you're right, Ev. Perhaps we *should* talk about this. But whatever discussion we have won't change what's going to happen. Bridget, Travis? Both of you should feel free to invite your boyfriends to the wedding. I hope they're both able to make it," he says. He nods once, obviously dismissing us, and my sister and I both scramble to our feet.

"William," Mom hisses.

"But Travis, one last thing," Bill says, and I freeze halfway to the door. Of course there's some sort of prerequisite. Nothing good ever happens in my life without some degree of torture.

"Yeah?" I say.

"I'd like you to invite Ben over for dinner sometime soon. Your mother and sister should have the chance to meet him as well, if you two are going to remain a couple," he says.

Yep.

Nothing good ever happens in my life without some degree of torture.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I am kissing Ben in the passenger seat of his car when I realize I'm starting to fall for him. Being only human, I snap my head back so suddenly that it smashes against the window, momentarily blinding me with lightning bolts of pain. To his credit, Ben at least asks if I'm okay and checks to see if I'm bleeding before he bursts out laughing.

"What the hell was that?" he asks. I shake my head, jostling my already scrambled brain a little more.

"Nothing," I say. "I just... nothing."

"No, tell me," he presses, but I just shake my head and tap the clock on the dashboard.

"It's nothing. I just thought we should, you know, go in. The bell's going to ring soon," I say. Ben shoots me a doubtful look, but kills the engine and pockets his keys anyway. I meet him around the front end of the car and sling an arm across his shoulders, pressing a kiss to the top of his head as we set off towards the front doors of the school.

"Hey, Travis," Logan calls to me from the front steps where he is sitting with a few of his friends. "Do you date guys who wear makeup and girls' jeans because you like to pretend you're still straight?"

"No," I say, "I date them because the tight pants accentuate their dicks."

"I'm sorry, but did you just *check*?" Ben says, squinting at Logan.

"No, I-"

"Please refrain from staring at my junk. It's kind of gay," he finishes. He heads up the steps, lacing his fingers through mine to tug me after him. We separate to go to our lockers, which are in different wings, and meet up again outside my homeroom.

"Are you nervous about tonight?" I ask. He shrugs.

"Trying not to think about it," he says.

"Come on. You've had a week to prepare."

"And you've had *four*. It's not my fault you took three weeks to get around to telling me I had to have dinner with your parents."

"I know," I say quietly. "It's just that... these past few weeks have been great. It's the first time I've felt really normal with somebody. Not just since I came out, either. I mean ever. It's the first time I haven't been lying to at least one person. And I don't want to lose that, so I figured if I could put off this ridiculous meet-and-greet, maybe I could keep everything all perfect for a while."

Ben wraps his arms around my waist and burrows into the circle of my arms, burying his face against my neck. "Everything can be however you want it to be. For as long as you want it to be."

I am definitely starting to fall for him. Fuck.

The bells rings right above our heads, and Ben makes a muffled sound of protest. I laugh and kiss his forehead.

"I'll come to your locker after the last bell," I say. "If you start to get too nervous about tonight, you can always talk to Alex about it. I'm sure he'd be willing to talk you down."

"Will do," Ben replies. "I'm about to get marked absent, probably, so I'll see you at two o'clock."

I nod. He leans up to kiss me on the cheek, then pulls up the hoods of both our sweatshirts, just like he does every morning. I roll my eyes a little, and he sticks out his tongue at me, nudging my shoulder - or, more accurately, the middle of my bicep - with his before setting off towards the senior wing.

"Mr. McCall, as vital as I'm sure kissing Mr. McCutcheon is to your education, I need you to be in the classroom before the bell rings from now on," Mr. Beckford says in a bored tone, not looking up from his attendance sheet. There's a chorus of snickers as I sit down.

"Sorry," I say. He returns to taking attendance, then passes it to Corey to bring down to the main office. As he draws level with my desk, Corey stoops down to put his mouth next to my ear.

"Isn't it funny how Mr. fucking Beckford knows more about your life than your supposed best friend?" he mutters. I want to turn to stare at him, but I can't make myself move. Instead, I just sit there, frozen, through the morning announcements, the Pledge of Allegiance, the bell signaling the transition to first period. I stand very slowly and make my way to Precalculus. Corey is already there, slouching in his seat and scribbling notes off the board. I don't get why he bothers; he can never read his notes anyway, and always ends up copying mine on the machine in the Guidance office two hours before the test.

"Cor," I say. "Can we talk?"

"Apparently not," he says flatly. "The last time we did was when I called you, back in February, and made you go call some of the seniors you hang out with now. Christ, aren't I glad I opened that fucking can of worms."

"I'm sorry. Things just got... hectic. I had a shitty February break, and then I've been busy. I-I've had homework and my job at the Grind, and that's pretty much always monopolized all my time. But then I've also been trying to spend time with Ben now that-"

"Now that you're going out? Yeah, I heard. Shelley told me a *month* ago, she heard it from her sister. It's obviously not a secret, so I don't get why I didn't hear it from you," Corey snaps.

"Who's Shelley?" I ask.

"Shelley is the person who *I'm* dating. You'd know that if you had returned any of my messages," he says, turning back to his notebook. "Look. It's obvious you've got some new life that I don't get to be a part of. Ben's your new boyfriend, Alex fuckin' Baker is your new best friend, Jeremy-"

"You've got it all wrong! I don't-"

"Mr. McCall, Mr. Copicetti, if you could save your conversation for after school, I'd like to get started," Mrs. DelMino says loudly. She peers at us over the rim of her glasses and turns back to face the board. "Now, if everyone could look at the graph on the board, who can tell me the sine of three pi over two?"

"Corey," I whisper, edging my desk towards his. He glances at me more out of instinct than genuine desire to keep talking to me, but I'll take what I can get.

"What?" he mutters. I pause as Mrs. DeMino glances over her shoulder to make sure we're all copying the work off the board. She turns around.

"After this class is over, do you want to blow off the rest of the day? Go hang out?" I say. He blinks at me for almost a full minutes, and I can't tell if he's amused that his National Honor Society best friend is suggesting blowing off school, or pissed that I've changed enough to suggest it. But eventually, he nods once.

"Yeah. Sure," he says. Even after I return my focus to my notebook, I can feel his eyes periodically darting back to me throughout the rest of class, but I try not to pay attention to it. When the bell finally rings, he and I both stand up.

"I'm going to go drop my stuff off in my locker. Meet me in the parking lot?" I say. He shrugs and heads for his own locker. Instead of following him to the junior wing, I bolt up to the senior one to find Ben. He is standing on his toes to peer into the top shelf of his locker, and jumps when I touch his hip.

"Hi," I say quickly. "I just wanted to let you know I'm skipping the rest of the day, so I won't be at lunch."

"Skipping?" he echoes, and I nod.

"Corey is... pissed at me. To say the very least. I guess things have been weird for a while, because we used to be best friends, but... you know. First there was Garen, and then there was me moping about Garen, and now there's you-"

"Got it," Ben says, nodding sharply. "Text me or something if you'll be back at two o'clock so I know whether or not I'm bringing you home. If not, then I-I'll see you tonight."

"Don't be nervous," I say, pecking him on the cheek. I manage to bite back the words before I let out the next sentence, but I can't stop myself from thinking it. *I love you*. Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Hold the fucking phone. I *what* him?

"I'll try not to be," he says, with a small upward flick of his eyes that tells me he'd be speaking sarcastically, if he didn't always speak in one shade off from monotone. I try to smile, but instead, I let out a spastic, stuttering laugh that sends Ben's eyebrows towards his hairline. I press another tight-lipped kiss to his cheek and bolt, calling a goodbye over my shoulder. I can't even begin to relax until I'm outside, sitting on one of the benches near the main parking lot.

This isn't supposed to be happening. I'm not supposed to be falling for someone else. As much as I want to get over Garen, I know I can't. Or at least, I shouldn't. *What if he comes back?* I grip the edges of the bench and squeeze my eyes shut. I should be blocking these thoughts out, should be trying everything in my power to make this horrible hopefulness go away, but it's too late, because I'm already thinking it. *What if Ben was right weeks ago, when he said that Garen would never be able to stay away from me?* I can't have him come back to me just to have him leave again. But if he's *not* coming back, I can't wait for him forever. Can I?

"Where do you want to go?"

I jolt, and my eyes fly open. Corey is hovering awkwardly nearby, gesturing with his keys. I jump to my feet.

"Anywhere," I say. "I mean, we could... the park? If you-"

"The park's good," Corey agrees. I follow him across the lot, but he stops to unlock a dark red pick-up truck. I blink before climbing into the passenger seat.

"You got a new car?" I say. He nods.

"A few weeks ago. I left you a voicemail," he says. I slip a hand into my pocket to touch my cell phone, trying not to think of the tiny voicemail icon that's been blinking in the corner of the screen for days. The rest of the car ride passes in awkward silence, and I'm grateful for the crisp, cool air when we finally arrive at the park and get out. Corey jams his hands into his pockets and heads for the playground. After a few seconds of hesitation, I jog after him. He pauses near the jungle gym.

"Wanna?" he says. At first, I think he's talking about climbing it. Then I realize he's gripping a plastic Bic lighter and a pack of Newports. When he tips it upside down over his palm, however, a joint comes out. I stare.

"Since when do you smoke pot?" I ask. He shrugs.

"I probably started around the same time you started getting wasted and letting Alex Baker put it in your ass," he says.

"He didn't 'put it in my ass.' Why, is that what you heard?" I ask.

"Really not the point," he says flatly. I flush and look down at the ground. I expect him to light up, but he sighs and tucks the joint back into the cigarette pack. "Which do you want to talk about first?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who do you wanna tell me about first? Alex or Ben?" he presses. Neither. I can't say that, though, so I sit down on one of the swings and tighten my hands on the chains until decades-old rust digs into my palms.

"There isn't much to say about Alex. We hooked up at this party he had over February break, but it was only because he was drunk. He's straight, actually," I say. Corey snorts and sinks down onto the swing next to me.

"Uh, no, he's not. Trust me. If he was straight, he wouldn't hook up with dudes," he says. "I mean, he's 'straight' like you were 'straight.' As in, not. He isn't straight like I'm straight. 'Cause I'm sure you're real, you know, whatever in bed, but it's just not my thing. Just... not for me."

I laugh.

"But anyway... so you hooked up with Alex, yeah? Yeah. And now you're hooking up with Ben McCutcheon-"

"I'm *dating* Ben McCutcheon," I correct. "He's my boyfriend."

"Oh?" Corey says. "How'd that happen?"

"I'm not really sure," I say, shrugging. "I think it was sort of inevitable. We're a lot alike, and... I don't know how to explain it. It's like he wasn't even a part of my life before November, and then he was suddenly so deeply ingrained in it. Even when I was with Garen, Ben was just in my *face* all the time. He was always there, hitting on my boyfriend, or hitting on me, and it was really obnoxious, but then once Garen left-"

"If you say there was a hole that needed to be filled, I might throw up," Corey says mildly. I shove him off his swing.

"Fuck you," I say, laughing. "No. I just mean I couldn't act like he wasn't there, because he was, just as much as before, but then I suddenly didn't mind it. It was nice, even. And it all happened pretty fast after that.

"If Garen had never come to Lakewood, would you have gotten with Ben from the start? If you met him on your own, that is," Corey says. I laugh softly.

"If Garen had never come to Lakewood, I would've remained deeply in the closet until I was like, thirty," I say. Corey rolls his eyes, though, so I shrug. "I probably would've gotten with Ben eventually, yeah. If I'd met him on my own, if I'd figured it all out before he graduated. It would've been a lot slower, probably, because Ben's not like Garen at all. He wouldn't have kind of... I don't know, pushed me into it, like Garen did. Not that Garen forced me or whatever, he just made me take the leap I was barely ready to take. But Ben's like... shy. Really, really shy, actually."

"Weird. 'Cause when I walked by his car this morning and saw him with his tongue in your mouth, he didn't look too shy," Corey says, but he's standing a few feet away now, so I can't hit him.

"Fuck you. He's shy. But it would've happened anyway, because... there's just always been a spark, I guess. You know? We've always had some chemistry," I say.

"Like with Garen."

"No," I say. "Not like with Garen. Because with Garen, it was more than inevitable, it was like this huge thing that was so fast and so *right*. It was intoxicating, it was... well, he called us a force of nature. Right before he left. So I guess that puts things in perspective. And it's not like that with Ben, because everything is so much more... I feel *normal*, Cor. For the first time in years, I'm just honestly, genuinely happy, and it's amazing, but it's scary as shit, too."

"It shouldn't be scary," Corey protests.

"It is, though! The last time I was this happy, a trust fund kid obliterated my heart under his steel-toed combat boots. I don't want a repeat of that event with an emo kid in Converse," I say. I kick at the sand and wait for a reply. I wait a *while*. I finally glance at Corey. He's staring back. I gesture for him to speak.

"Hang on," he says. "Are you, like... do you love him, or whatever?"

I shrug and kick the sand again. "I don't even know, at this point. It's hard to figure out what's real and what's not real. I-I think I might, I think I *do*, but it's not like it was with Garen, and that's all I have to compare it to. So I don't know if it counts as love if I don't want to spend every waking second with him, fighting with him, yelling at him, getting screwed senseless by him-

"Dude."

"Sorry. But... you know what I mean. Part of me is just absolutely certain that it doesn't count as really being in love if I'm not getting hurt someone. Like being hurt is proof that I really care enough about him. And then the rest of me thinks that one part is *retarded*, because how could I not fall for Ben? I mean... okay. He's too short, and he's sarcastic as hell, and he's such a fucking train wreck-

"His stock is really plummeting in this conversation, Travis..."

"-but he's funny, and he's smart - like, painfully smart, smarter than me - and he's so goddamn cute-"

"You lost me."

"-and he *gets* me. As stupid as that sounds, it's true. All the shit I could never explain right to Garen, I don't have to explain to Ben. He just knows," I say. Corey digs back into his pocket for the Newports, taking out an actual cigarette this time. He lights it, takes a drag, and glances at me.

"It's like with me and Shelley," he says carefully. I lean back on the swing and start to turn myself around so I'm trapped beneath the twisted chain.

"Tell me about her," I say.

"She's a sophomore. Her sister's on the girls' cross-country team, so she goes to practices sometimes, and we just started talking one day. She's pretty and fun to hang with, so I asked her out a few weeks ago. She doesn't... okay, I get that I'm kind of stupid, right? It's not like I think I'm Einstein or whatever, I know I'm an idiot. But Shelley doesn't even care about that. She likes me anyway. And she doesn't care that I'm sort of weird, either. I don't have to explain why I hate double-chocolate chip cookies-"

"You think they're boring and lack gustatory variety."

"Or why I hate when Faye makes us watch anything with Johnny Depp in it-"

"You're jealous of him. He got to be a pirate, and also, you can't grow facial hair."

"Or anything stupid like that. She just kind of takes it all in stride, and isn't... she's not embarrassed by my quirks and shit, like most girls are. She likes me for me," he says.

"I'm happy for you, then. She sounds cool," I say. He nods his thanks, and I smile slightly. Several minutes pass in silence. Finally, he grinds out his cigarette and gestures across the playground.

"You wanna see who can run up the slide the fastest?" he asks. I look up at him, see the carefully measured look of caring and uncaring. I stand up.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, let's do that."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Maybe he had to work late," Bree suggests when she catches me checking my watch for what must be the nine millionth time in seven minutes. The seven minutes since seven o'clock passed and Ben became officially late.

"He works at a used bookstore that his father owns. I'm pretty sure he won't get fired if he refuses to stay late. Besides, he told me a week ago that he was taking tonight off completely," I say. I pull out my phone, but there are no new messages.

"Well, maybe he got into a car accident," Bree continues. Then, seeing my face, she adds quickly, "A minor one. You know, a fender-bender."

"He would've texted. And besides, he's an annoyingly careful driver. I don't think I've ever seen him speed in his life," I protest. She shrugs and examines her cuticles.

"Then maybe he fled the state like your last boyfriend," she says.

"Not funny, Bridget. And can I take this opportunity to point out that Garen wouldn't have 'fled the state' if you hadn't flipped your shit and outed me to Mom and Bill?" I say through gritted teeth. Bree tries to hide a wince, but fails.

"I-I told you I was sorry, okay? God, how would you have reacted if, instead of Bill having a son named Garen, he'd had a daughter named like, Gertrude, and you'd walked in on me half-naked and spooning her?" she asks. It comes out sounding a lot like an appeal for sympathy, but I still can't bring myself to give it to her. Can't bring myself to forgive her, not all the way.

"Okay, number one, you would never date someone named Gertrude. Number two, it's not like either Garen or I was the pinnacle of heterosexuality. You shouldn't have been that surprised," I say.

"Oh, Garen didn't surprise me at all. He and I talked about it all the time," she says, waving me off before crossing the kitchen to check on the beef cooking on the stove. I stare at her for a good two minutes before she notices my surprise. "What, like you think you're the only person in this house he talked to? I lived with the guy for just as long as you did. Besides, you were always working or at your therapist's or at track practice, and Christ if Garen could go five minutes without talking. He used to come hang out in my room and talk to me while I was trying to do homework."

"What uh... what did you guys talk about?" I ask slowly. She shrugs.

"I don't know. Everything? Except, you know, the obvious. He told me he was seeing somebody, yeah, but he wouldn't tell me who. He just said that he thought Mom would freak if he ever told her he had a boyfriend - which was true, in a way - so he wanted to keep it a secret until he graduated. That was back in like, December, and I was like, 'You really think your relationship is going to last that long?' and he was so convinced it would. He was always telling me how he'd found his soul mate and was going to marry this guy someday." She pauses. "It's strange, you know. Now that I know he was talking about you. I kind of always assumed it was..."

"Ben," I finish. "Yeah. They um... they hooked up, back when Garen first moved here. But it was just sex. It's not like they were a couple."

Bree's eyebrows shoot up towards her hairline, and she cocks her hip to the side, planting a fist on it and looking all too much like a disapproving mother. "What, and you're cool with that? Is there some big

secret underground gay society in Lakewood, with this whole group of guys who are all hooking up with each other?"

"Well, it's not so much a society. I'm pretty sure society's have to have more than four members by definition - Bree, I-I don't think it's healthy for your eyes to get that big," I say uncertainly. They look about ready to roll out of her head.

"Who else?" she hisses, grabbing my arm. "I mean, wait, let me get this straight. First it was Garen and Ben, and then it was Garen and you, and now it's *Ben* and you, but there's somebody else in the middle of all that?"

"S-Sort of. Do you remember Alex Baker, from middle school? Before you started going to the magnet school?" I say. Her eyes get impossibly wider, so I rush to finish. "It's not like that, no, no, no. He's straight, alright? Or, I guess, he sort of is. He's just made out with Ben a few times before, because they're like, best friends and Alex is really weird when he gets drunk. And then there was this time that Alex and I were both kind of trashed a little bit, and we sort of hooked up, but not really? I don't know, it's all-"

"Are you *joking*?" Bree demands. "Do you even realize how ridiculous this sounds? God, Travis, I'm still trying to get over the extreme 'ew' factor of you sleeping with *anybody*, let alone Garen, and now you're all 'P.S. I'm one corner of the world's sluttiest and gayest love square ever.' I mean, we might as well send Alex off to find Garen and complete the goddamn square! Are you aware of the fact that you are *not* a character on *Queer As Folk*?"

The doorbell rings, and I bolt for it, scaling the living room couch rather than walk around it. I check my watch - seven sixteen - before yanking the door open.

"I'm sorry. My mom needed to run to the grocery store for something stupid and my dad had the van, so she couldn't take all my sisters with her, but she couldn't leave them alone either, so I had to stay so that they wouldn't kill each other or burn the house down or get eaten by Lucy or something. And then she finally got home and said I had to help unload the car because God forbid any of the girls actually have to do anything, and it took way longer than I thought it would, but she said if I left without helping her, you wouldn't be allowed to come over for a month. I don't even know. It's stupid, I should have called. I'm really sorry."

Ben somehow manages to say all of this in one breath, then goes up on his toes to kiss me quickly on the lips, casting a glance around the room to make sure my parents aren't there. Bree, however, has joined us with a half-surprised, half-amused expression.

"It's okay. Really, don't worry about it. It's nothing," I say.

"That is the biggest lie ever. He was freaking out like it was his job," Bree says. I try to silence her with a look, but she is definitely not intimidated. I place a hand in the small of Ben's back and take another step into the room.

"Ben, I don't know if you've met my bitch of a sister, Bree. You guys used to go to school together, back in middle school," I say. Ben nods sharply, a tight, nervous smile in place.

"Yeah, of course. Hi. How are you?" he says.

"Pretty good, considering the fact that my little brother was just regaling me with the details of his sex life," she replies. Ben turns to squint at me.

"To the best of my knowledge, Travis hasn't *had* a sex life lately, so I hope it was a really short conversation," he says. I glare at Bree.

"She asked about Alex. It was a strictly past tense conversation," I say.

"Oh! I didn't realize our company had arrived."

Ben flinches and snaps his eyes shut. God, he is completely terrified, even more so than I am. I reach down to take his shaking hand and tug him towards the kitchen, where Mom stands framed in the doorway.

"Yeah. Mom, this is Ben. My boyfriend. Ben, my mom. And I'm pretty sure you know Bill already," I say, gesturing past Mom to Bill, who is examining the food on the stove.

"Bree, may I ask what the hell you're cooking?" he says, then turns around to stride out to meet us. "Ben, it's good to see you again."

"You, too, sir. How have you been?" Ben says, reaching out to shake Bill's hand. Wow. He's taking this 'meet the parents' thing pretty seriously.

"Excellent. And yourself?" he asks. Ben's hand is back in mine the second Bill has released it.

"I've been very good, thank you," he says. He turns to Mom next. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. McCall." His hand twitches slightly, but Mom's arms are crossed, tight as the fake smile on her face.

"Of course, Benjamin. Likewise," she says. There's one second of awkward silence, and then Bree hurries into the kitchen.

"I'm making picadillo, Bill. It's Mexican. It's got ground beef, tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers, raisins, apples, and cinnamon," she says. Bill's brow furrows.

"I'm sorry, it's got *what*? It sounds like you mixed tacos in with muffin mix," he says. Ben lets out a very small laugh, like he's afraid of getting yelled at for making too much noise.

"I-It's actually very good. Especially if you add about a quarter teaspoon of cumin," he says.

"You cook?" Bree says, surprised. Ben nods.

"A little, yeah. Nothing especially fancy or whatever. Just a little bit," he says.

"Oh, that's very interesting," Mom pipes up. "It makes a lot of sense, you know. I was very surprised when Travis told us he thought he liked men, because he was always so athletic. He was never interested in things like cooking or gardening or anything like that. You know, the type of things I'm sure you're interested in. No, for Travis, it was always sports, sports, sports. Have you seen him run?"

"Oh my God, Mom, please tell me those words did not just leave your mouth," Bree mutters. Bill is watching Mom warily out of the corner of his eye, and Ben looks stunned. I open my mouth to tell my mother to go fuck herself, but Ben snaps out of it.

"No, actually, I haven't, but I'm sure I will sometime this spring, once his meets start up again. I'm actually not a big fan of gardening either. My mom owns her own catering business, and when I was younger, I

used to help her cook a lot of the food sometimes. That's how I got into it. Not because I have some deep desire to become Martha Stewart," he says.

"Oh?" Mom says, like this is a shock to her. "I had no idea. I just saw the eye makeup and I assumed."

"Oh, no. I wear eyeliner because it makes me feel like a pretty, pretty princess," Ben says flatly. Half of me is thrilled that he is suddenly calm enough not to take her bullshit. The other half of me is terrified of what the rest of the night will be like if this is the first ten minutes.

"Let's eat!" Bill says hastily. Bree empties the pan of picadillo into a giant serving dish, and she and I move into what I can only think of as "attack formation." Bill sits at the head of the table, and I shove Ben towards the seat adjacent. Bree bolts around the other side to sit across from Ben, and I take the seat next to him. Mom takes the only remaining seat; she's not out of Ben's line of vision, but at least they're not next to or facing each other.

"So, Benjamin," Mom says, scooping some of the picadillo out onto Bree's plate, "tell me about yourself."

Ben clears his throat and obviously tries to ignore the fact that he is served last and hesitantly. "Well, I'm a senior at LHS. As of right now, I don't know for sure where I'll be going to school next year, because I'm still waiting to find out what I get in the way of financial aid. My parents can't really spend all the money on my college education when they'll eventually have to pay for my sisters' and brother's, too. But it's probably going to be Juilliard."

"Only ten percent of the applicants are accepted there," Mom scoffs.

"Eight, actually. And I was accepted last week," Ben replies. I squeeze his hand under the table. The morning after he got the letter, he had bolted into the cafeteria where I was talking to Corey, shoved me up against the wall, and kissed me hard, gasping against my mouth, "I got in. I got into fucking Juilliard." He squeezes my hand back under the table.

"My friend's sister goes there. She's in the dance program, and she loves it," Bree says.

"Do you know where you're going next year?" Ben asks, and she shrugs.

"Not completely positive, because I'm still waiting to hear back from a few, but right now, I'm thinking Williams," she says. Ben nods.

"Good school. It was in my top five or so, and I was thrilled when I got accepted, but then I saw how much tuition would be, and..." He laughs awkwardly. "Basically, if Juilliard is a stretch twenty-nine thousand, Williams is even less likely at thirty-eight thousand."

The conversation halts for a few minutes while we all eat, and I finally nudge Ben's elbow with mine. "Do you want something to drink?" I ask, standing and heading for the fridge.

"Um, diet Coke would be great, if you have it," he says. Mom drops her fork as if she'll need both hands free to seize onto this detail.

"Diet? Certainly you don't *need* diet. You're absolutely petite," she says. Ben starts to stammer out a "thank you," but Mom cuts across him with, "How tall are you?"

"I-I'm five foot six," Ben says, glancing at me with eyes that clearly say, *This is about to get bad, isn't it?*

"And so you must weigh about... one hundred forty pounds? One hundred fifty? Somewhere around that?"

"No, I'm more like uh... one fifteen, I think," Ben says.

"*That* can't be healthy. Is it purposeful?" Mom asks. I hand Ben his soda and sink back into my seat.

"Mom, lay off," I order. Mom feigns innocence as Ben eats quickly, almost as if to prove her wrong.

"I'm just concerned. I'd like to be sure my son's 'boyfriend'-" She actually uses air-quotes "-is a healthy, well-adjusted young man. Do you see a therapist, Benjamin?"

I don't point out that I don't see a therapist, either. Not since I made the connection between *Dr. Baker* and *Alex Baker*, and realized it was actually impossible to go forty-five minutes in that office without thinking, "My dick has been in your nephew's mouth, Doc, and you haven't the slightest idea."

"Are you... *no*, I don't see a therapist. I don't *need* to. And I don't do anything to make myself thin anymore than I do anything to make myself short. It's just my body. I mean, I drink diet soda because I like the taste better," Ben says. He has abandoned his fork and is hugging his hoodies around himself. I brush my fingers over the nape of his neck. Mom clears her throat.

"Have you-"

"Ben's going to be a piano major," I interrupt. "He's been playing since he was six."

"Why do-"

"He also plays guitar and drums," I say over Mom's next question.

"There's a baby grand piano in the den, more for show than anything else. Maybe you could play for us later," Bill suggests. He offers Ben an encouraging, mildly guilty smile.

"Yeah, sure," Ben says weakly. Mom takes advantage of the pause in conversation to thrust out another question.

"Are you a Christian, Benjamin?" I hate the way she says his name. *Benjamin*. Like it's an insult to pronounce everything beyond the first syllable. To my surprise, Ben laughs softly.

"I'm half-Irish, half-Italian. I think I'm about as Catholic as a person can be without actually being the pope," he says. When Mom eyes him doubtfully, as though wondering how a Catholic boy can wear eyeliner, Ben half-rolls his eyes and reaches into his shirt to pull out a small gold crucifix on a chain around his neck. For the first time tonight, Mom looks somewhat pleased.

"Now, Ben, you have sisters, I believe you said? How old are they?" Bill asks. Ben ticks them off on his fingers.

"Ten, eight, five, and three. I've also got a brother who's a few months old," he says. He hesitantly works his way through more random details of his life, and by the time we've finished the picadillo and the ice cream afterwards, Mom has loosened up enough to turn to Ben, smiling *very* slightly, and say, "I seem to recall Travis saying once that you're afraid of crustaceans?"

"Oh, he told you that?" Ben says, digging his heel into my shin. "Well, it... it's not *all* crustaceans, just

lobsters. See, when I was like, eight, I think, my parents took me and Rosie - she was still a baby then - to Maine for a week. We went to this restaurant that was completely packed, and my parents convinced me to order lobster. Only... I-I guess there was a mistake in the kitchen, because the lobster they brought out for me was *alive*. I'm talking about like, claws waving, antennae wiggling all over... God. I didn't even realize it until I grabbed it, and then I just freaked out and literally ran screaming into the night. Now I won't go near them."

He shudders, and I pat his shoulder in mock pity. He shrugs me off, glaring, and I laugh.

"Poor Ben. Your life is such a tragedy," I say. "You're a modern-day Hamlet."

"How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world," Ben murmurs. He pauses, snorts, and adds, "Hamlet was way more emo than me."

"I don't remember Hamlet wearing guy liner and skinny jeans, though," Bree says. I try to avoid glancing over at Ben's skintight pants, but fail. Oh *god* is that a bad idea. I forgot just how much those jeans cling to him.

"You're right. He wore man-tights, which is way worse," I say. Nobody would know, really, if I just slipped a hand over onto his knee, pressed my palm to the denim on his thigh, or his-

"Oh God, it would take so much more than putting on an antic disposition to make me wear tights," Ben says, cringing. "Even *I'm* not *that* gay."

He glances at Mom to gauge her reaction; I'm positive I'm not the only person who sees her smile dim just a little. She clearly does not appreciate the reminder of what this night's really about. I stand, picking up my empty plate, and Ben follows suit.

"No, Ben, you're a guest. Sit down," I order.

"I've got it," he protests. He scoops up Bill's plate and beats me to Bree's, then follows me to the sink. He helps me load the dishwasher even though I tell him half a dozen times to go sit down, then waits, empty-handed and awkward.

"Where did you say the piano is?" he asks. Bill leads the way to the den, which I try to avoid whenever possible. There are several bookshelves, and all the furniture is mahogany. It looks too much like Dr. Baker's office. Ben approaches the baby grand slowly, and hesitates before sitting at the bench.

"Any requests? I probably know enough by Mozart to make your heads explode," he says.

"Play what you played for your school audition," Mom instructs. I want to tell her that if it's good enough for the admissions committee at Juilliard, it's good enough for her. But Ben shakes out his hands and pauses with his fingers just breathing on the keys.

"It's the second movement of Haydn's Sonata Fifty-Four, Hoboken Sixteen Forty," he says, and then his hands are... gone, rocketing up and down the keys, fingers dancing so fast I can't even see them, can't figure out how I'm hearing the beautiful blur of notes faster than he should be capable of playing. I listen, dumbstruck, to this music-in-fast-forward for three minutes. The second the song is over, Ben shoves his hands in his hoodies pockets and waits, slouched over and breathing hard, for us to react.

"Holy *shit*," I say.

"Seconded," Bree pipes up. Bill and Mom both nod in affirmation, and Ben twists sharply to look at me. Just me.

"Yeah?" he says. I can't believe he's nervous about this. I can't believe he could ever think I'd be anything less than floored by that sound, those hands, this boy. I swallow and nod.

"Yeah," I say hoarsely, and he gives me one of the smiles that make me just a little bit glad that Garen left. Suddenly, Mom steps forward.

"Ben. Could I speak to you for a moment?" she says. Ben's eyes snap towards her and he tenses, but nods once anyway. Mom rotates on her heel and marches out of the den. As Ben heads after her, I snag his elbow.

"You don't have to talk to her if you don't want to," I murmur, but he shakes his head and slips out into the hall. The door clicks shut behind him, and I turn to stare at Bill.

"What's she saying?" I hiss. "Bill... what the fuck is she saying to him?"

"Travis, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," Bill says, brow furrowed. "Have some faith."

"Have some faith in the person who has made it clear she'd rather die a horrible, painful death than have a fag for a son?" I say. Bill says nothing. I sit down hard on the piano bench and press the heels of my hands against my eyelids. Fuck. This is it. This is the part where everything gets screwed up and I end up alone. Again. I wait there in silence for somewhere between thirty seconds and half an hour, I'm not too sure. Finally, the door opens again and Ben leans in.

"Travis? I-It's getting late. I should go," he says. I jump up.

"I'll walk you out," I say. He doesn't look too stressed, doesn't look like he was just told to fall off the face of the earth and die. Mom is clattering around in the kitchen, so halfway to the front door, I take Ben's hand.

"What did she want?" I ask. The corner of his mouth twitches upwards.

"She wanted to tell me that she finds me regrettably charming, and while she wishes you could just rejoin Team Breeder, if you have to be a flaming homosexual, she's glad you're at least dating a *gentleman*. One who, incidentally, is the best pianist she's ever heard in her life," he says. I blink.

"No, really. What'd she say?" He shoves me.

"I'm serious. That's really what she said. Believe me, Travis, I couldn't make up something that ridiculous," he says. He slips a hand into his pocket to check the time on his cell phone. "I really do have to go, though. I told my mom I'd be home by ten."

"Okay," I say, trailing after him. I lace my fingers through his once we're on the porch, and he offers me a small smile as we head out to his car. He unlocks the door and climbs in, rolling the window down the second the ignition catches. I rest my elbows on the window edge and lean in to kiss him.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight," he says, letting his head loll forward so our foreheads touch.

"Thank you for putting up with my semi-retarded family," I say. He laughs and shifts back to buckle his seatbelt.

"It's weird," he says. "Ever since I met you, I have been in a series of situations so strange I sometimes think I'm making them up. And I've still never been happier. I think that says a lot about how batshit insane I am."

"I already knew you were batshit insane. Pretty sure that's why I love you."

Oh shit.

Oh. Holy. Fucking. Shit. I am *not* supposed to be saying that out loud. I'm not even supposed to be *thinking* it, but I sure as shit shouldn't be letting him in on it after only coming to this conclusion, oh, twelve hours ago? I stumble back a few steps, wondering if my eyes are as wide as Ben's are. And also wondering if it's prudent use of my track talents to sprint up to my room and barricade myself in my closet for all of eternity.

But instead of throwing the car into drive and speeding as fast as he can in the opposite direction, Ben fumbles for his seatbelt and grabs the front of my shirt, leaning the entire upper half of his body out the car window so he can kiss me. I steady him so he won't fall completely out of the car and crack his head open on the pavement, and he shifts his hands from my shirt up to my hair.

"Fuck you, you asshole," he breathes, "I was convinced you were going to make me be the first one to say it."

"Fuck *you*, don't call me an asshole. Just say it *back*," I whisper, laughing just a little, and he kisses me again.

"I love you, too, Travis. God, you're such a moron."

We stay there, kissing each other breathless and smiling like idiots, until Ben's cell phone starts ringing over and over, and my mom starts flicking the porch light on and off, on and off.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

My mom has always been, above all things, a control freak. This, combined with her obsessive need for time efficiency, psychotic over planning, and hysterical misinterpretation of the importance of details - all of which I was lucky enough to inherit - means that in the weeks preceding the wedding, she completely loses her mind. With two weeks and six days left before the wedding, she shakes me away when it's still dark outside.

"Ushers," she hisses. My eyes are still half-glued shut with sleep, and I have to hold my watch an inch from my face to see the time.

"Mom?" I say hoarsely. "It's three thirty in the morning, what's wrong?"

"Ushers! There aren't enough ushers! I have two hundred and thirty-three people coming to this wedding and only three ushers!" she shrieks. I clamp my pillow down over my head.

"Mom, you can *hire* ushers. Call Heather and tell her to get you a bunch of matching J. Crew models. That's why you hired a wedding planner in the first place. Let me go back to sleep," I grumble. Mom seizes my pillow and flings it across the room.

"I don't want *strangers* as my ushers! This is supposed to be a day for family and close friends!" she says.

"Yeah, all two hundred and thirty-three of them."

"Call your friends, Travis, I need them all to-"

"Mom, you hate all of my friends, except for the two you've already recruited. They're all scruffy emo kids. Trust me, it'll be fine with three," I say, groping around for another pillow. My fingers finally brush against one, but Mom tears it away and throws the lights on. I burrow under my blankets, groaning. "Mom, fuck off."

"Travis, I expect you to be waiting outside your school at two fifteen, well... let's see, today is too short notice, and tomorrow you're working, correct? Correct. But I suppose Friday should work. Anyway, I expect you outside your school at quarter after two with all of those boys you hang out with. Corey and Miles-"

"You were making them be ushers anyway," I interrupt.

"Ben, Alex, Jason, and... well, that other boy. The one with the unfortunate floppy hair who should really try to smoke less marijuana, he absolutely *reeks* of it."

"See, this is why you only met these people yesterday, even though I've been hanging out with them for months. There is no Jason, by the way. His name is Jeremy," I say. I poke my head out from under the blankets to see Mom massaging her temples.

"Travis, they both begin with the letter 'J' and are therefore practically the same name, for all I care. Please just be outside the building at two fifteen," she says through gritted teeth.

"No, Mom. I realize that you're clearly sleep-deprived and half-crazy. But trust me, you do not want my friends as your wedding ushers," I say.

"Well, I don't have much of a choice, do I? Six ushers is barely enough, given the crowd we're expecting,

but you obviously won't be an usher now that you're the best man instead of Garen. That's why I remembered this whole thing to begin with. Thinking about him, of course," she says, almost absently. I sit up so sharply that she actually bothers to look at me, mildly surprised.

"Why were you thinking about him? Why 'of course'?" I ask. She stares at me.

"Don't you know what today is?" she says. I grab my cell phone off the nightstand and flip it open to check the date. March twenty-seventh. Garen's birthday.

"Oh," I say mildly. Mom pauses, then pats my arm awkwardly.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up," she says, the words only sound half-sincere. As of today, Garen can vote (if he can decide whether he's a resident of New York or Connecticut), get married (in whatever states would allow it), join the Army (as long as they don't ask and he doesn't tell), buy cigarettes (again), get (more) tattoos, and get into clubs (without having to pay off and/or blow the bouncer). I snap the phone shut and shake my head quickly.

"I don't even care. I just... I'd forgotten, I guess. B-But it's not important. So, wait, why am I supposed to meet you outside school this week?" I say.

"Because I need your friends to all have matching suits if-"

"They're not going to be ushers, Mom, please step out of that fantasy. And please let me go to sleep," I say, failing to stifle a yawn. Mom shoots me a final withering look, but leaves anyway. I crawl out of bed to turn off the light and fetch my pillow before curling up under the blankets and passing out once more.

The whole experience makes for an amusing story at lunch on Monday, when I'm still trying not to think about Garen's stupid birthday or fall asleep in mid-bite. By Tuesday morning, I've forgotten about it, because Mom has already moved onto the next psychotic episode and set up an easel with the seating chart in the kitchen. When Friday finally comes around, I've completely forgotten about Mom's demands to meet up with my friends and I. I'm too busy trying to figure out how to tell her that she'll only be having five ushers after all.

"She's going to kill me," I sigh, slouching down a little more on one of the wooden benches outside the school. Ben, who is sitting on my lap, straddling my hips, has to adjust quickly to avoid hitting the sidewalk.

"She is not. I mean, she might kill *Miles*, but not you," he says. Jeremy hums in agreement.

"It's not your fault he backed out at last minute," he adds.

"It's not last minute," Mason protests. "The whole thing's like, a month away."

"Two weeks, two days," I correct. "Maybe I could convince him to change his mind? It's a dick move to have agreed months ago and then just be backing out now because his girlfriend became a bitch."

"What's the story with that, anyway?" Alex asks, stretching his long legs out and slouching down on the bench next to me as well.

"Basically, Faye is okay with Travis the Fag in theory, but is kind of squeamish about the whole situation now that Travis the Fag is publicly dating Ben the Fag," Ben murmurs.

"Okay, one? It's weird to talk about yourself in the third person. Two? Maybe she'd have less of a problem with it if you guys would stop dry-humping each other in public every day," Jeremy suggests. Ben gives him the finger and presses a kiss to my neck.

"We don't dry-hump each other every day in public," I protest. Mason snorts, and Jeremy rolls his eyes.

"Oh, sorry. I guess I just invented that part. I must've been confusing it with the making out before school in Ben's car, and then in the hall before homeroom-

"And then whenever you run into each other between classes-

"And before lunch-

"And after lunch-

"And sometimes during lunch, which is just a whole other level of disturbing-

"I think you guys have made your point," I say loudly. "And that's not what Faye's problem is. She just... well, according to Miles, she 'doesn't like my new reputation.'"

"Meaning she doesn't like the fact that you went from this uptight, asexual eunuch to being a complete exhibitionist?" Mason asks. I open my mouth to reply, but Alex shakes his head and cuts across me.

"No, meaning she has felt awkward being friends with him ever since the whole school started talking about that time his dick was in my mouth," he says. Ben stiffens slightly, even as Jeremy and Mason both chuckle.

"Can I just remind everyone that we're talking about my boyfriend here?" he says. Alex sticks his tongue out at him.

"Well, if it bothers you, maybe you should stop going after my sloppy seconds," he pauses, then turns his head towards me. "Or, are you technically sloppy thirds? 'Cause I mean, I guess I had Garen's sloppy seconds, and now Ben's getting my sloppy seconds and Garen's sloppy thirds?"

"I really resent the use of the word 'sloppy' in regards to my sex life," I say. He shrugs.

"Just using the expression. And I'm not saying anything that's untrue, am I? I'm just discussing the timeline. Garen blew you first. Then I did. That makes him first, me second. Right?" he says. I snort.

"If you can even count what happened between you and I as a blowjob," I say.

"Ouch," Mason murmurs.

"Fuck you, McCall, I give great head," Alex protests, and I grin.

"I only meant that it lasted about ten seconds," I say, and Ben looks around at me in mild surprise.

"Is that really all it takes you? God, if I'd known that, I might not've been so quick to date you," he says. I cuff him lightly around the head.

"No, that is *not* how long it takes me. I only meant that I stopped him from doing it after a few seconds because it felt wrong."

"Take that *back*, Travis," Alex orders, and then he adds to the others, "He's so full of shit. I can suck cock like it's my *job*."

"Alex, you were so wasted I'm surprised you didn't throw up on my-"

"Travis Daniel McCall!"

Ben jolts so suddenly that he almost falls off my lap. I manage to catch him before he actually hits the ground, but a second later, when we both follow the voice over to the SUV idling a few feet away and see my mother sitting in the driver's seat, he scampers off my lap, straightening his clothes and turning a deep shade of red.

"Mom? What the hell are you doing here?" I ask.

"I told you I was picking you and your friends up. Did you think I was joking? I only see four other people, Travis. Where are Corey and Miles? Where are my last two ushers?" Mom demands, cutting the ignition and getting out of the car. She is dressed in a tailored white suit, the same kind of outfit she's been wearing constantly lately. Apparently, she's trying to look simultaneously "business" and "bridal."

"I thought you were joking about that!" I hiss. She glowers at me. I roll my eyes and look around at the guys. "Guys, please tell my mother that you will not be going to her wedding."

"Well, why not? Benjamin is supposed to be going as your date anyway, God knows you fought *that* battle with enough gusto, but I need ushers, so if your friends aren't busy that day, then why not?" Mom says. Ben blinks at me, and Mason chuckles, echoing under his breath, "*Benjamin*."

"You want me to be your date to the wedding?" Ben says.

"Travis Daniel, when this entire thing is over, you are *grounded*! You were so adamant that you be allowed to invite him to the wedding, you absolutely refused to participate unless you could invite your boyfriend, and now I find out you haven't even asked him?" she says. I open my mouth to reply, but she turns towards Ben, who flinches. "Ben, would you like to be my son's date to the wedding? It's two weeks from this coming Sunday, and he would love to have you there, but is apparently not enough of a man to invite you himself."

"Did your mom just say you have no sack?" Jeremy asks me, and Alex bursts out laughing. Ben is blushing furiously, and seems incapable of speaking. Eventually, however, he nods and manages to force out, "Y-Yeah, okay. Thank you for inviting me."

"Not at all, dear," Mom says, and then she rounds on the others. "The ceremony begins at eleven o'clock, and I expect you all at the church no later than ten. Now, you-" she points at Mason, who blinks slowly "-do not look like you even know what a suit is. We'll have to change that immediately. Furthermore, if you show up at my wedding as high as you are right now, I will have you shot."

"Mother!" I yell, and she turns to me, unfazed.

"I'm not joking, Travis. This is a very serious matter. Now, everyone, stand up!" she cries, gesturing for us all to stand. None of us move. After a moment, a muscle in her forehead begins to twitch, so we all eventually scramble to our feet. "Get in the car! We're going shopping, I need you all to match. Travis, find Corey and Miles immediately."

"Um. About that," I say. I try to explain to her about Miles not being an usher anymore, and the muscle twitches a little harder. I bolt back into the school to find Corey, if only so I don't have to watch the explosion. Corey is walking down the hall in the sophomore wing, his arm around a pretty brunette girl. I skid to a stop in front of them.

"Corey, my mom's here, and she's going crazy. She's taking you, me, and all my other friends out to buy us clothes, apparently, because now every guy I've ever met is an usher in her wedding," I gasp out. Remember the girl, I turn to her and add, "Hi, I'm Travis."

"Shelley," she says, giving a small wave. Corey shakes his head.

"I can't. I'm driving Shelley home," he says. She turns to him quickly.

"No, it's okay. I can get a ride from someone else," she protests.

"Shelley, you can come along, for all I care, but if Corey and I aren't outside and in my mom's car in about ten seconds, none of us will live to see eighteen," I say. I turn on my heel and bolt back outside, the two of them trailing after me. Outside, Mom is arguing with Jeremy about the physics of fitting this many people into an SUV.

"Mrs. McCall, I'm really sorry, I just don't see how you expect us all to fit. It seats one driver and four passengers. I'm sure if we took another car, we could follow you-"

"No! I am not letting any of you out of my sight! There aren't really that many of you, I'm sure we can all fit," she says. She spots us, and beams.

"Corey, how nice to see you again!"

"Hi, Mrs. McCall. This is my girlfriend, Shelley. I'm supposed to give her a ride home, but Travis said it'd be okay if she came too," Corey says.

"Of course! I have a plan, you see," she announces. "Jeremy, Mason, and Corey. You all seem to be roughly the same size, and, well, it won't be *comfortable*, but you can all fit in the back together. Go on!"

The three of them clamber into the car awkwardly, trying to make themselves as small as possible, but failing miserably, considering they're all about five eleven. Mom turns to Alex and surveys him mournfully.

"Good God, Alex. How tall *are* you?" she asks. He shrugs.

"About six two?" he says. She seizes his shoulder and shoves him towards the front of the car.

"There's no way you'll fit in the back, so you can sit up front. Travis, you go with him, you're too tall to fit in the back, too," she says. I blink at her.

"Mom, there's only one seat up front," I say as I get in the car.

"So sit on his lap, for Christ's sake, Travis!" Mom shouts, and a few passing freshmen hurry away, looking alarmed. "You're always telling me how *gay* you are, how much you like *men*, how you are just this *special rainbow of homosexual impulses*, and if that's true, then you will get in that car and get on top of your friend!"

"Mrs. McCall?" Alex says quietly, looking slightly mortified. "I'm actually um, straight."

"Then I guess it's fortunate for you that I'm not telling him to molest you. Please get in the car, Alex," Mom says sharply. Alex hastily climbs into the seat with me, and Mom slams the door after him. In order to actually fit both of us, I am on the absolute edge of the seat, and Alex is twisted so he's half-facing me, his right leg somewhat on top of mine. All in all, it's significantly awkward.

"Let's see. Yes, Shelley, that should work fine," Mom says, and I twist to look. Shelley has joined the mess in the back seat and is the only one who looks comfortable from where she is on Corey's lap. I catch her eye, and she grins at me. Clearly, this is an adventure for her. Ben peers into the backseat, then gestures off towards his own SUV.

"You know, I really can just follow you guys," he says.

"Nonsense, Benjamin. You're very small, you should fit in nicely," Mom replies. Ben opens his mouth to speak, but the words die in his mouth as my mom *lifts him off the ground and flings him into the backseat*. He's halfway on top of Mason, half on Jeremy, but Mom looks satisfied and slams the door shut.

"There! See? I told you it would work out well!" she says, smiling at us as she gets into the car, turns it on, and guns it out of the school parking lot.

"Mom, just... I don't even..." I sigh. "Where are we going?"

"Store," Mom says flatly. I don't really want to bother trying to disrupt her thought process, so I drop it.

"So, what's the wedding going to be like, Mrs. McCall?" Shelley asks. Mom, clearly thrilled at another female taking interest in the topic, launches into her plans, going into way too much detail over her dress, the reception hall, the caterers. Alex sighs and lets his head loll sideways against the headrest. The awkward positioning puts his forehead just barely touching the side of my face and his breath slow and shaky on my neck. I nudge him.

"Are you feeling okay?" I whisper. He nods after a brief pause.

"Yeah, I'm great. My left arm's just kind of crushed and falling asleep," he says. I grab his wrist and try to rub some feeling back into it, but he yanks his arm back, twisting at a strange angle to do so. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"Okaaaay," I say, raising my eyebrows, but his eyes are closed, so he obviously doesn't notice. His posture doesn't relax at all, so halfway down the highway, I slip my phone out of my pocket and, holding it close to the side of my thigh so he won't see it if he opens his eyes again, type to Ben's phone, *Alex is acting weird. What's up with him lately?* A second after sending it, I hear Ben's phone beep. There's a brief pause as he reads and types, and then my phone buzzes against my palm. I have no idea. *I thought I was the only one who had noticed. Want me to try to talk to him once we're out of the car?* I glance over my shoulder, catch Ben's eye, and nod once. Mom whips the car around into a parking lot and lurches to a stop, and my head snaps forward.

"Jesus, Mom, we've got nearly three weeks until the wedding. Not every single thing you do that's related to it needs to be so dramatic," I say.

"I don't know how long this is going to take, and the store closes at five," Mom says as the eight of us make our way into the formalwear store.

"Oh God, this cannot take even close to two and a half hours," I groan. Mom gives me a warning look,

then turn to the salesclerk, who greets her by name. Within half an hour, all measurements have been made and recorded. Within an hour of our arrival, my friends are all lined up in front of me, Mom, and Shelley. Each of them is dressed in a crisp black suit jacket, black pants, a shockingly white shirt, a vest and tie in what is apparently called "clover," and unbelievably shiny black shoes. They all look very uncomfortable, but very, very good.

"Perfect," Mom announces. Very few of her wedding plans so far have been actually perfect, but I don't think any of the guys realize just how much of a compliment this is, coming from her. She smiles briefly in satisfaction, then goes to the back with the salesclerk to retrieve my tux, which had been ordered a month ago.

"Guys, you all look so amazing," Shelley says, grinning. I nod.

"Yeah," I say. Ben is the only one not facing us. Instead, he is facing one of the many floor-length mirrors, his head cocked to the side as he surveys himself. I can't blame him, really; I can't take my eyes off him either. He glances at me in the mirror and gives me a slightly quizzical look. I hadn't realized I was watching him so intently. I clear my throat and say quietly, "You look really good."

"Thank you," he says, smiling slightly. We stare at each other for another minute - *God* his eyes are blue - and finally, he mouths, "I love you." I grin and mouth, "I love you, too."

"Do you need help?" Jeremy asks suddenly. I glance at him, but he's addressing Alex, who is fiddling with one of his cufflinks.

"No, I just wanted to see if I could take it off and put it back on. You know, on my own. Just in case," he says, and then he looks back at me. "Why aren't you matching us?"

"Because I'm not an usher anymore. I was supposed to be, I guess, back when Garen was going to be the best man. But not anymore," I say. Alex's eyes dart back to his cufflinks.

"Did you wish him a happy birthday?" he asks. Ben freezes, still facing the mirror.

"What?" I say softly. Alex spares me the briefest glance.

"Garen. Did you call and wish him a happy birthday? It was on Monday. I thought you remembered," he says. Corey clears his throat pointedly, but I ignore him.

"Of course I remembered. But I haven't talked to him since he left. Why would I call him?" I ask. Alex shrugs.

"I did," he says. Ben twists sharply to face him.

"You did?" he says. Alex nods very slowly, still not looking at either of us.

"Yeah. We talked for about... half an hour, I guess. It was cool," he says. He pauses, then adds, "Before you start freaking out, no. I didn't tell him you guys are together now."

"Wait," Jeremy says, turning to Ben. "So, Garen doesn't know? Like, he still thinks Travis is single and that you *didn't* start dating his ex like, a month after he left?"

"It's complicated," Ben mutters.

"No, it's not," is Alex's stony reply. "At least, it wouldn't be to Garen."

"And what about you?" Ben hisses, closing the distance between them in three steps. Despite the fact that he is eight inches shorter than Alex, he still looks pretty intimidating. "I may have started dating him after a while, but which one of us got fucking wasted and went down on him one month to the day after Garen left?"

"It's not my fault you're jealous I got there first," Alex says flatly. Ben jerks back like Alex just punched him in the face. I stand up and slip between them, hooking an arm around Ben's waist and pulling him a few feet away.

"Both of you, stop it. Right now," I say. Ben digs two fingers under the cuff of his jacket and draws back one of the rubber bands on his wrist, letting it snap down hard against his skin. I clamp a hand over the elastics before he can do it again. "Ben. Ben, stop it."

"Let go of me, Travis," he says, but I just drag him further away from the others and catch his face between my hands.

"Listen to me. I don't know what Alex's problem is today, but everything he's saying is just because he's in a shitty mood. He doesn't really mean it. He doesn't give a shit that you and I are dating, and he doesn't think we're being assholes to Garen. He doesn't think you're jealous that he... you know, that he and I hooked up before you and I got together."

"What if I am?" Ben says, his voice heavy with a misery I hadn't anticipated at all. "What if I'm tired of never getting all of someone? Because, you know, I never got all of Ethan - fuck, I never *wanted* all of Ethan, but still - and I never got all of Garen, because he was yours from the first second you looked at him, and n-now there's you, but you had Garen, and Alex, and I don't-"

"Stop it," I interrupt. "Listen, Ben. You know that what happened between Alex and I was just a random drunken hookup, and you know he's just bringing it up to piss you off for whatever reason. And Garen... look. Garen was my first everything. The first guy I kissed, the first guy I slept with, the first guy I fell in love with. But *everybody* has a first, and most of the time, the first isn't the only. My relationship with him is over. It's in the past. And you're right here, you're in the present, and you're going to be in my future, too. I wasn't joking when I told you I love you. I meant it. I mean it."

Ben doesn't speak for several minutes. He stand completely still, his eyes on the ground, and for a little while, I start to worry that he's going catatonic. Eventually, however, he slowly raises his eyes to mine and nods.

The car ride back to the school is silent except for Mom's endless babbling. Mason wordlessly takes my seat up front with Alex, and I flash him a small, grateful smile before sliding into the backseat with Ben on my lap. The general sense of awkwardness doesn't bother me, but Ben's refusal to make a sound, his rigid posture and the occasional, deliberate snap of the rubber band on his wrist... *that* bothers me. I wrap my arms around him as tightly as I think he'll stand and kiss his neck softly.

"Please don't be sad," I whisper. He shakes his head and huddles closer to my chest. Each one of my mom's sentences seems to be punctuated by the snap of the rubber band, and by the time we pull into the school parking lot and I get out to walk Ben to his car, I can see that his wrist is red and swollen under the streetlight.

By the following Friday, everything is back to normal. I don't pretend to understand it.

Chapter Thirty

He arrives the day before the wedding, when everyone is in full-blown, breathe-into-a-paper-bag, gouge-my-eyes-out-just-so-I-can-look-at-something-other-than-a-seating-chart-or-gift-registry mode. The doorbell rings halfway through Mom and Bree's fifth argument about the merits of a half-updo, and I gladly slip out of the kitchen. Our front door has been open nearly all the time for the past few weeks, constantly swinging open for deliveries and people and Heather the manic wedding planner. The one thing I have not been expecting to see on my front step is an almost freakishly tall boy with golden-tanned skin, dark brown hair, and acres of smooth muscles. We blink at each other for barely a second before he flashes me a grin so white and perfect that I can't believe he's not a spokesman for Crest.

"Well, if you're Travis, I think I finally understand this whole shitstorm," he says in a honey-sweet Southern drawl. "I'd be willing to get myself disowned too, if it meant I'd get a chance to get my hands on you."

"Um," is all I can say. I don't think I have ever seen anyone so gorgeous in my entire life. I don't think anyone so gorgeous has ever existed before. As he raises a duffel bag and steps past me, however, my brain finally starts again. "Who are you?"

"I'm the emissary," he says, laughing just a little at his own private joke. When I don't laugh with him, he inclines his head a fraction of an inch. "My name's James Goldwyn. I'm here on behalf of Garen."

"You're here on what of whom?" Mom says loudly from the other room. She bursts from the kitchen with acid in her eyes, but the second she sees James, she freezes. Being in the presence of a god seems to have that effect on a lot of people.

"I'm here on behalf of Garen," James repeats. "He would have liked to attend the wedding himself, but given the circumstances, he felt it was inappropriate." Bullshit. Like being appropriate was ever high on Garen's list of virtues. "He asked me to come in his place."

Mom stiffens visibly, and Bree pokes her head around the corner. She looks from James, to me, to Mom, then ducks back around the corner, but not before I see her lips moving to form the words, "Oh shit."

"I don't know what Garen told you, but he no longer has a place at this wedding. He forfeited that place when he molested his brother," Mom says. James' warm brown eyes harden, but his polite smile remains intact as he tugs a folded piece of paper from the back pocket of his body-hugging jeans.

"With all due respect, ma'am, Garen has been living with me at my dorm room in New York, where he received an invitation to the wedding several weeks ago. So, while you may not believe he has any place at this wedding, Garen's father apparently does. Furthermore, I feel compelled to point out to you that the legal age of consent in the state of Connecticut is sixteen, and if I understand the story correctly, your son was still a virgin up until shortly after his seventeenth birthday. This, coupled with the fact that Travis referred to Garen as his boyfriend for several months, leads me to believe that any and all sexual acts that occurred between them were completely consensual, which would mean that your use of the word 'molested' is, pardon my language, bullshit." James lifts his duffel once more and turns to me. "Now, Garen has given me permission to stay in his bedroom for the time being, and I took the liberty of calling Bill to ask his permission as well. He has been kind enough to grant it to me." These words come with another glance at my mother. "If someone would show me to Garen's room, I would greatly appreciate it."

Fuck Catholicism. Fuck all organized religions. This gorgeous boy with an obvious hatred for my mother is clearly the real God. I lead him wordlessly up the stairs and down the hall into Garen's room. He pauses just inside the door, blinking down at the mess of sheet music. I clear my throat, and his eyes snap back to mine.

"I guess I'll just um... leave you to get unpacked. Or whatever," I say. He laughs, but there's no humor in it this time. When I reach for the doorknob again, he pushes it further shut, just out of reach.

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd rather you stayed. See, I've heard so much about you. I want to figure out how much of it's true and how much of it's a result of those three years that Garen spent getting high," he says.

"Oh," is all I can force out. James stoops down and scoops up the sheet music, stacking it neatly on the desk. I watch him move to the bed, digging my fingernails into my palms so I won't make him stop as he

smoothes out the sheets, erasing every inch of Garen's last minutes in this house.

"See, I've known Garen since he was fourteen. I knew him back when he was still this scrawny, wide-eyed little virgin from Ohio, and I saw him turn into the big bad city-boy he pretends he is now. I was there the first time he got drunk, the first time he got stoned, the first time he got laid. I held his hand when his parents got divorced and it became obvious that neither one of them wanted him around. I cleaned the blood off his face when Dave beat the shit out of him. I stayed up with him when he would have bad trips. I took him to the infirmary when he found out he was moving here and put his fist through a window. I listened to him talk about you for hours, Travis. Fucking hours. So I think naturally, you can understand why I want to kill you."

"No," I say sharply. "That part, that part I don't get. He's the one who left."

"He told me you were a National Merit Scholar, yet you seem oddly retarded to me," James says. "He didn't have a choice. His father kicked him out of the house! Did you expect him to say, 'Oh well, that can't deter me in the slightest, I'll just go sleep on the sidewalk and wait for my one, true love to get off his comfy couch and come see me'? He couldn't stay--"

"But I didn't make him leave," I hiss. "Bill did that. Not me. I begged him to stay, I offered to go with him, but he wouldn't let me."

"And you tried oh-so-hard to contact him, of course. I mean, back in our dorm room, that phone is just ringing off the goddamn hook! I pick up every time and I say, 'Fuck off, honey! He doesn't want to talk to you!' and you plead with me to let you talk to him, you beg me to bring him back to you. And let's not forget all the times you bothered to get up off your tight little ass and travel ninety minutes to come see us. You're right! It was all his fault! I mean, the way he slammed the door in your face was just--"

"He broke up with me and you still expect me to chase him?" I demand. James grabs the stack of music off the desk and crumples it, shaking it in my face.

"Yes, goddamnit! Chase him the way he fucking chased you!" he orders. "Jesus Christ, are you really this stupid? Are you really this blind? Chase him like he chased you. Love him like he loved you. Like he loves you, Travis, because I promise you he still does. Four months can't change that. Nothing can."

I cannot listen to this anymore. If I do, my eardrums will burst, or my brain will explode, or my heart will break over, and over, and over, like it did every night for months when he first went away. I grab the music from James' hand and turn around.

"You should set your alarm for eight. We have to leave by nine in order to get to the church early enough. The ceremony's at ten. Ben's picking us up," I say.

"Ben? The travel-sized-for-your-convenience Pete-Wentz-in-training with inappropriately tight jeans, but good intentions? I've heard about him," James says.

"Do not even think about pretending that you know anything about my boyfriend," I say, and I close the door behind me, not daring to look back to see if his beautiful face matches the stunned silence.

Getting the last word in doesn't help me sleep better. I spend half the night rolling over and over, and the other half pressing the heels of my hands to my eyelids, silently begging myself to just turn off my brain and sink into unconsciousness. When my alarm sounds at eight, I turn it off and head to the bathroom to examine the dark circles under my eyes. The heat of the shower helps me feel less disgusting, but it doesn't stop me from nearly falling asleep and cutting my throat while shaving. Once I've put on my pre-wedding t-shirt and jeans - Mom would stab me if she even hallucinated a wrinkle in my tux - I head to the room across the hall. A voice is seeping out from under the door, so I don't bother knocking before I push it open. James is sitting up in bed, shirtless, with his cell phone up to his ear.

"You should shower and get dressed," I say.

"Just a moment, honey," he murmurs to who I assume must be his boyfriend, and then says, "I showered last night, after you went off to pout in your room. I guess you couldn't hear the water running over the sound of your own angst."

"I wasn't pouting, so... never mind. Forget it. Ben's going to be here soon, so get dressed," I say. James lets out a laugh colder than a bucket of ice.

"Oh, right, your boyfriend. Say, since I've got him on this here phone, wanna talk to your other boyfriend?" he asks, extending the cell phone to me. I stare at him. He stares back. The room is dead silent, and then--

"Jamie, don't!"

I can only stand being in the room for those two barely audible words from the earpiece before I bolt. I can hear James' harsh tone behind me as I sit down hard on the top stair, but I'm not sure if it's for me or for Garen. Garen, Garen, Garen. Garen and that beautiful, horrible voice of his, and then fuck, I remember it all over again. The songs he sang ever so quietly while we sat at the kitchen table together and did our homework, the noises he made when he came, the way his voice would hitch when he told me he loved me, like he was ripping out his heart and stuffing it into my hand every time he said it.

The doorbell rings downstairs, and I cannot go answer it. Someone does, though, because a few seconds later, there are footsteps on the stairs. I refuse to look up, because I know if he sees my face, he'll know, but apparently, I'm in luck.

"You know, just now, your mom was like, 'Oh, I'm amazed how great Travis is being about this, he's totally an adult' or whatever, and in my head I was like, 'Bullshit, lady, he's just gearing up for another temper tantrum or suicide attempt.' And honestly? Right now, I can't tell which it's about to be."

"Cor, what are you doing here?" I ask. Corey shrugs.

"Your loving boy toy asked me to pick you up. Said he got stuck on last-minute babysitting duty. Don't worry, though. He promised he'll be at the wedding. You just might not see him before then," he says. I'm still too numb to function properly.

"But Ben's supposed to be picking us up," I say. Corey's eyebrows draw together, and he glances around.

"Um... dude, there's only one of you. There's no 'us,'" he says. I point behind me to Garen's bedroom door. Corey freezes, but I can't offer any more of an explanation. After too long of a pause, he passes me slowly and pauses with his hand on the door for another moment before he pushes it open. There's another awkward pause.

"Hello," James finally says. I glance over my shoulder in time to see Corey cautiously enter the room with his hand outstretched.

"Hi. Corey Copicetti. Travis' best friend," he says.

"James Goldwyn. Garen's best friend."

"Oh shit," Corey says, and I can just tell that he's looking around the room for signs that Garen is back, too.

"I came alone, don't worry. I'm here on Garen's behalf, just to make sure he's not forgotten."

"It's a little late for that, maybe."

There's another awkward pause, then the shifting of bed sheets. "Would you like to talk to him? I've got him on the phone, but I've got to get ready."

"Uh, I don't."

"It was nice meeting you," James says, and he appears in the doorway, pausing to give me a calculating look before he heads down the hall to the bathroom. I expect to hear Corey from within the room, expect to hear him making awkward small talk or vicious threats. But instead, he reappears in front of me and drops the phone, still-open, in my lap.

"Open your mouth and talk, McCall. I promise you'll be fine," he says. He sits down on the step next to me and grabs my wrist in the most reassuring way he can manage without seeming gayer than I am. Slowly, I raise the phone to my ear.

"Hi," I say, when my lips are capable of movement.

"Travis." There is more agony and ecstasy in those two syllables than in any other sound on earth.

"Christ, Garen," I say.

"That's a start," he says hoarsely. "Just please keep talking. God, I miss your voice. I miss it so much."

"Stop it," I say softly.

"I miss you, Travis. I don't know what I was thinking when I left, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here. Fuck New York, I need you--"

"Stop," I say, louder this time, and he does. There's a brief pause. "James told you. About me and Ben."

"Yeah," Garen whispers. "Why, Travis? I don't get it. You don't even know Ben, let alone like him."

"Yes, I do. We started hanging out after you left, and everything was so fucking shitty for me, but he

helped me. He fixed so much of it. And I... I love him."

"Don't say that," Garen says desperately. "Please, baby, don't say that. Listen, I have it all figured out, okay? I can come back. And I-I can get a job, I can sell my car. I'll get my own place. And maybe you could come too. We could live together, we could be together, just like we wanted, just like we talked about. I still love you, Travis. And I know you still love me, too."

"I don't," I say flatly. "I can't. I'm with Ben now. You have to accept that. You can't say shit like this anymore. You have to let me go."

Corey grips my wrist a little tighter, and Garen says nothing. My whole body is shaking so much, it feels like I'm convulsing. Downstairs, I can hear Bree moving in the kitchen. Down the hall, I can hear James singing indistinguishably around a toothbrush in the bathroom. I can hear every sound in the world except Garen's voice. Eventually, he clears his throat.

"Can you put James back on? Please?" he asks.

"He's in the bathroom, actually. He's getting ready for the wedding. Do you want me to have him call you back?" I ask. The only reply is the dial tone.

Chapter Thirty-One

By the time I see Ben at the ceremony, there's no way I can talk to him. He is sitting in the third row back, between Jeremy and Alex, and I am standing at the front of the church between Bill and James. James is a last-minute addition, stuffed in beside me when Bill finally realizes his real son isn't showing up. For what must be the one hundredth time, James slips a hand into his pocket, tugs out a folded piece of paper, stares at it, and returns it to his pocket.

"What are you doing?" I can't help but whisper. He glances at me, almost as though he'd forgotten I was there.

"Contemplating the pros and cons of having a complete psycho for a best friend," he says. I snort.

"Well, the cons are pretty obvious. He's impulsive, he's unreliable, he bails whenever things get too complicated, he's a hypocrite, he's immature, he drags other people down with him. Should I continue?"

"But on the other hand, he writes beautiful songs, he's a god on the guitar, he loves people hard, and he gives one hell of a blowjob," James says. I want to roll my eyes and turn away, but... well.

"Yeah, he really does," I whisper back.

James laughs, and I fix my eyes on Ben, my face boiling. Alex is whispering something to him, and Ben is shrugging it off. God, I hope that nonchalance will last long enough for me to tell him I talked to Garen without getting dumped.

The organ starts up, and everyone stands in unison. I try to keep completely still as my mom's too-long procession of bridesmaids enters one by one. Her sisters, some coworkers, a friend from high school. Christ, is there anyone she didn't invite to be in the wedding party? Bree comes in last, and there's an overly dramatic pause before Mom finally makes her appearance on my grandfather's arm. There is a collective sigh of appreciation, and to be fair, it's well-deserved. All of her obsessive-compulsive planning has paid off; she looks beautiful. She makes her way down the aisle, and half the people in the audience are already tearing up.

Mom finally reaches the altar, and she and Bill are gazing at each other in a way that might be sweet, if it didn't make me feel a little nauseated. The Minister raises his hands and booms, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of William and Evelyn."

At least, some of us are. I, however, am fucking gone. I keep my eyes on Bill so that I won't hold things up when the time comes for me to hand off the ring, but my body is the only thing that's really present. My mind is millions of miles away. Or, more realistically, a hundred miles away, in a dorm room in New York, with someone it shouldn't be with.

Why did you have to do this to me, Garen? You left me, and you should've stayed gone. You had no right to start talking to me again the day before the wedding, right when I'm so happy with Ben and you're about to become my family in a way you never wanted to be. It's unfair, and it hurts, and it can't be the way things were supposed to happen. It can't be.

Bill turns to me, grinning, and I fish the ring out of my pocket, holding it out to him. When my hand drops back to my side, something brushes against it, and someone takes it. I look down. James has laced his fingers through mine, and is squeezing so tightly his knuckles are white. I should shake him off. Really, I should. Ben can see, my friends can see, everyone can see. I don't even know him. But he is the closest thing I have to Garen right now, and no one else in the world seems to understand the real significance of

this moment. This isn't just the part where Mom and Bill get married and celebrate their love and unite forever, or whatever everyone else seems to believe.

This is the part where Garen becomes my brother. This is the part where that possibility – the one I spend all of my time trying not to acknowledge, the one where maybe, maybe, maybe things with Ben might fall apart on their own and he'll fall in love with some guy way better for him and Garen will show up on my doorstep and everything will be like it was before – is completely destroyed.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

I suddenly realize that my hand is damp, warm, and sticky. I look down. My hand is covered in blood, and there are tiny half-moon cuts on James' skin where I have dug my nails into him. I try to pull away, but he just steps closer.

"Travis, stop. It's okay. I'm best friends with Garen. I'm used to 'fucked up.' It's okay," he whispers, barely loud enough for me to hear.

"You may kiss the bride."

I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for it all to be over.

I bolt after the ceremony. As soon as we have all made our way out of the church and the rice has been thrown and congratulations have been given, I am using every track-trained muscle in my body to get as far away from that place as possible. I'm the worst best man ever, but Bill should've expected that. They should've known I wouldn't be able to do this.

I run until my thighs are burning, my muscles are screaming, my blood is boiling inside my veins. Sweat seeps into my pretty designer tux, and my hair is flattened against my forehead. It's incredibly hot for April, and I'm out of shape, so I don't really make it as far as I plan. Not like I'm planning anywhere I want to go. Another city, at least. New Haven? Hartford? New York? Fuck. I can't get there, but I still make it halfway across town. Gasping and with lungs burning, I collapse in the grass at the edge of the park where Corey and I started really talking again. I've passed out enough times in my life to know when it's coming, so when the edges of my vision start to blacken, I squeeze my eyes shut and curl up on my side. When I finally open my eyes again, my head feels foggy and the world is spinning a little, which probably means I've already passed out.

I stay where I am until my head clears. I want to stay here until there's nothing left of me. For the first time in months, I actually wish I could die. For the first time in months, I itch for a razor blade in my hand so I can cut myself open and bleed out all the horrible, painful *shit* I'm feeling. I shove a hand in the pocket of my suit pants for my wallet, which is useless. The sharpest thing in it is a fucking Blockbuster card, which is about as productive as trying to cut myself with a highlighter. I snap it in half, which at least creates more of a jagged edge, and dig the card into my wrist, right above my tattoo. Fuck you, G. Fuck you. It's not even enough to bleed, just enough to make my skin angry and red. It's not enough, definitely not enough to make me forget everything I'm suddenly remembering.

I'm in love with my stepbrother. Not I *was* in love with someone who was *going* to be my stepbrother. I am – *present tense* – in love with someone who is – *present tense* – my stepbrother. And no matter how many times I tell him, tell his friends, tell my friends, tell my boyfriend that I'm not, it doesn't change the fact that I am, and probably always will be.

"Your mom asked me to come look for you. I've been looking everywhere."

I refuse to look up at him, choosing instead to sprawl back on the ground and check the time on my watch. Four o'clock. Guess it took me longer to get here than I thought. I slip my hand into my pocket for my phone and check my texts. There are twelve, all of which are variations of "where are you" and "call me right now" from assorted friends and family members. I delete them all.

"I talked to him last night. He was on the phone with James, and then Corey gave me the phone. He told me he still loves me," I say, as calmly as I can manage. Ben is still for a moment before he leans back against the chain-link fence near my head.

"Oh," he says. It's a single sound, but it's enough to make me look at him.

"That's all you have to say? 'Oh'?" I say.

"I'm not sure what else I can say, since I always expected this part," he says hoarsely. "So... are you going there? Or is he coming here?"

I stare. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he told you he still loves you. That's what you've been waiting for, so I-I just assumed... you're going to get back together with him. I mean, I'm a really good substitute, but that's all I—"

"Bullshit," I say, scrambling to my feet. "You're not a substitute."

"Are you going there, or is he coming here?" Ben repeats. I grip the fence behind him for a moment, then reach up to brush his hair off his forehead so I can press my lips to his skin.

"Neither. I told him I don't love him, and that he shouldn't call me anymore," I say.

I don't have a chance to speak anymore before Ben yanks me forward by the front of my suit and kisses me. His lips are smooth and trembling slightly, and I rub my thumbs over his cheekbones, trying my best to sooth him in a way I cannot seem to sooth myself. We part eventually, and I have to stoop down a bit to wrap my arms around him.

"I'm yours, Ben. Don't doubt that," I say.

I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.

"Do you want to go back? The reception started a while ago," Ben says. I shake my head slightly more spastically than I mean to.

"No. No, I really don't want to go back. Did you drive here?" I say. He nods, thumbing towards the silver SUV parked a hundred feet away. I hook an arm around his waist and tug him towards it. He laughs, sounding almost nervous.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

I push him against the side of the SUV and kiss him hard. "Nowhere."

He watches me open the door to the backseat and slide in across the bench. He hesitates before following, and by the time he gets in and shuts the door, my suit jacket is balled up on the floor and my shirt is half-unbuttoned.

"Why are we doing this?" he asks, even as he slides out of his own jacket. I thread my fingers into his hair and pull him close enough to feel his breath on my lips.

"Because there's no reason not to."

"How romantic," he says dryly, and I laugh softly.

"Ben... I love you. I really, really do. And you love me. And it's stupid not to do this if we love each other and want each other. Okay?" I say. He breathes in and out very slowly, his head cocked slightly to the side as though he's weighing his options. Eventually, he leans up towards the front of the car and pops open the glove compartment. Shoveling an owner's manual and assorted papers aside, he eventually plops back down next to me with a condom and a small, travel-sized bottle of lube.

"Do I even want to know?" I ask. He snorts.

"Probably not. But it's hard to get any real privacy if you live with as many people as I do, so... I don't know. Welcome to where I lost my virginity?" he says helplessly, gesturing to the backseat. "Ethan – the uh, the first guy, the one before G—" He freezes for a second, watching me, but I make sure I remain as still as possible. "Ethan was the first guy, and he didn't want to do anything at his house. And mine was out. So, you know. It just sort of happened here, so I started keeping some supplies. And then I eventually just forgot about them until now. It's nice to be prepared."

"You're a real Boy Scout, Benjamin McCutcheon," I say. "Kiss me."

He slides into my lap, knees braced on either side of my hips, and we kiss. All the talk about Ethan kind of ruined it for me, but he grinds against me very slightly as I work the buttons of his shirt, and within minutes, I'm as turned on as before.

Without clothes, it's impossible to really think about Garen anymore, because there's no similarity. Ben is *tiny*. He has nowhere near as many muscles as Garen, but there doesn't seem to be an ounce of fat on his entire body. His skin isn't as smooth as Garen's, either, and I rake my fingers experimentally through the trail of hair leading down from his navel. He reaches past my hands to unbutton his trousers, and I slip a hand into his pants as his eyes flutter shut. The way his lips part and his tongue darts out to moisten them is making me almost painfully hard, and I sink down in my seat as he wraps a hand around the grab rail and pulls himself up. I tug his pants over his hips and, squeezing my eyes shut, I wet my lips and slide my mouth down over his cock. He inhales sharply, and I panic, gripping his hips so I won't choke just in case he thrusts forward. He doesn't thrust, simply threads his hand into my hair and tugs. Giving head isn't really all that complicated, despite my somewhat irrational fears, and I assume I'm decent at it, given the soft noises Ben is making. He only lets me suck him for a few minutes though, and then he's pulling away and shifting off of me so I can return to my seat. He toes off his shoes and strips the rest of the way down. I don't know if I'm really allowed to look at his body – it's been so long since I actually had sex that I seem to have forgotten all of the etiquette. Ben isn't bashful though, about his body or my own. He unbuttons my fly and tugs my pants down towards my knees before moving back onto my lap. I tear the condom wrapper open with shaking hands and don't speak until I've rolled it on properly.

"I-I've never... I'm not usually on this end of things."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asks, pausing with his hand halfway to the bottle of lube. I nod quickly.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Just... promise not to hate me if I suck at this?" I say. He grins.

"You're not going to suck at this, Travis," he says. I'm not about to argue with him – what kind of guy would actively try to convince his partner that he has no sexual skill? – so I pour some of the lube onto my fingers and start to work him up. This is the part where being on the bottom with Garen will probably help me out; I move slowly, carefully, even though Ben rocks onto my hand impatiently.

"Travis," he says, "it's okay. Y-You can..."

I pour a little bit more of the lube onto my cock, just for good measure, and position myself carefully. I mean for it to go slowly, but Ben's the one controlling the pace from this position, and he sinks down onto me in one movement. I inhale sharply. "F-Fuck."

"Are you alright?" he murmurs against my temple, and I nod shakily. "You sure?"

"I'm *fine*, I just... fuck, you're tight," I whisper, and he makes a vaguely guttural noise, sliding up and sinking back down. It's so tight, so hot, so good, and all I'm really capable of doing for the first few minutes is pressing my forehead to his shoulder while he rides me. When I can eventually move, I dig my fingers into his hips to guide him, and he leans back slightly so that he's curved over the headrest of the front passenger's seat. I shift slightly to make up the distance between us, wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing my lips to his chest. This is one of the most intense physical sensations I've ever experienced, but...

He is not Garen. The sex is incredible, and I love Ben so much it hurts, but he is not Garen and it doesn't matter whether or not this is about *making love* or *expressing commitment* or any other cheesy euphemism. This is not Garen's skin, this is not Garen's mouth, this is not Garen's body. This is Ben, and Garen is gone, and why does that hurt so much?

Once we have finished, we both dress slowly, eyes locked on each other. Ben is shaking a little, and I can tell that he's trying to pretend I can't see the scratches on his arms. They look relatively fresh – maybe a week old? – but I decide not to mention it. Once he has finished knotting his tie, I slide across the seat to kiss him. He kisses me back, but all I can taste on his tongue is apprehension.

"Do you want to go to the reception now?" he asks. "Your mom told me everything would be over around seven, I guess."

"Yeah. She and Bill are going straight to the hotel after, though. It's attached to the airport, and their flight for Paris leaves at five in the morning, so they decided to just save time by not coming home," I say. I pause, then laugh softly. "I'd really rather not deal with them yet, though. Can you take me home?"

"Of course," he says immediately. He presses another kiss to my forehead before we move back up to the front seats, and on the way to my house, I stretch across the chasm between the seats to rest my head on his shoulder. Lack of Garen aside, this is one of those moments I know I should savor. I just had great sex with my fantastic boyfriend who I honestly, truly love. It shouldn't be this heavy. I shouldn't be waiting for it all to be ruined.

Ben turns the car into the driveway and parks without cutting the engine. "I should go. Can I see you tomorrow?"

I nod. "Of course. I'll call you when I wake up. You can come over."

"Alright," he says. I turn his face towards mine and kiss him.

"I love you."

"I love you, too." He watches me open the car door, and waves goodbye once I'm on the porch. The front door is unlocked, which I assume means Bree and James have both returned by now. There are voices in the kitchen, so I shuck off my jacket with a sigh and trudge over to answer all the questions I'm sure they will have. James is pacing around the room with long strides, and Bree is sitting at the counter, plucking the flower petals from her bouquet with deliberation. It takes me longer than it should to realize that neither of them is the one talking.

He stills when I enter the room, his dark green eyes focused on the surface of the table. He raises his mug of coffee to his lips and takes a long sip, if only for something to do to delay speaking. I can't stop staring at him. He is smaller, thinner, almost as if he hasn't eaten since he left. His skin is paler even than it was before, and his hair, untouched for months by the flat iron still stashed under the bathroom sink, is curly and slightly longer than before. His clothes swallow up his newly small frame, even though, I realize after a moment, he's wearing my LHS Varsity Track Team hoodie. Once he has swallowed his mouthful of coffee, he finally looks up at me, almost guiltily. Neither of us moves a muscle. James has stopped pacing, and Bree's hand is frozen halfway to a petal.

Eventually, Garen cracks the same wide smile I've been aching over for months. "Hey, little brother. Miss me?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

Deep breaths, Travis. Take deep breaths, close your eyes, and pinch yourself so you know this isn't another twisted dream. Open your eyes.

He's still there. Every atom of my body is screaming at me to turn one hundred and eighty degrees, and sprint down the road after Ben's car. Instead, I sink down into the chair across from Garen, and fold my arms across my chest to keep myself from crumbling to pieces.

"So," he says, running his forefinger around the lip of his coffee mug, "how are you?"

I'm dying, I want to say. I was fine until today, fine until I had to remember you, but now that you're here sitting in front of me, I am falling apart. You're a horrible person, and you left me alone at the worst possible time, just because things started going bad for you. You are selfish and spoiled and I hate you. I hate you for going away, and I hate you for coming back, and if you somehow managed to disappear off the face of the earth, I would probably hate you for that, too. I will hate you for the rest of my life, whether you are here or not, whether you are my brother or my lover, whether you are alive or dead.

"I fucked Ben," is what comes out instead.

Garen flinches so hard that some of the coffee sloshes out of his mug and onto the polished tabletop. In less than a second, though, his smile is back in place, even if it looks a little forced. "So did I. This town has a great way of welcoming newcomers. He's a fucking animal in the bedroom, isn't he?"

Before I am even aware of what I'm doing, I curl my hand around his mug and bring my fist down hard on the table. Garen doesn't even move to shield himself from the shards of ceramic and waves of scalding hot coffee that spray everywhere. Bree lets out an involuntary shriek of surprise, and James jumps.

"Don't talk about him that way. He's my goddamn boyfriend, and if you ever say something like that again, I'll beat the shit out of you," I say. Garen simply shrugs.

"Fair enough," he says. He glances down and flicks a piece of the mug off his sleeve. "How was the wedding?"

"It was great. Really beautiful. I'm really happy for Mom and... Dad." Calling Bill "Dad" makes me want to vomit, but it's worth it to see the way Garen winces.

"If it was so beautiful, why did James and Bree just get through telling me you completely bailed on the reception?" he asks. I stay silent, and he laughs without humor. "Don't worry. James gave the best man's speech, actually."

I glance at James, who shrugs helplessly and digs into his pocket for the piece of paper he was clutching during the ceremony. I take it from him and flip it open. *On behalf of my father and his new wife, thank you all for coming today. I'm sorry I couldn't be there myself,* it begins.

"He dictated it to me over the phone last night and asked me to read it for him," James says. Without another word, I tear the paper in half and let the piece fall to the floor.

"Everything Garen has to say is meaningless," I say, "because he's a liar. He only tells people what he thinks they want to hear. He only says anything good because it gets him what he wants."

Garen is on his feet in an instant, circling the table and twisting me towards him, his hands digging into

my shoulders.

"That's bullshit and you know it," he says. For the first time today, there is actual anguish in his voice. "You know I loved you. And you know I still do. I came back for you, Travis, and I know you're mad at me, but it doesn't have to be like this. W-We can pick up where we left off, I *promise* we can—"

"There are two problems with that scenario, though," I say, raising one finger into the air. "First of all, I have a boyfriend. One who isn't my stepbrother, who doesn't make out with his ex-flings behind my back, and who doesn't break up with me the second people start to give him funny looks." I raise another finger. "And second of all, I fucking hate you, and hope you die."

"Travis," Bree says sharply. I shrug. If she expects me to take it back, she is going to be extremely disappointed.

After several moments of aching silence, Garen releases my shoulders and steps back. "Alright, then. It was worth a shot." He is out of the room before I even realize he's walking away.

"Great job, asshole," James snarls at me, then bolts after his best friend. Bree and I stare at each other, both of us listening to the thud of feet on stairs and the slam of a bedroom door. I stand slowly, if only for something to do. Bree takes one hesitant step towards me, then another. I half-expect her to hug me, and am already preparing to push her away, when I hear a loud *whack* and realize the noise is her palm connecting with the side of my face.

"Jesus, Bridget!" I exclaim, blinking away the stars that are suddenly clouding my vision. "What the fuck was that for?"

"I cannot believe you said that to him, you piece of shit!" she hisses, shoving me backward a few steps. "I am so ashamed to call you my brother right now. You're a fucking terrible human being."

"Me? He's the one who abandoned me and then comes crawling back three months later, expecting to be welcomed with open arms," I say.

"That's such a lie. He didn't 'abandon' you. Do you not even pay attention to what other people say? His dad stood right where you're standing now, and he said 'Get out of this house, I don't care where you go, get out.' Garen didn't choose to leave; he got kicked out. Or do you not even remember the day he left?"

"I remember it every second of every day," I snarl. "I remember running upstairs after him and packing my bags to leave with him, and I remember him telling me it was over and that he didn't want me to come with him. I remember calling him over and over and over again, begging him to come back. I remember waiting for some form of contact — *any* form of contact — and getting *shit*. So don't act like he's the one who was wronged here."

"But he's the one who came back for you. He didn't know you had started dating again, but the second he found out he might have lost you for good, he came back here to see you," Bree said. "That makes him really fucking brave."

"It makes him selfish!" I yell, and for a moment, the voices upstairs cease.

"Fine," Bree says flatly. She shoves her hand into my jacket pocket and stuffs my cell phone into my hand. "Then call your boyfriend and tell him that Garen's back, but it makes no difference. I want to see your face when you swear to him that Garen means nothing to you."

I dial the phone wordlessly, and Bree crosses her arms across her chest, waiting.

"Hey," Ben picks up on the third ring. I can hear the smile in his voice, the flush on his skin.

"Can you come over?" I ask. There's a beat of silence, and when he speaks again, his voice is wary.

"I haven't even pulled into my driveway yet," he says. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I say. "Please come."

Another beat.

"Okay. I'll be there in ten," he says, and I click my phone shut.

"I really hope that you're inviting him over so that you can break up with him," Bree says, leaning back against the counter.

"What is your problem, Bree? A week ago, you thought Ben was great for me. You thought he was fucking amazing, you were so proud of me for moving on," I say.

"Because a week ago, I didn't know what your face would look like when you saw Garen again," Bree retorts. "You're still in love with him. I don't care what you say. Before you started breaking cups and screaming, you fucking melted. I saw it. James saw it. Garen saw it. Stop denying it."

"The fact that I love him doesn't mean I can't hate him, too," I say before I can stop myself. I expect Bree to look triumphant at my confession, but she just looks tired.

We wait in silence after that. I pick up all the pieces of the mug, and Bree wipes down the table with one of Mom's tea towels. I am on the floor, sopping up the last of the coffee, when Ben opens the front door without bothering to knock. He has already removed his coat, tie, and shirt, replacing them all with a plain black hoodie, zipped halfway up his chest.

"Hello?" he calls hesitantly.

"Garen's back," I say in reply. He does not turn towards where I'm sitting, but cocks his head to the side.

"You said he wasn't coming back. You said you told him to stay away," he says.

"Yeah," is all I can manage. There is a crash from upstairs, followed by some yelling, and Bree darts past me up the staircase. Ben nods towards the second floor.

"I assume he's upstairs?"

"Yeah."

Without another word, he bolts up the stairs. I sprint after him, my heart starting to cave in. Nothing good can come from this confrontation. I grab Ben's hand, but he wrestles away from me and bursts through the bedroom door. The first person I see is James, who is sitting with his legs folded in the center of the bed. His back is perfectly straight, and he is staring at the floor with a bland expression, as though he has been through too many of Garen's tantrums to be particularly fazed by them anymore. Bree is perched on the edge of the desk, gnawing on a thumb nail and looking anxious. Finally, my eyes land on Garen. He is standing in one of the corners with his face against the wall, like a child who has been put in time-out. His

rolling desk chair lies upended a few feet away, plainly having just been kicked across the room.

"Garen?" Ben says softly, and Garen groans.

"Not now. Please not now. If I have to see the happy little couple making out or something, I swear to God I'm going to throw up."

"We're not making out," Ben says hoarsely. "I swear I'm not trying to upset you. I just want to talk to you. You... I haven't heard from you in months. You didn't call, or anything. You even called *Alex*, but you didn't send me so much as a text message. You were one of my best friends, and I... missed you."

Garen rotates slowly on the spot, glowering so hard I'm afraid Ben is going to burst into flames.

"Garen," James says, his eyes focused on the loose thread he is busy pulling from the hem of his pants leg, "stop being such a Jewish princess and say hello to your friend."

"How can he be my friend if he barely waited a month before he moved in on the only guy I ever really cared about?" Garen demands.

James stands and crosses the room in two strides. He slings an arm across Garen's shoulders and says, "Stop it. You're going to regret it if you say something stupid right now. So, swallow your pride, and say something to him."

Garen looks Ben squarely in the face and says, "Bite me."

James cuffs him around the head and shoves him back into the corner.

"Garen, stop it," Ben says flatly. "You're not the wronged party here, alright? Let's just... let's just *stop* and review the timeline, here. You moved to Lakewood. You slept with me. You blew me off, and started dating Travis. You two slept together. Your parents found out. You broke up with him and ran away. Travis and I started dating a month later. Your dad married his mom. You came back to town. Did I leave anything out?"

"Yes. You left out the part where *I got kicked out*. It wasn't my choice. And you also left out the part where Travis was supposed to give a shit that I was gone. Even if all of the rest of it is true, you were my friend. You shouldn't have moved in on him like you did," Garen says.

This whole conversation is going nowhere. I am sick of this going in circles, and I am sick of them talking about me like I'm not even here. I grab Ben's wrist and tow him out into the hallway, shutting the door behind me.

"I'm not going to break up with you. I need you to believe that," I say. I wait until he nods to continue. "I wanted you to know he was back. I wanted you to see it for yourself, and I wanted you to see that... it's not like it was before. He's a different person, and so am I, and he and I are not getting back together. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he whispers.

"I think I should talk to him now. Make sure he understands that all, too. And I want you here, but I think it would be better if you weren't. Just for right now," I say.

After slight hesitation, Ben nods. "Alright. Will you text me later tonight? Just so I know what's going on?"

"Of course. And I still want you to come over tomorrow, if you... you know, want to," I say. He rocks up onto his toes and brushes his lips against mine.

"Call me when you wake up, and I'll come right over," he says.

I press another kiss to his forehead and say, "I love you."

He nods, but heads downstairs without a word. I sigh and open Garen's door once more. "I want to talk to Garen alone for a minute."

Bree nods stiffly and leaves, though she pauses at my side and mutters, "At the end of the day, you will still have your job, your friends, your boyfriend, your family, your school, and your future. And at the end of the day, Garen will still not have anything. So, be careful. Don't make me hate you."

I watch her patter down the hall to her bedroom, then turn to face James expectantly.

"You're insane if you think I'm leaving. He's my best friend."

"And there's a guest room down the hall. Please shut the door behind you on your way out," I say. James exchanges a brief look with Garen, then leaves without comment.

"This isn't exactly the way I imagined things would go if I ever came back," Garen says softly.

Something breaks inside of me. Before I can stop myself, before I can take a second to actually think about what I'm doing, I cross the room and sink into his arms, right where I've been wanting to be since he left. He buries his face against my neck and grips me so tightly I can't breathe. Like I could breathe anyway; he still smells the same, still feels the same, even if he's a little scrawnier than before, and everything is so fuzzy around the edges right now. I can't remember if I love him, or if I hate him. I can't remember if he's my best friend, or the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I forget where I am, and who I am, and why I shouldn't be here. He backs me up against the door, and I run my hands up and down his spine, trying to prove to myself that he is solid flesh, and not just some quality hallucination.

"Travis," he says hoarsely, and I knot my fingers in his hair.

"Yeah," I whisper. "It's me. I'm here."

He twist around and nudges me backwards onto his bed, wrinkling the sheets that James took care to smooth that morning. His weight on top of me is so familiar, so perfect, and I find myself clutching at his – my – sweatshirt, determined not to let him go.

And then he kisses me.

He tastes like coffee; his lips are soft; his tongue is hot and slick against mine. I slip a hand up under the back of his sweatshirt, digging my nails into his skin until he gasps, wanting us to be closer, closer, closer. *This is how it should be*, I think.

Suddenly, all I can see is Ben's face. All I can hear is my own voice saying over and over, *it's not like it was before, it's not like it was before, it's not like it was before*. Because it's true. This is not my life anymore. This is not where my heart belongs anymore.

"Get off of me," I say, rolling him off even as I say the words. I stand up, straightening my clothes,

flattening my hair. When I glance back at Garen, he looks stunned.

"What? What's wrong?" he asks. His dark green eyes are full of longing that makes my stomach churn. I can't do this. Not to him, not to Ben, not to myself. I take a step back towards him and brush my palm across his cheek.

"That was your kiss goodbye. And that was all you will ever get from me. I'm saying this as plainly as I can, Garen. Leave me alone," I say, and I stride out of the room, slamming the door shut behind myself.

Sometimes it is too easy to turn my heart off.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I try my hardest to sleep forever, but eventually, my sister sneaks into my room and yanks the blinds up. “Up,” she demands, seizing my wrist and dragging me off the bed, onto the floor.

“Bree, leave me alone. I’m not in the mood,” I grumble. She digs around in the mess on my nightstand until she finds my cell phone, which I make a grab for.

“You have two messages from Ben. Get off your ass, shower, and call him. Then come eat pancakes,” she says.

The last time Bree tried to make pancakes, she made the batter with confectioner’s sugar instead of flour, added stale chocolate chips, and set them on fire. Then she made me eat them anyway, telling me I was being “unappreciative of her hard work.” I think it’s fair of me to scramble to my feet and flee to the bathroom.

“I didn’t make them!” she calls after me. “Asshole!”

I expect the heat of the shower to ease some of my tension, but it doesn’t. It just suffocates me, burns me, highlights every inch of my skin that Garen touched last night. *Please, God, don’t let Ben find out from Garen. Let this all go away.*

But apparently God isn’t listening, because when I leave the bathroom with nothing but a towel slung low around my hips, I find myself face to face with Garen. His eyes scrape across my skin, and he sucks in a ragged breath. After a few awkward seconds, he pointedly shifts his gaze to the ceiling and says in a strangled voice, “Good morning.”

“Hi,” I say dully. “So, did you call Ben the second I left your room last night, or are you planning to fill him in today?”

His eyes drop back to mine, but his face is suddenly bare of any of the accusation or resentment I’d been expecting. He even seems like he might be genuinely confused when he says, “What are you talking about?”

“The kiss last night. I know you’re probably planning to tell Ben, because apparently it’s impossible for me to have a normal, happy relationship without something huge screwing it up. And I’d rather be the one to tell him, thanks, so if you don’t mind, I—”

“Travis,” Garen interrupts, “have you completely lost your goddamn mind? I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

I blink, but he doesn’t seem to be joking. Did I hallucinate what happened last night? Was it a dream? “You kissed me last night,” I say uncertainly. “And I kissed you back.”

He laughs, still seeming pretty bewildered. “I’m pretty sure I’d remember if I made out with anybody last night. You’ve got to stop this wake-and-bake shit, man.”

I open my mouth to reply, but he edges past me into the bathroom and shuts the door with a click.

What the fuck just happened?

I stop by my bedroom to throw on some clothes, and am still in the process of pulling on my t-shirt when I

get down to the kitchen. “Did Garen hit his head really, *really* hard this morning? Maybe he fell out of bed and into a ravine full of incredibly sharp rocks or something?”

Bree frowns around a mouthful of pancakes, and James pauses with a measuring cup of batter poised above the sizzling pan. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“He... okay, Garen kissed me last night—”

“Travis!” Bree groans.

“—and I kissed him back—”

“Completely understandable,” James murmurs, and Bree seems unable to stop herself from humming her agreement.

“—okay, can you two please shut up for a minute?” I say irritably. “As I was saying... we kissed last night, and I just ran into him after my shower—”

“This story is going to end in a blowjob,” James says sagely to Bree. I grab one of the pancakes off my sister’s plate and throw it at him.

“Shut up, James. I just ran into him, and I was wearing nothing but a towel, and... nothing happened.”

Bree snorts. “That was probably the most anticlimactic story I’ve ever heard.”

“No, I mean, that’s what he told me. He says nothing happened last night. Not as in, ‘It meant nothing.’ As in, he says he has no idea what I’m talking about. He says we didn’t kiss, even though we did. And he seems to actually believe it.”

Bree makes a little noise of confusion and cocks her head to the side. James, however, goes rigid. “Let me guess. He said something condescending like, ‘I’d know if I did something like that. Are you on drugs?’”

“Yeah,” I say slowly. “Why, does this happen often?”

He shrugs gently, looking uncomfortable. “It used to, when we were in school together. It’s a game he plays.”

My body starts to get cold from the inside out, like my internal organs are on ice. “What do you mean?”

“He’ll hook up with a guy, then deny it the next day to mess with his mind. He’ll say he doesn’t know what the guy’s talking about, it never happened, he was hallucinating, whatever. And then eventually, when he gets bored with that, he’ll finally agree it happened, but in a way that’ll make the guy wish it hadn’t. He’ll say things like, ‘Can you blame me for forgetting? It’s not like it was any good.’ Or he’ll say he must’ve been drunk when it happened, because no way would he hook up with that guy sober. He... really only does it when something’s bothering him, or when someone else has hurt him. Garen can be very Old Testament sometimes, ‘an eye for an eye’ and all that. He’s just not too picky about whose eye he gets.”

“So, I hurt him by not waiting for him, and now he’s trying to get back at me by pretending he never kissed me anyway? That’s... actually pretty convenient for me,” I admit. James shakes his head.

“Listen, you don’t know Garen like I do. I’m sure he was a great person while he was here, and I’m sure it

was pretty genuine, but *Lord* is there darkness in that boy, and I don't think he ever let you see it. He was fairly normal when I met him, more of a prankster than anything else. And he got better again, right before he left for this shithole town. But you have to believe me when I say that Dave poisoned him, and there were a few years in the middle there where he was twisted beyond all belief."

He pauses and surveys me as though he's trying to decide how much more he should say. I don't move, and eventually, he continues, "He told me some about you, Travis. I know you've had some problems, and you've been to some bad places. But it's not the same. If you're a bad storm, he's a damn hurricane. There are places he goes in his mind that even I don't know how to bring him back from. There are times, when he's upset and angry, when the only way he can stop himself from feeling pain is by causing pain. He will fix himself by hurting other people, by destroying them, and sometimes, I swear he can be downright evil. But then he'll get better, and he'll feel guilty. He makes his amends, he undoes as much of the damage as he can, and everyone forgives him because we know he has a good heart. It's just that when someone tries to break that heart, it turns stone cold for a while."

"Travis fucking McCall, did you seriously *need* to use all the hot water?"

We all jump as Garen, wearing just a pair of jeans and his combat boots, saunters back into the kitchen, rubbing his hair dry with a towel.

"Garen fucking Anderson, did you seriously *need* to come downstairs half-naked? I'm eating here, and you're practically my brother now," Bree says, making a face at him. Garen plants a kiss on the top of her head, then rounds the table to press his lips to my cheek. He catches James last, a lingering brush of mouth across mouth.

"So, while I was showering, I was thinking," he announces.

"About me?" James suggests.

Garen responds by making an obscene gesture in front of his crotch. "Of course. But seriously, I was thinking, and I've decided we should have a party. I think it would be a disgrace to our age if we didn't take advantage of having this place to ourselves."

"This is true," James says, considering. "And we could get a pretty big crowd, considering we cover two different schools."

"Three," Bree corrects. "I go to Kandinsky Magnet, not Lakewood High."

"And I'm assuming that you know enough girls to balance out our friends from Patton. A lot of people stay there over spring break, so most of our friends could just take the train in, then get a few cabs here. If each of us just invited fifteen people, this place would still be mostly full," Garen adds.

And then the phones come out, all three of them texting everyone they've decided to have over tonight. Am I the only one who cares about the big speech James just gave us? I can't invite my boyfriend into this house if there's even a chance that Garen will try to screw things up. I clear my throat. "Garen? Are you going to—"

"Should I invite Liam?" Garen cuts me off, glancing up from the contact list in his phone.

"Liam's alright," James says. "He might not want to come, though. I don't think he really gets along with most of the people who we hang out, so there wouldn't be much of a point. And he and Jason keep beating the shit out of each other, because Liam fucked Jason's girlfriend. Unless you want to have

somebody call the cops, I'd say pick one or the other."

"Okay, aside from the fights, Liam's pretty easy-going, though, so he could probably talk to some Lakewood or Kandinsky people. Plus, he gives better blowjobs than Jason," Garen points out. Bree looks up from her contacts list, frowning at him, then at James.

"To be completely honest, I don't understand that at all," she says.

Garen cocks his head to the side. "Don't understand what?"

"How the gay guys I know can possibly have more active sex lives than any of the straight people I know. It was enough of a weird coincidence that my brother *and* my stepbrother turned out to be gay. But Garen slept with Ben, who sometimes makes out with Alex but is now dating Travis. And now, Garen, you're basically telling me your old roommate was gay, as are all your friends from school. How is this even possible?" Bree demands.

"Well, first of all," James says, "I'm bisexual. I'm just as attracted to women as I am to men, but I've had more relationships with men because I happen to *know* more men, since I go to an all-male school."

"Second of all, not all of our friends are gay. We hang out with plenty of guys who would never even think of hooking up with another guy. And a lot of the guys we *do* hook up with aren't really gay either, per se. Some are bisexual, some are experimenting, and some just get really, really trashed. Everything's kind of... skewed, I guess, when you live in the environment we've been in. Part of it's the fact that, after all these years, we're all a little too comfortable with each other, so the boundaries aren't the same," Garen says.

James shrugs. "Besides, rumors fly fast around boarding school. I became notorious pretty early in freshman year, and once people heard that there was a guy who was extremely willing to hook up with people—"

"—especially a guy who's as hot as Jamie—"

"—yes, that too. Once they heard about me, a lot of the guys who knew they were gay, but hadn't really been hooking up with anyone, decided they would seek me out."

"Same with me," Garen adds, "but that started later. We also share guys. You know, I'll sleep with someone and let Jamie know if he's any good, and he'll do the same for me. That's kind of how it worked with Lakewood, too. Obviously Ev didn't go up to my dad and say, 'Hey, I think my son's as much of a fag as yours, we should date.' But I'm pretty sure the only reason Ben decided to talk to me was because he thought I was hot. If he was straight, he would've just stuck to his own group of friends. And if I had been straight, I probably wouldn't have made the effort to hang out with him outside of school, or text him as often, or go to parties where I knew he'd be."

"So, following your logic," I say slowly, "Alex only made out with Ben because he knew Ben is gay, and therefore he knew that the odds of rejection would be low, explaining why he's never tried it with a straight guy, like Mason or Jeremy. And I only hooked up with Alex because I knew he had already made out with a guy before."

"Yeah. Just like how you only got with Ben because I got with him first, which enlightened you to the fact that he was... wait, what? When the fuck did you hook up with Alex?" he says sharply.

Oh, fuck. Things like this are why I need a chart, so that I don't become buried under my own horrible,

incestuous drama. Shifting slightly, I admit, "Valentine's Day. About a month after you left, I guess. The week before Ben and I got together."

"What did you do with him?" Garen says. I can't tell if he realizes that he has taken a few small steps towards me, but I am uncomfortably aware of it.

"We just hooked up."

"No," Garen says flatly. "No, I mean, what exactly happened?"

Fuck you, I want to say. He has no right to be asking me this, or looking so pissed off.. But the words come out without me having to try that hard to summon them. "He and I got wasted at this party he was having at his house, and we ended up making out in his basement. We went up to his room and he started sucking me off."

"What else?" Garen says, and I finally realize he hasn't blinked once in at least a minute.

"It didn't feel right. It was only happening for about a minute before I told him to stop, and I went home," I say. He doesn't reply. We stare at each other for ages, and just when I begin to wonder if he's going to hit me, James clears his throat.

"Garen," he says, and Garen suddenly transforms, shooting him a lazy grin and returning to his cell phone.

"So, since it turns out that Alex must've been bullshitting us with all those protests about how he's really straight, he just makes stupid choices when he's drunk, we should definitely invite him. I'd be pretty interested in seeing how good he is at giving head if I let him do it for longer than a minute," he says. The change in his demeanor is so sudden that I find myself backing away.

"Yeah," I say finally. "We should invite him."

When I am sure that Garen has returned to inviting his own friends, I pull out my phone and send a text to Alex's number. *Having a party tonight, you should come. Garen's back. He wants you here too, but he's acting weird. If he asks you to hook up, be careful.*

I only have to wait a few minutes for the reply.

gonna be driving 2nite, wont be drinking. a sober alex is a straight alex, so no worries about hooking up w/ g. just remember to take ur own advice. & if u hurt ben, i'll fucking kill u.

I blink down at the screen, baffled as always at Alex's ability to see exactly what I wish he couldn't. I hit 'reply' and type, *Same here: no worries about hooking up w/ G.*

"I'm... going to go call Ben," I say.

"Tell him I say hi," Garen calls after me as I escape to the front porch.

Ben answers on the first ring. "Do you have any idea why Alex is texting me with a promise not to get drunk and embarrass himself tonight?"

I laugh softly. "That's actually what I'm calling you about. We're having a party tonight, which I obviously want you to come to. Do you have plans?"

"I do now. How are things over there?" he asks. I don't need to think that hard to figure out that he's really asking if I'm about to break up with him. I force down the memories of last night – my promises to Ben, my mistakes with Garen – and try to sound normal.

"Awkward, as would be expected. And Garen seems like he's kind of going off the deep end, and may or may not be planning to seduce Alex. Hence me texting him with a heads-up, and Alex deciding not to drink tonight," I say. Partly because it sounds good, but mostly because it's true, I add, "I miss you."

"You saw me yesterday," Ben says, sounding amused. Maybe all I mean is, *I miss you being the last person I kissed.*

"I know. I'm still glad I get to see you tonight, though," I say.

"Me too. Listen, I have to go, one of my sisters is about to burn down our house with the toaster. I'll talk to you later. Love you."

"I love you, too," I say.

I sit there for several minutes, listening to the silence of the ended call and trying to figure out if "I love you" means the same thing as "I love you more than I love him."

Chapter Thirty-Four

"I'm telling you, Cor. Something's wrong with him."

"Yeah, dude. He's pissed at you for going out with Ben. I don't get why this is a shock to you," Corey says, swiping an armful of chip bags off the shelf into my grocery cart. I glare at the chips, then at him, but feel sort of guilty for it. It's not his fault that Jerry's been cutting back on my hours at The Daily Grind, or that I refused the offer of using Garen's credit card to buy food for the party. But it felt wrong to use the card, knowing that Bill was probably the one who'd end up paying the bill. I rearrange the bags carefully, then follow Corey back towards the soda aisle.

"No, I get that. But he's... different. It's like he's planning something, you know?" I say. "It's like he's not even pissed. He's just completely blasé about everything now, like, 'Oh yeah, I hooked up with you a few times, I used to hook up with tons of guys, my first boyfriend used to smack the shit out of me, it's no big deal.' He's being more open with me now than he was in the entire three months we were together."

Corey snorts. "Maybe that's because he doesn't have to impress you anymore. And what, you guys were really only together for three months?" I nod. "Weird. I thought it was longer than that, considering you guys almost got *married* and shit."

I want to hit him with the two cases of Coke I'm holding, but I settle for hoisting them into the cart and following him towards the front of the store. "Like I really want to be reminded of that?"

"Yeah. Thank God you're only seventeen and it's like, not even really legal. Because that would've been the *worst* mistake of your life," Corey agrees.

The ring on my finger feels hot, like the Hebrew inscription is written in flames. I don't say anything more until I've paid for the snacks with the last two twenties from my last paycheck. Once we've left the grocery store, however, Corey's looks are a little too pointed for me to justify being quiet any longer. I shrug and say, "He's being too normal too fast. If he wanted to beat the shit out of me, I'd get it. If he wanted to never speak to me again, I'd get it. But he's just... wrong. James thinks it's some type of ploy. He says Garen's M.O. is usually to mess with people's minds and completely ruin their lives for sport. I don't know why."

My phone beeps loudly from my pocket, but I wait until I'm safely in the passenger seat of Corey's car to read it.

Where r u? it's already 8pm, people r here. hurry up w/ the soda, jack&coke w/o the coke is delicious but not the same :(-g.

"And now he's drinking," I say flatly. "Great."

"Yeah, but everybody drinks. That's not that big of a deal."

I shrug and sink into my seat. Of course it's not a big deal to Corey. His dad hasn't ever given me a speech about finding drug stashes and empty bottles in his room. The old Garen – the Garen I know, at least – was so guarded that I still don't know the story from his point of view, but James certainly hasn't done anything to deny the stories. How the hell am I supposed to know if he really has a problem?

Garen was right about one thing; people definitely have arrived at the house. Corey and I pull up to see lines of cars parked on the curb and a few people trampling the neatly manicured lawn on their way to the door. Considering I only invited Ben, Corey, Alex, Jeremy, and Mason, I can assume that most of these

people are from New York. Two unfamiliar boys are sitting on the front porch, and the one with dark red hair reaches up to snag a bag of chips from my arms.

"This guy's awesome, he brought snacks," he says to his friend, and adds to me, "Wassup, man? I'm Kevin."

"Travis," I say, glancing over at Corey as he heads into the house without introducing himself. "Uh... are you friends of Garen?"

"Yeah, he was in my squad before he moved here. He was my neighbor, actually. Do you go to Lakewood with him?" Kevin asks. I nod slowly.

"I'm a junior there, yeah. How's the party?" I ask.

The other guy, a Latino boy with glasses, gives me a big thumbs up as he swigs from his red plastic cup. When he has finished swallowing, he says, "It's pretty great. Garen's the best guy to have at parties, 'cause he's so friggin' entertaining. Get a few drinks in him and the next thing you know, he's up on a coffee table, singing an Aerosmith song note for note." He switches the cup to his left hand and holds out his right to shake. "I'm Matt, by the way."

"Nice to meet you. So... what was Garen like back at Patton? He says he was kinda crazy, but I can't really picture it. He's pretty sedate here," I say as casually as I can. Kevin and Matt both burst out laughing.

"Garen, sedate?" Kevin chuckles. "Yeah right! He's the most fuckin' ridiculous guy I know. He pulled off some truly spectacular pranks, back in the day. And he was all about the party."

"You know it. He and James were the first guys in our year to get fake IDs, 'cause they looked like they were twenty-one way before the rest of us. What was it, end of freshman year?" Matt asks, and Kevin nods. "Yeah, end of freshman year, they had IDs and kept our dorm stocked better than half the bars in the city."

"James is great, too. He's just more, you know, into the sex stuff than Garen. He goes to a party, he just wants to hook up with somebody. Garen goes to a party, he wants to get fucked up," Kevin adds.

"Which actually makes his plans riskier. None of the teachers ever really caught him with drugs or anything, but everybody knew he—"

"Matt, what the fuck, man. You can't just go around telling people that."

"No, it's fine!" I say quickly. "I already know about the drugs. He told me he was really into coke for a while, but it's not much of a big deal for him anymore. At least, it wasn't before he left for New York again."

Kevin laughs, though he looks a little apprehensive. "I wouldn't be too sure about that tonight. Seth's here, and everybody knows he's the guy who sells the most shit. James is *pissed*, he fuckin' hates Seth."

"Well, everybody kind of hates Seth. Guy's a total douchebag. But hey, if you want it, he's got it, so we all sorta put up with him."

They fall into a companionable silence, sipping their drinks and chomping their way through the whole bag of Doritos. I'm not sure if they mind me staying, but I don't want to go inside yet, so I lean back

against the porch railing and check my cell phone. There's another text from Garen.

COREY IS HERE WHERE R U I WANT DORITOSSSSSSS.

I blink at the message. Well, at least now I know he's on *something*. I send back a text with one word; *Porch*. Just inside a minute, the front door bursts open and Garen tumbles out.

"Travis, you douchebag, I want *chips*!" he exclaims, darting towards me on unsteady legs. He flings an arm around my shoulders and stares directly into my eyes with a grave expression. "I would also like some Coke. Like, the soda. Do you have any? I'm not seeing any cans, so I really hope you plan to turn your hot ass around and go back to the store."

"Corey already brought the soda in, Garen. It's probably in the kitch—"

"Have you introduced yourself to Matt and Kevin?" he interrupts, a strange glint in his eyes. "Guys, this is my little brother, Travis."

"Dude, you're an only child," Kevin says, brow furrowed. Garen snorts.

"Yeah, I thought so, too. But apparently Evelyn – my stepmom, Travis' mom – must think that 'stepbrother' is basically the same as 'brother,' 'cause she was pissed as hell when she found out I took her kid's virginity," he says.

"Shut up," I say tightly, but he just lets out a soft, humorless laugh and cards his fingers through my hair.

"Come on, Trav, stop pretending to be modest," and to the guys, he adds, "The kid's pretty good in bed, especially for someone who had absolutely no idea what he was doing. Not as good as his boyfriend, Ben, though. Now, *there* was a guy who knew his way around a mattress. He was a fucking animal."

"Shut up," I repeat, louder. I can feel the heat creeping up into my face, partially from anger, but mostly from embarrassment. Am I really that bad in bed? Is it really that screwed up for me to be dating a guy who hooked up with my ex?

"What? It's not like you don't know. Or, I guess, maybe you don't. I don't really imagine the sex between you two is like, fireworks, especially since you're both total bottoms. But your slut boyfriend really loves to get fucked, so I assume you're playing pitcher? *That* must be interesting. And when I say 'interesting,' I really mean hilarious and awkward." The cold smile he gives Kevin and Matt makes me want to throw up. "The real problem with fucking Travis is that it's hard to get your cock in his ass when there's already a huge stick up it. He overanalyzes everything, and believe me, sex is no exception. He's so busy with his 'oh my god, does he love me? Am I doing this right? Are people gonna find out I'm a faggot?' bullshit that he forgets that sex is supposed to be sexy. I mean, every time it happened, I wanted to be like, 'Is that really all you've got? Come on! Pull my hair, bite me, hit me, anything so I'm not *bored*.' Don't get me wrong, he's a nice kid. But... that's pretty much it."

I want to die.

"Y-You're such a fucking asshole. I seriously cannot believe I ever dated you," is all I can manage to make myself say before my voice goes out. His face is completely blank, but I notice his eyes darken as I pull off the ring on my finger and stuff it into his hand. I push open the front door, and add over my shoulder, "If you ever speak to me again, I will beat the shit out of you, and I promise you that you won't find that boring."

I will not cry. I will not fucking do it. I'm not a little kid like he says I am. I'm not some prissy little queer, I'm not a five-year-old girl. And Garen is not worth crying over. So why do I feel like there's a rock jammed in my windpipe?

"Hey, Trav! Did you just leave all the chips out on the lawn? Your boyfriend's hungry!" Corey calls to me. My eyes won't seem to focus on anything, but once I have blinked a couple thousand times, I see that he's standing near the stairs with Ben and Mason. Ben smiles at me and raises his hand in a small wave. I make a bee-line for him and crush him against the wall, knotting my fingers in his hair and kissing him hard.

When I finally allow him to come up for air, his eyes are clouded over and his breathing is heavy. "Hello to you, too."

"Let's go upstairs," I murmur.

"This is a very uncomfortable greeting to be standing next to," Mason says to Corey, who nods with a laugh. I ignore him and tug Ben towards the stairs. It doesn't take much convincing to get him upstairs, but I open my bedroom door to find Bree's friend, Molly, making out with one of the Patton boys on my bed.

"Get out of my room," I order. The boy looks like he wants to protest, but Molly jumps up, blushing, and sneaks out past me. Her companion takes his time straightening his clothes, and glares at me once more for good measure on his way out. The second the door is shut and the lock clicks, I drag Ben towards me.

We fuck standing up, his hands braced against my bedroom wall, my mouth at the base of his neck. The sex tonight is a hundred times more intense than yesterday's. I pull out every trick Garen says I don't have, everything I've learned or had tried on me, until Ben's knees are shaking so hard I have to grip his hips to keep him from collapsing.

"I love you," I whisper into his ear. "You're gorgeous, you're perfect, I love you."

He twists back to kiss me over his shoulder, and I catch his bottom lip between my teeth, reaching around to jerk him off to the rhythm of my hips. When he comes over my hand, his arms shudder and buckle so that he falls forward, his forearms flat against the wall.

See, Garen? I'm not sexually stunted. I'm not pathetic. I don't have a stick up my ass, and I'm not boring. I can pull a guy's hair, I can bite. I can make a guy come, hot and hard. Even Ben. Even you.

It's these thoughts – these twisted, messy thoughts – that bring me to climax. I dig my fingertips into Ben's hips, maybe hard enough to bruise him, and once I have finished riding out the waves of orgasm, we both stagger back to my bed. Neither of us is completely undressed, and I don't know whether I should strip us both down to nothing and hide in my bed for the next year, or we should both put our clothes the rest of the way back on and go back downstairs. If we stay here any longer, someone's bound to come looking for us, and that's the last thing I want. I roll over to kiss Ben again, slowly, and get ready to return to the party.

No one seemed to have noticed our absence. I check the clock on my phone and discover we were only upstairs for about forty minutes. Not long enough for anyone to give a shit, I guess.

"Hang on. Weren't you hungry before? I thought that's what Corey said," I realize. Ben snorts.

"Yeah, I was. I think it'd be fair to blame you for distracting me," he says. He laces his fingers in mine and tows me out to the kitchen. I'm actually feeling more normal now; there is still a dull ache in my chest from what Garen said earlier, but it doesn't matter as much as it did. I can ignore him. Really, I can.

Or, I could. If he wasn't using his credit card to cut a line of cocaine on my kitchen counter.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I say hoarsely.

"I'm training rabbits to play chess, McCall. What the fuck does it look like I'm doing?" he says.

Ben crosses his arms over his chest. "You told everyone you'd stopped."

"Because I had. Welcome to my reunion tour," Garen replies. I want to take a deep breath and blow the coke right off the table, but my feet won't seem to carry me forward, and by the time I can really rationalize movement, Garen has already rolled up a bill from his wallet, leaned down, and snorted the entire line in one go.

"You've become a completely different person since you left," I say as quietly as I can, if I still want to be heard over the noise of the party. "I don't get it. Why didn't you just stay in New York, if you were only coming back to torment us all?"

Garen's eyes darken, just like they did on the porch earlier. I immediately regret having said anything, but I can't take it back. He knows I meant it, and he doesn't seem to want me to escape unscathed. "So, does your boyfriend know you only just fucked him because I told my friends you were bad in bed?"

Ben and I both flinch.

"Yeah. 'Course, maybe I got it wrong. Now that I think about it, there were some things you were good at. Is he still as good of a kisser as I remember?" Garen asks, almost casually.

"It's been a while since you kissed him, so I don't know," Ben says flatly.

Oh fuck. Please don't say anything. Please, please, please don't--

"I don't know. Twenty-four hours really isn't that long, is it, Travis? I mean, shit, for all I know, I was kissing you an hour ago. But I'm pretty sure it was actually just last night."

"Bullshit," Ben says immediately. Garen stands, shooting us a slightly manic grin.

"What do you think happened last night, after you left? Did it really seem like a good idea to leave your boyfriend in my bedroom?" he says.

Ben rounds on me. "Tell me this is bullshit. Tell me he's lying."

I don't say anything. I don't have to, because Garen is all too willing to say everything for me.

"You act like you don't care about anything, but *that's* the real bullshit, Ben. I bet you didn't get any sleep last night, did you? Stayed up until the early morning, trying to figure out if you could trust him. And I guess you couldn't, because the second you left, he got his sister and my best friend out of that room, and his hands were all over me. He couldn't wait to get me alone, and trust me, we had a lot of catching up to do. Don't bother asking him again if it's true, because you know it is. You know it right down to your core, because every time you put your hands on him, all you feel is me. I got there first, I took away all

that honor and innocence he used to have, and I made him into a pathetic, needy, deceitful slut, just like someone did to you, just like someone did to me. He's damaged goods now, Ben, and I did that, just because I could. And you may think you're hot shit, with your battle gear," he yanks hard on the front of Ben's black hoodie, then reaches up to smear a streak of eyeliner down his cheek, "and your war paint. But your armor isn't strong enough to keep you from realizing that the only thing you ever were to him was a substitute."

His hand falls limply to his side, and for a moment, we all just stare at each other. I want to reach out to Ben, to make him see that I really do care about him, but what can I say? He won't believe me anyway. There is something wrong about his face now; his bright blue eyes have iced over in a way that shakes me to my very center.

He clears his throat, crosses his arms once more, and says in a bored, flat voice, "Guess you're right."

"No," I say forcefully, "he isn't. Look, I... yes, I kissed him, but it wasn't because I still want him. It was a reflex, like I couldn't stop myself, and as soon as it even registered, I pushed him away and left. I told him it was the last time it would ever—"

"Do you remember Christmas Eve?" Ben interrupts. I blink.

"What about it?"

"I kissed Garen. I knew he was seeing someone, because he couldn't shut up about it, but I didn't find out it was you until he got kicked out. On Christmas Eve, I kissed him, and he kissed me back, and then he went home and told you about it. He said you were mad for about a second."

I grit my teeth. Of all the nights he decided to reminisce about, it had to be this one.

He sits down on the edge of the kitchen table, shaking his head. "I thought you were such a fucking moron for staying with him. Seriously, I don't know what he told you, but at the time, I was so convinced that you were just whipped. Why would you stay with a guy who made out with someone else? Why would you ever believe another word he said, after that?"

"Ben, please—"

"But I guess I get it now," he continues flatly. "I guess sometimes it's easy to tell yourself that it'll never happen again, or that it was just a mistake. That's what I'm trying very hard to believe right now, Travis. Because for the most part, I think Garen's right. I didn't mean anything to you – I *don't* mean anything to you – and you're really just with me because Garen left and hey, your dick isn't gonna suck itself! Might as well have some fucking idiot trailing after you like a lovesick puppy, giving you any part of him you want."

"That's not true, and you know it. You know I care about you. I wouldn't be with you right now if I didn't lo—"

"If you tell me you love me right now, this relationship is over," Ben interrupts, and I clamp my mouth shut on the words. "I don't want to hear the same bullshit all your other jock buddies try to spew out after they get caught cheating. I'm just assuming that you forgot how it felt on Christmas, when you found out that Garen had kissed me behind your back."

It felt like shit, but not like this. Having Garen begging me not to care, hearing his protests about how sorry he was, feeling that hole being torn into my gut... it's nothing compared to right now, looking at Ben,

and seeing his heart just give up.

"This is worse. This is so much worse, I'm so sorry," I say quietly. Ben squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. When he opens them again, he smiles without any real enjoyment.

"Last night with Garen was a one-time thing, right?" I nod. "And it's never going to happen again, right?" I nod again. "And it wasn't because you loved him. It was just physical, right?" A third time. "Alright. Then that was your free pass."

I stare at him, waiting for the punchline. When it doesn't come, I say, "I don't understand."

"That was the only time in this relationship when I will ignore the fact that you hooked up with someone who wasn't me. We're not going to break up. We're not going to fight about this. You got one free pass, and you used it last night, with Garen, okay?"

"Okay," I say slowly, even though it feels like a trick question. He hops off the kitchen table and heads to the sink to wipe away the rest of the eyeliner Garen smeared down his face. Garen himself is standing in the corner near the fridge, looking mutinous.

There, you fucking bastard, I think. You tried to ruin us, and it didn't work. It blew up in your face, and nothing you do will ever make this type of thing happen again.

But almost before I'm done thinking that, Ben straightens his hoodie and heads purposefully across the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"You revisited one of your old hook-ups with your free pass. I think it's only fair that I get to do the same," he says over his shoulder. I scramble after him, catching his hand and trying to drag him back to me.

"Ben, Ben, Ben, *wait*. I thought you said you were going to get over this, that we weren't going to fight!" I say.

Ben jerks his hand out of my grasp and says, "Because we're *not* going to fight about this. There is nothing to fight about. You cheated, Travis. You made out with your ex-boyfriend, and you weren't even going to tell me about it. You're not the victim here, alright? You're the asshole. And if I'm willing to forgive your indiscretions, you sure as hell better be prepared to forgive mine."

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Garen sidling out of the kitchen, watching us with the same calculation of a panther stalking its prey.

"We can talk about this, we can work it out," I say. Ben nods jerkily and shoves his way through the crowd of people.

"Yeah, we probably can, but I think you'll get my point a lot more this way," he says. He finally comes to our group of friends, sprawled out over the living room furniture. Jeremy is attempting to flirt with one of my sister's friends, who seems amused by his awkwardness; Mason and Corey are discussing soccer on the couch; Alex is on his knees, trying to pour himself a small glass of whiskey without spilling it all over the coffee table, which seems to be a difficult task for him right now. I see Ben's eyes lock onto him.

"Ben, stop!" I order, but he doesn't seem to hear me.

"Al," he says softly, and Alex glances up at him.

I'm struck for a moment by the absurdity of the image before me. Even though he's on his knees, the top of Alex's head still almost comes up to Ben's shoulders, which means that Ben barely has to lean down when he curls his hand around the back of Alex's neck and kisses him.

I am suddenly numb to everything. My body no longer feels like my own, and I am certain that what I'm seeing must be a hallucination. There's no way I can be watching my boyfriend kiss his best friend. He can't really be wrapping an arm around Alex's neck, and I have to be imagining the flash of tongues meeting. It's impossible that Alex actually lets out a ragged gasp and pulls Ben forward by his hips. He definitely isn't scrambling to his feet, lifting Ben a few inches off the ground as he does so, and Ben can't be circling his legs around Alex's waist as Alex stumbles forward so that he has Ben pinned to the wall. I must be imagining the minutes tick by as they kiss and move together, their bodies intertwined while the rest of us just stare, slightly open-mouthed. When Alex pulls back slightly, staring glassy-eyed at Ben, their foreheads touching, it's not actually happening; it's just a very elaborate nightmare.

The only part I will allow myself to believe is when Ben untangles himself from Alex and drops back onto the floor, straightening his hoodie and finger-combing his hair.

"There," he says with a shrug. "Now we're even."

"What the fuck is going on?" Corey demands. He seems to have recovered from his shock enough to return to his role as the indignant best friend. I want to call him off, but my mouth is too dry to form words.

"Travis gave Garen a bigger welcome home than I'd anticipated," Ben says quietly. "And now he knows how it feels from the other end. It's only fair."

"I'm not going to defend anything that might've gone down between them," Mason says slowly, "but they've got a history together. It's understandable that—"

"I feel I'm being perfectly understanding. If I weren't, I would've broken up with him already. But if he expects me to be alright with him cheating on me once with someone he used to hook up with, then I expect the same courtesy to be extended to me," Ben says. He hitches his chin a little and adds, "Kissing Alex just now was a one-time thing. It will never happen again. And I don't love him. It was just physical. Okay?"

No, I want to say. Not okay, never okay, I want to fucking scream.

"Okay," I echo instead.

He nods once, a small gleam of triumph in his eyes. "Alright, then. I'm going home. Call me later, *darling*."

Before he turns to leave, he kisses me. He tastes like whiskey.

Jeremy, Mason, and Corey are all staring at me; Alex still hasn't moved from where he stood near the wall. Eventually, a movement near the couch catches my eye. Garen is creeping towards me, his body no longer tense and catlike. He slumps against the wall near Alex.

"I'm sorry," he tells me.

I can't tell if he actually means it. His face is completely blank, but at least he's not growling out his hatred anymore. Whatever darkness has possessed him for the past few hours is gone now, replaced with

defeat. But at this point, I'm not so sure it matters.

I shake my head. "Don't talk to me."

"Travis—"

"Don't talk to him," Corey says sharply. "Garen, I fucking told you months ago that if you hurt him, I would take you out. Luckily for you, you took off before I could manage that last time. Now that you're back, the same rule applies. This is between Travis and his boyfriend, so I'm staying out of it. But if something like this happens again, I will fucking kill you."

"The same goes for Ben," Jeremy says, glaring. Mason nods his agreement.

"But who's going to kill Ben the next time he hurts poor Alex?" Garen says, watching the blonde boy, his head cocked to the side.

Alex quickly turns to face him, his eyes wide with alarm. "Garen, please—"

"It's not fair, if you ask me," Garen says, though he seems to regret the words even as he says them. "Everyone wants to protect Travis from me. And protect Ben from me. But has anyone bothered to tell Ben that he shouldn't try to lead on the guy who's been in love with him since they were freshmen? Poor, closeted Alex. I guess nobody but me has been wondering if it upsets him to have to hide how he feels about Ben just because it might interfere with the Great and Wonderful Romance of McCall and McCutcheon."

Stunned, defeated, and still a little drunk, Alex sinks to the floor, staring at his shoes. For a few moments, no one says anything. Finally, Jeremy extends a hand to the blonde on the floor. "Come on, Alex. I'll drive you home. This party is suddenly sucking."

Most people leave with them. Even those who weren't close enough to hear what happened must know that something bad went down, because within half an hour, the house is empty. Bree, oblivious to most of the night's events, heads up to bed. James takes the time to gather up most of the plastic cups before he retreats to the guest room. And for a long time, Garen and I just stand there, staring at each other.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

"No," I say. "You're not."

I head for the stairs, fully intending to lock myself in my room for the rest of my life. I can't seem to force myself to sleep, but I am comforted by the fact that I don't ever hear Garen's boots on the stairs. He could stand there in the living room all night, or at least until he starts to come down from his coke high. I couldn't care less.

Nothing really seems to matter anymore.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ben refuses to answer any of my calls, and I go a little bit out of my mind; I send him dozens of text messages, leave at least ten voicemails, and get hung up on more times than I can count. My texts to Jeremy and Mason are met with variations of the ever-unsatisfying “maybe you should just give him some space.” My one message to Alex is met with a brief phone call the night after the party.

“Garen has no idea what he’s talking about,” he babbles to me before I can speak. “I-I don’t like Ben that way. I never have. I’m straight, alright? I’ve been saying it for years, but none of you listen, and Ben’s the one who kissed me, not the other way around. S-So it’s not fair for everyone to say I’m gay just because he kissed me. Ben doesn’t even know what Garen said, which is just as well, because it’s not true. I would tell you guys if it was true, alright? Everyone’s fine with you being gay, and they’re fine with Ben being gay, and they’re fine with Garen being gay, and I’m sure they’d be fine with me being gay, but I’m *not*. So please just forget whatever ‘we’re totally cool with it, man’ bullshit you were planning to say, because I’m getting enough of it from Jer and Mason.”

It takes me a while to process everything he says, but even his following silence is nervous enough for me to know he’s lying.

“I know that Ben kissed you first,” I say eventually. “You were really drunk, too.”

“Yeah,” Alex agrees cautiously.

“And Garen was being a complete asshole that night. I still haven’t talked to him. Did you know he was snorting cocaine in the kitchen right before the kiss?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. He was completely high. I don’t think anyone really took what he said to be true. I guess... you know, if you say you’re straight, you’re straight. You’d know, right?” I say. The relief in his sigh is almost embarrassing.

“Thanks,” he says. “Just... don’t mention it to Ben? Even if it’s not true, I don’t want him to think it might be. He’d get weird around me, and I’m not gonna mess up a six year friendship over something so... stupid.”

My phone chimes in my ear. “Of course. Listen, I have to go, I’m getting another call. I’ll see you at school on Monday.”

“Yeah. Good luck with Ben,” he says, and I can tell it pains him to say that. Poker is definitely not Alex’s game. I hang up and check my messages with shaking hands. It’s a text, not a call, but my heart still jumps. It’s from Ben.

I’m sorry for not calling you back, but I have a lot to think about. This isn’t me breaking up with you. It’s just me needing some space so I can figure stuff out. Please give me some time to myself. I love you. See you Monday. Xoxo, B.

Whether he says he’s breaking up with me or not, it sure as hell sounds like it. I can’t handle this, being left like this for the second time in less than a year. It took so much out of me to move past it when Garen abandoned me; I won’t be able to do it again, if Ben decides that the kiss with Garen was worth ending things over.

After that, sinking into myself is so much easier than actually trying to function, so I resort to my “relationship fuck-up standby mode”; the hall between my bedroom and the bathroom is the only place I’m willing to walk. Even going down to the kitchen to eat takes a backseat (possibly a trunk seat, maybe even a seat out of the car, on the side of the road), and the only food I have in my bedroom is a granola bar I stuffed in my track bag a week ago. By the time Friday evening rolls around, I haven’t really eaten anything in almost three days. In a way, I’m grateful when Garen knocks on my door and comes in with a McDonald’s bag in his hand. In a different way, I still want to punch him in the face.

“Go away,” I say, raising my voice slightly to be heard over the growl of my stomach. Garen ignores me and sits down on the edge of my bed, digging in the bag to unearth two cheeseburgers and a large container of fries.

“Peace offering,” he says, and I snort.

“It’s going to take a hell of a lot more than this to make me stop hating you,” I say. The way he flinches appeases me enough that I don’t want to kill myself for unwrapping one of the burgers and taking a huge bite of it. He watches me eat for a few minutes, occasionally helping himself to a fry. I nod to the other burger. “If you’re hungry, just eat that, for God’s sake.”

He shrugs and brushes the salt off his fingers. “I shouldn’t, really. I’m leaving in about five minutes to go out to dinner.”

I frown slightly. Now that I’m actually looking at him, he *does* look like he’s going out. He’s wearing jeans and combat boots, like he does every other day, but the boots look like they’ve been polished, and under a black leather motorcycle jacket, he’s wearing a dark green button-down that make his eyes look supernaturally beautiful. I shake my head slightly to clear my thoughts and ask neutrally, “With James?”

He blinks. “James left yesterday. You’d know that if you came out of your room once in a while.”

I feel a little guilty for not even noticing, but hey. It wasn’t my idea to invite him in the first place. I cram the last bite of cheeseburger into my mouth and chase it with a few fries. Once I have swallowed, I ask, “So, who are you going out with?”

“I have a date, actually,” he says, scratching the back of his neck and looking uncomfortable. I shove him off the bed, and he hits the floor hard. “Travis! The fuck was that for?”

“For being a completely bi-fucking-polar! Four days ago, you were doing your damndest to make sure my relationship with Ben would implode, for reasons I still don’t understand. You claim you never even liked me, and that I was a shitty lay, but you don’t seem to want me to be happy with my boyfriend. And now you’re going out on a date? With *whom*?”

“Why would you assume it’s someone you know? It’s not you, it’s not your boyfriend, it’s not Alex, and James went back to New York. That pretty much covers all of the gay or bisexual people you know,” he says as he rubs his elbow in what is probably an overly dramatic way. I continue to glare at him until he rolls his eyes and adds, “I met a cute guy at the Starbucks near the train station when I dropped off James yesterday. His name’s David, he goes to Yale, and he’s a history major. We’re going to some Italian place he likes, over by his school. Satisfied?”

“Not really,” I say flatly, “but I hope you have a great time on your date while I’m waiting for my boyfriend to stop hating me.”

“Look,” Garen says, standing up and brushing himself off, “I’m sorry for the other night. Sometimes I do

stupid shit, especially when I'm drunk, and I know I shouldn't have said anything to Ben. I'm really sorry, and if I thought it'd help, I'd apologize to Ben, too. But it won't. He'll be mad for as long as he wants. Now if you don't mind, I'm getting picked up soon, and I really don't feel like hanging around my bitter ex-boyfriend anymore. I should be home around ten, unless I get laid, in which case, I'll be home whenever the fuck I feel like it."

I stare at the doorway for a few minutes, even after he's gone, but once I finally stand up, I don't want to stop moving. My skin feels too small to hold the rest of me in. I'm restless, but what can I do? Garen is gone – not like I really want to hang out with him anymore anyway – and Bree is at her boyfriend's house. Ben doesn't want to talk to me, Corey's on a date with Shelley, Alex is afraid I'm going to think he's gay, and Jeremy and Mason probably hate me for kissing Garen behind Ben's back.

I'm alone. More alone than I've been in ages. At least when Garen left, Ben and the others adopted me into their group. At least when I was struggling with Bill moving in, Corey, Faye and the others were there to stick by me. The last time I felt this alone, I was fifteen and swallowing a bottle of Valium.

There are only two options, really, and one is so much more inviting than the other. I kick open my closet door and dig around for the tin with my razors in it, but I can't find it. Last time I used them, on Valentine's Day, I'd fallen asleep on the floor in front of the window, and had woken up to my Mom knocking on the door. I'd hastily thrown the tin back in the closet, and it had clattered onto the floor somewhere in the back. But the floor is bare now, at least of what I'm looking for.

What the fuck? Had Mom gone snooping and taken them from me, to try to make me stop? Had Bree figured out I still had them, and hid them for my own good? Had Ben snuck in here one of the times he came over, and stolen them just in case I got the urge again? I sink to the ground, cursing, but it's not like being pissed is going to make them magically appear. I sigh, grab my running shoes, and start to lace them up.

There have always only been two choices for me; a razor or a run. They are the only two things that can make me forget myself. They are the only ways I know to get my skin buzzing and my blood pumping. It feels good to finally hear the pounding of my sneakers on the sidewalk, to have to focus on my breathing instead of everything else. It's been so long since I needed to run just to forget, not because I was trying to get away. This isn't about escaping a wedding, or a confrontation I know I can't have. This is just about me. Being me. Forgetting me.

I manage to disappear for almost two hours, making it all the way through Lakewood and the next town over before I head back. Once I've returned from my oblivion, I lurch to a stop at the end of the driveway. There's a car parked in front of the garage, but it's not the Testarossa, which Garen for some reason seems to have left in New York, or Bree's Subaru. It's Bill's Mercedes. Fuck.

I trot up to the front door and open it cautiously. "Hello?"

"Travis? Honey, it was the trip of a lifetime! Absolutely fabulous!" Mom declares, swooping down on me instantly to envelop me in a hug.

Bill claps me on the shoulder in a horribly affectionate way. "Nice to see you again, Travis. It's also nice to see that you and your sister didn't trash the house while we were away."

"Where is Bridget, anyway? We went to the most gorgeous perfumery in Nice, and I bought her some genuine French perfume," Mom gushes.

"We got you some gifts, too," Bill adds with a laugh. "Don't worry, we didn't forget about—"

"Bill, can I talk to you in private for a minute?" I interrupt. He has to know before Garen gets home. He can't just have this sprung on him after all this time.

"Sure, sure," he says agreeably. "Just give us a minute. Now, our hotel was right near this fantastic sweet shop. We brought home a tin of chocolate biscuits, and I want you to try one."

"Bill," I say, and when he doesn't stop unzipping one of his suitcases, I say louder, "Bill!"

"It's in the biggest suitcase, dear. Remember, we wrapped it up in my sweater so it wouldn't get dented," Mom tells him.

"That's right," Bill says, snapping his fingers.

I must say his name another half dozen times before, in a split-second of desperation, I say, "*Dad*."

As much as it pains me to say the word, as much as it disgusts me to think of Garen's father as my own, it gets his attention. He straightens up quickly, sparing Mom the briefest glance before he nods. "Yeah. Yeah, you wanted to talk. What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you alone," I say. "Mom, can you just give us a minute?"

"Of course, dear," she says, though she looks a little offended as she retreats to the kitchen, muttering about putting on a pot of coffee.

"Is something wrong?" Bill asks.

I step a little closer and drop my voice, just in case Mom is listening. "Garen came back."

Bill's spine goes rigid. He stares at me, wide-eyed, then glances at the stairs almost involuntarily. "When? How long was he here?"

"He was here when I got home the day of the wedding. I-I think he must've showed up during the reception—"

"Where is he now?"

"He's here," I say, then add quickly as he heads for the stairs, "but not right now. I mean, he says he's back. For real. For good. But he's not home right now. He went out."

"Where did he go?" Bill demands.

"He said he had a date with some guy he met when he was out for coffee. They're at some Italian place near the Yale campus. H-He said he'd be back around ten."

Bill looks at the clock on the wall – quarter after ten already – and makes a slightly animalistic noise. "Why didn't you *call* me, Travis? He's my son! I had a right to know!"

"What's going on?" Mom asks, returning from her brief field trip to the kitchen. Apparently any reference to Garen is enough to raise her hackles.

Reluctantly, I turn to her and say, "Garen came back after the wedding. He's been staying here all week."

She throws her hands into the air in exasperation. "My God! First he disappears for months. Then he sends that horrible hick here, just to make a scene at my reception. And now you're telling me he's come back, despite the fact that his father specifically told him not to come back? I've told you a hundred times, William, that boy is—"

"Don't you dare, Evelyn," Bill snarls. "Don't you dare tell me that you expect me to kick my son out a second time. I lost him once, and it was my own damn fault then, but I'll die before I lose him again."

"So you've forgotten, have you, that he raped his brother?" Mom says shrilly.

That is too much. I hate Garen, too, but he's not a rapist, and he certainly didn't rape *me*. "For Christ's sake, Mom! He never raped me, he never molested me, and he never did anything I didn't want him to. He was my boyfriend! And besides, I'm seventeen, so everything we did was completely legal."

"It is not legal to have sexual relations with your stepbrother!" she counters.

"Alright, first of all? I'm pretty sure it actually is. And second of all, he wasn't my stepbrother until five days ago. When we were together, he was just the son of your boyfriend, which isn't that big—"

"We are not having this fight again," Bill says to both of us in a low, deadly voice. "It is not up for debate. Garen is my son, and he will stay for as long as he likes. End of discussion."

In an almost amusing punctuation to his declaration, headlights flash against the front windows, and we all turn in unison to see a black Lexus pulling into the driveway. Oh, wonderful. Yes, this is the perfect time for Garen to come back, right when we're playing yet another round of "Is He A Rapist?"

Mom sucks in a deep breath and hurries back into the kitchen. I want to follow her, but if I do, I'll have to actually talk to her. She'll ask me why I didn't call them, why I let Garen stay, what Ben thinks about this whole thing. Mom may hate Ben from the very depths of her soul, but she'd rather I married Ben than ever looked at Garen again. So, at the risk of having to partake in that painful conversation, I stay where I am, watching Bill grow increasingly anxious. When five minutes have gone by and Garen still hasn't come inside, I give up on patience and throw open the front door.

I immediately wish I hadn't.

Because Garen is making out with some guy on the porch.

"Fuck my life," I burst out, turning on my heel and storming over to collapse on the bottom stair, glaring at the floor. This is truly ridiculous. First, I have to watch my boyfriend kiss another guy. Now, I have to watch my exboyfriend kiss another guy. Great.

"Um," says Garen's date, and I turn my glare towards him. He's not even that good-looking, to be honest. He has a straight nose, golden brown eyes, and a chiseled jaw, so in a way, he's ruggedly handsome. But there is something... *angry* about him. His face seems almost twisted, like he spends most of his time scowling. It makes me uncomfortable to look at him for too long.

"Hi, Dad," Garen says evenly. "This is David."

David, however, seems unwilling to get dragged into the impending family drama. He tugs on Garen's sleeve and murmurs, "I'm going to head back to the dorm. I'll call you."

"Looking forward to it," Garen says, almost mockingly. We all watch David hurry back to his car. Only once he has peeled out of the driveway and sped off down the street does Garen actually come into the house and hang up his jacket. "How was the honeymoon?"

Bill strides forward, and for one wild moment, I think he's going to punch Garen out. I am halfway through scrambling to my feet when he throws an arm around Garen's neck and drags him into what must be a bone-breaking hug.

"I'm sorry," he says gruffly. "I'm *sorry*, Garen."

Garen looks stunned. For a few seconds, he simply stands there, letting his father squeeze him. Eventually though, he closes his eyes and raises one arm to hug him back. "It's fine."

"No, it's not. It was a horrible thing to do. I can't believe I ever... I'm so glad to have you home. I should never have kicked you out."

Garen laughs a little as Bill releases him. "Well, yeah. But I probably shouldn't have fucked my stepbrother, so, I guess we're even."

I hear a little squeak from the kitchen, but everyone ignores it.

"There's a lot we need to talk about," Bill says. "School, for one thing. You're an entire semester short of the credits you need to graduate, you've missed too many classes to even be a student anymore, and you've missed the deadlines to apply to almost every college we discussed. I'm... sure we can figure something out."

"Yeah," Garen says with a small shrug. "I figured this would all come up."

Mom clears her throat from the kitchen doorway and says, glaring, "We also need to make some new rules."

"Like?" Garen says. His eyes are just daring her to continue, but his intimidation is wasted; we all know she'll talk for as long as she wants to.

"You and Travis are not to be spending time alone together. It's completely inappropriate, given the circumstances. If I find out you are trying to seduce him, you will never be welcome in this house again. You—"

"Ev," Bill says coolly. "We can discuss this another time."

Mom crosses her arms. "I think it's worth discussing now. God only knows what they've been doing while we've been away, Bill!"

"We haven't been doing anything," Garen says flatly. "Travis is with Ben now, so it doesn't even matter. We're over."

"That remains to be seen," Mom snaps.

"Yeah, well, open your fucking eyes, then," I growl, and she glares at me. "He just told you exactly what you want to hear, so I don't get why you're—"

Bill clears his throat loudly. "I think this has been a busy night for all of us. Maybe this conversation would

be better in the morning?”

“Fine,” I mutter, trudging up to my bedroom. Behind me, I can hear Bill enthusing how great it is to have his son back, and Mom grudgingly agreeing. I slam my door for good measure and flop back onto the bed. Less than a minute later, the door creaks open a few inches, and Garen leans in, tilting his head against the frame.

“My date went well, in case you’re wondering,” he says. I’m beginning to hate the way he can smile and so obviously not mean it.

“Fantastic,” I say dully.

“Mmhm. David gives really good head,” he adds.

I can’t hold back a snort. “Guess that answers the question of whether or not you put out on a first date.”

“Yeah, but you already knew that,” he says with another cheeky grin. He yawns and glances around my room, the utter image of nonchalance. “And anyway, I didn’t get head from him tonight. I’ve known that for what, two years or something? He and I dated before.”

For just a moment, my heart actually stops. I can tell, because my blood freezes in my veins, and the air suddenly seems to be impossible to actually bring into my lungs. “Wait. This is *that* David? This is Dave, the guy who used to *beat* you?”

“Don’t worry, T. He promises he won’t do it this time,” Garen laughs, but I can tell he doesn’t believe the words he’s saying. That’s the point. He *wants* to get beaten up. He *wants* to date someone who is wrong for him in a horrible, deadly way. He *wants* to get hurt.

I should’ve realized it earlier. I should’ve known it was too much to be a coincidence that he would suddenly start seeing a guy named David who was a few years older than him. I should’ve realized that Dave’s face was so cruel and hateful because that’s what the rest of him is. I should’ve *known*.

“Please don’t do this, Garen,” I say hoarsely. “You can’t go out with a guy who hit you. He’s just going to end up doing it again, that’s what his type *always* does.”

He moves so suddenly that I flinch. In three strides, he is at the edge of my bed. He curls a hand around the back of my neck and leans down to press a hard kiss to my forehead, then inclines his head a little so our noses are almost touching. “I know. I’m counting on it.”

I open my mouth to tell him to stop and think about this – for once in his life, actually think about the consequences of one of the fucking stupid things he does – but he is already sauntering back to his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind himself.

Chapter Thirty-Six

I spend most of Sunday night rolling over and over in my bed, staring at the ceiling, staring out the window, trying to think of what I'm going to say to Ben when I see him at school. I manage to come up with a few good lines about how one night with Garen made me realize I want to spend every night with Ben, or how I'm willing to forgive his transgressions with Alex if he'll forgive mine with Garen, but as soon as I picture the face he made when he found out I'd kissed Garen, all of my thoughts leave me.

The truth is, I don't deserve to be forgiven. It tore a hole in my chest to see my boyfriend kissing Alex, but even under the burning shade of jealousy, I know he doesn't love Alex. At least, not like Alex loves him. On the other hand... Ben has no idea what to believe about my feelings for Garen. How can he? I don't even know how I feel about him. Loathing and lust and regret and jealousy form a toxic – and fucking confusing – mixture when forced together, and I can't prepare myself to confront that particular strain of thought yet.

When my alarm clock chimes to wake me, I slog to the bathroom to get ready. The heat of the shower puts some color back in my skin, but I still have dark circles under my eyes when I trudge down to the kitchen, where Mom is scooping scrambled eggs out onto plates.

"Morning," I say groggily.

"Good morning, Travis. I'm about to head out for work, but I wanted to make sure you and your sister both had nice breakfasts for your first day back at school. Is Benjamin picking you up? There's enough for him, too, if he'd like to say," Mom offers.

I can tell she thinks she's being generous by inviting him to join me, which just makes my necessary reply sting a little more. "No, he's not picking me up. We're... I don't know. We're just going to see each other at school, I guess."

Her brow crinkles. "Have you two had a fight? Are you breaking—"

"I don't wanna talk about it, Mom, okay?" I interrupt. "We're still going out, we just aren't riding to school together. Jesus Christ."

Rather than chastise me for taking the Lord's name in vain, as she usually might, she frowns down at her briefcase. "Is Bree going to drive you, then?"

What she really means, I guess, is, *I'm not at all comfortable with the idea of you and Garen alone in a car together*. But I'm in a giving mood, so I say, "No. I'm pretty sure she already left. Maybe I'll just ask Garen to bring me. It's not like he's got anything to do besides sleep all day. Just my luck that, of the two hundred people who are supposed to be graduating from LHS this year, my brother had to be the one who's *not*."

Mom lights up like Christmas at that. "Yes. Yes, it's a shame that your *brother* missed so much school this year." It's almost sick how excited she gets at the idea of me thinking of Garen as a sibling, not an ex-boyfriend. "Well, I really do need to get going. I'll see you tonight, dear."

She plants a kiss, which I try to shrug away from, on my forehead and sails out the door. I scarf down a few mouthfuls of eggs, swallow my medicine, and dart upstairs to bang on Garen's bedroom door. "Garen, wake up. Mom says you need to drive me to school. And considering it's your fault my boyfriend won't talk to me, let alone drive me anywhere, you don't get to object."

"Alright, alright," Garen grumbles from the other side. "I'll be downstairs in a few minutes, just let me put some clothes on."

I very pointedly do not picture him getting dressed as I head back to my room. The contents of my backpack are scattered from my half-hearted attempts to study, and by the time I gather everything up, I can hear Garen brushing his teeth in the bathroom down the hall. I trudge out to the porch to wait for him. Almost five minutes later, when I'm starting to get pretty impatient, the front door bangs open.

"You're damn lucky I went up to New York on Saturday, otherwise my car would still be in the Patton seniors' parking lot. Then you'd be screwed," Garen says, almost gleefully. I turn to glare at him, but my retort gets caught in my throat when I see his face.

"What happened to you?" I demand. He blinks at me.

"What do you mean?" he asks. I reach out to touch his face, and he dodges me, jogging over to the Ferrari.

"I mean you're *hurt*," I say, clambering into the passenger seat.

Garen frowns at me, then tilts the rear-view mirror so that he can examine the barely-healed gash dividing his lower lip. "Oh, right. I forgot about that. I went to the grocery store last night to pick up iced tea mix, and on the way home, somebody's cat ran out in front of my car. I wasn't wearing my seatbelt, so when I stomped on the brakes to avoid it, I got thrown forward and smacked my mouth on the steering wheel." He smiles wryly. "I'm an idiot, I know."

"So, I'm supposed to believe that you started dating your abusive ex-boyfriend again, and then just happened to get a split lip two days later?" I demand. "I call bullshit."

Garen snorts and twists around to check for traffic as he backs the car out of the driveway. "I don't really care if you believe me, Travis. I'm always forgetting to buckle my seat belt. Ask my dad, I've gotten banged up like a dozen times because of it."

"So? Maybe you just keep recycling the same excuses whenever Dave smacks you around. You told me you wanted him to hit you."

"No, you just keep reading too much into everything. Anyway, would it even be that big of a deal if he *did* hit me? You've gotta get out of this hetero mindset, man. If a guy punches his girlfriend, he's slime. He's an asshole, he's wrong, no matter what. There's nothing a girl can say that will justify a guy hitting her. But if a guy's punching his boyfriend... it's not the same. It's not that big of a deal," Garen says with a shrug. I stare at him. He can't really believe that, can he? But his face seems pretty neutral, like he really doesn't think there's anything wrong with the words coming out of his freshly-punched mouth.

"Abuse is abuse, Garen. It doesn't matter if it's physical or psychological or verbal, or if it's in a straight relationship or a gay one. It's not okay to hit someone you're dating," I say finally. Garen laughs a little.

"Do you even know how many fights I've been in? Dozens. Hundreds, probably. In case you haven't noticed, I'm always pissing *somebody* off, 'cause I'm annoying as fuck. So yeah, sometimes guys'll punch me for it, but it's not like it matters, because nine out of ten times, I'll still win the fight. And sometimes the guys I'm dating or sleeping with or whatever will be the ones who punch me. It doesn't mean anything. Sometimes I deserve it."

"No, you don't," I say forcefully. "You deserve way better—"

"So, what, would you still be saying this if I had hit *you* when we were dating? Even if you were shooting your mouth off and completely deserved it?" Garen asks. For a moment, I am thrown. It's impossible to picture him actually trying to start a fight with me – a physical one, anyway. There's no way to reconcile a fist-fight with the way he used to touch me.

"If you had ever hit me when we were dating, it would've been the last time I ever let you touch me. Because I may think I'm shit... I may think I'm worthless. But I wouldn't want to date someone who thought that lowly of me," I say. He lets out a little irritated sigh, and we finish the ride in silence. He only speaks again when I'm out of the car and about to slam the door shut.

"You should get a ride home from one of your friends. I'm meeting Dave later."

I twist back to look at him, and he stares back at me with blank, dead eyes. I shiver involuntarily. "Yeah. I guess I can do that."

He peels out of the parking lot the second I've shut the door. Once he's out of sight, I have to turn my attention to my other big catastrophe; I square my shoulders and head inside to meet Ben.

He's waiting at my locker, sitting on the floor with a thick textbook on his lap. For once, he's not wearing a hoodie; while most people have accommodated for the warmer weather with t-shirts and shorts, Ben has simply switched to a white, long-sleeved shirt under a dark blue t-shirt advertising a Chopin concert in the park from a few years ago. I wonder if he played in it. I wonder if I'm allowed to ask.

"Hi," I say, and he jumps, but still takes a few seconds to look up at me.

"Hi," he says. "I didn't see you there."

"Yeah, I uh... I just got here. A-Are you studying for a test?" I ask. He shakes his heads and moves as if to stand. I quickly extend a hand to help him the rest of the way to his feet, and he lets slip a tiny smile.

"No, I'm just trying to start reviewing for final exams. They start in two weeks, and I've got a lot of shit to memorize," he says. Of course. Two weeks until his exams, a month until he graduates, just a few months until he heads off to Juilliard. Why is it that whenever I get a boyfriend, he disappears to New York? Shifting nervously, he adds, "So... we should probably talk about the party, I guess."

Before I can take the time to actually compose my thoughts, my mouth pops open and a flood of words tumbles out. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kissed Garen, especially after I promised you nothing was going to happen. It was one of the stupidest things I've ever done, and it just... I don't want to say, 'It just happened,' because I know it was a choice. But while it was happening, it was like I knew it was wrong, and I knew it was a shitty decision, but I couldn't stop myself. And I think part of me just wanted to *know*, you know, if it'd be like it was before."

"Was it?" Ben asks.

"No," I say quietly. "Not at all. It wasn't *good*. There was so much missing, and whatever I had with Garen, however important it was at the time? It's not there anymore. He's a different person, and so am I, and I'm glad. Because you're the only person I want to be with, and I know that what I did was shitty, but I'm hoping you can forgive me anyway."

Ben shifts his eyes to the floor. "I do. And... look, you shouldn't have to feel guilty for having a history with some other guy. I shouldn't *make* you feel guilty for it, especially since I've got a past, too. And kissing

Alex at the party meant nothing. You know that. I was just, I wanted to hurt you, I wanted to make you feel like I felt, knowing you'd kissed Garen. It was the only thing I could think of. It sucked. I'm sorry."

I reach out and wrap an arm around him, drawing him forward against my chest. We both exhale at once, melting together as the tension of our situation diffuses. One of these days, I'll probably have to address the fact that Alex actually *does* like him. But right now, it's not my secret to tell, and it's not my real concern. Right now, all I want to do is touch him.

"I love you," I whisper. He burrows into my arms, and I press my smiling lips to the top of his head.

After that, everything is easy. At least, easier. The next several days of school pass quickly and simply; five of my classes are Advanced Placements with exams timed to coincide with the senior finals, so most of my teachers are just trying to cram in some last minute facts before we all become buried under the weight of study guides and notebook checks. Even though I've been the widely acknowledged shoe-in for next year's valedictorian since the first day of high school, I still can't really bring myself to pay attention. With just a few days left to go before finals, some of my teachers actually give up and just assign us a study hall.

At this point, I couldn't give a fuck about school, because life is actually going *well* for me; Ben and I have returned to the blissfully content way we were before Garen returned, Mom is actually being pleasant now that she's deluded herself into believing that Garen and I were only ever friends, and Garen is actually being *normal*. He isn't doing lines of cocaine in the kitchen. He isn't trying to sabotage my relationship. He isn't throwing big parties whenever our parents leave the house. He isn't flirting with me, or giving me those horrible, aching looks he used to.

The real problem with my life, I realize during my Calc-class-turned-study-hall last period on Thursday, is that the calm is always followed by a big, ridiculous storm. I should have expected these past few pleasant, average days to culminate in something heartbreaking or humiliating. And the universe is all too willing to oblige, apparently, because the school loudspeaker suddenly crackles to life.

"—is not for student use! Return to class immediately!"

"Attention, everyone!" Wait... is that *Alex*?

"Oh my God, you are not doing this—" Ben? What the fuck is going on?

"Ow, McCutcheon, get off of—"

"Put it down, Alex! I swear—"

"—be disciplined severely!"

"My friend here – everyone knows my friend, Ben, right? Ben McCutcheon? He's a senior? He's the short one, with the eyeliner! And those lame-ass hoodies. Yeah, my friend has something he wants to say—"

"No, I don't! Put it the fuck down!"

"Detention! Detention for both of you!"

"Hey, Travis! Travis, are you listening?" My head snaps up, and everyone in the room turns, almost in unison, to stare at me.

“Alex, stop it! This isn’t cool, you—”

“—an outrage! Never in all my—”

“Jesus, Ben, stop hitting me!”

“*Turn off the fucking speaker!*”

“Alexander! Benjamin!”

“Travis, will you go to prom with Ben?”

Silence.

“I can’t believe you just did that. You’re the worst friend I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Someday, when you and Travis move to Vermont to get married, you’ll be thanking me for it.”

“Not if he says he won’t go with me! God, Al, I just told you I thought he’d say no if I asked him, and I didn’t bring that up so that you’d—”

“Um, Ben, the speaker’s still on—”

“Shit, shit, shit—”

“Benjamin McCutcheon, that language will not be—”

“*Fuck!*”

And then the speaker finally clicks off. The laughter and applause that follows is almost deafening. People are clambering over seats to clap me on the back, and at least four girls immediately swoop over to demand to know my answer. Apparently, even Lakewood is willing to forget its homophobia when someone pulls a stunt as spectacular as that. By the time the bell rings, I’ve heard enormous lists of the pros and cons of accepting, and the only guy who suggested “because I’ll kick your ass if you do” as a con was booed by the people around me.

I take my time packing up my backpack at my locker, then make my way up to the senior hallway. Ben and Alex are nowhere to be seen, but Jeremy and Mason are both there, joking with each other, then cackling even more when they see me coming.

“If you’re looking for your boyfriend, he’s up at the main office,” Jeremy says, grinning at me.

Mason chuckles. “Yeah, they probably won’t even be *allowed* to go to prom, after that.”

“But if they *are*, what are you going to say?” Jeremy says, suddenly sobering. They both eye me warily, and I suddenly realize they must think I’m the least trustworthy person alive. Chasing Garen out of town... being a step away from a one-night stand with Alex... hurting Ben, over and over and over.

“Bite me, you guys,” I say, forcing a smile, “I think I can handle this on my own.”

Before they can band together and tie me down until I submit to more of their questioning, I turn on my heel and march up towards the main office. As promised, Ben and Alex are camped out on metal folding

chairs in front of the office, sneaking looks at each other like chastised children in time-out.

"I can't believe you two," I say. Instead of grinning up at me guiltily, like Alex does, Ben buries his face in his hands.

"Oh my Jesus, go away, Travis. And like, never come back, or look at me, or think about this occasion," he groans.

I laugh and reach out to card my fingers through his hair. "Stop being dramatic."

"I wasn't even planning to really ask you! Alex just—"

"Yeah, yeah," Alex interrupts. "Alex just acted as the middleman for you two morons. God! First, I introduced you to the idea of hooking up with Travis by sucking his dick at the Love Sucks Party. Then, I convinced Travis to get his head out of his ass and actually ask you out after you guys made out. And now here I am, getting you two to go to prom together."

Ben finally lifts his head enough to laugh at his friend, but I feel a vague churning of guilt in my stomach. However much he jokes about it, this must be infuriating for Alex. Every time he's compelled by all his best-friend urges to help Ben out, it only drags the possibility of them being together further out of his reach. On the one hand, I feel like a homewrecking shitbag. On the other, Ben is *my* boyfriend. I curl my hand around the back of his neck and lean down to kiss him.

"You're ridiculous, Ben. Of course I'll go to prom with you," I say.

For a moment, he sits there in stunned, thrilled silence. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously," I say. His face splits into the widest, most beautiful smile I've ever seen, and I can't stop myself from kissing him once more.

"McCutcheon, McCall! PDA is against the student code of conduct!" Principal Hammond barks from the doorway of his office. I'm sorely tempted to ignore him, but anything I do will probably just add to Ben and Alex's punishment, so I step back quickly. "McCall... just go home already. I need to speak to your friends about their completely inappropriate actions."

"If it helps you make your decision about how to react, Travis agreed to go with Ben," Alex adds, and Ben shoots him a warning look. Principal Hammond scowls.

"Well, it remains to be seen if *any* of you will be permitted to attend after that little stunt. Travis. Go. Now."

His voice makes it clear that he will not be telling me a third time. I offer Ben one last small smile and head outside into the warm April sunlight. I don't have a ride home now, but it doesn't matter; the weather is fantastic, and I'm feeling content enough not to mind walking home. My good mood lasts me all the way back to the house, and most of the way to my room. Halfway up the stairs, however, I realize that the house is eerily quiet. Garen's car is in the driveway, but there's no babbling from the TV downstairs, or streams of music coming from his bedroom.

I frown and pause outside to knock on his door. "Garen?"

There's no reply, so I push open the door. His room is empty. It takes me a few seconds to realize that the light is on in the bathroom down the hall, though the door is open. I approach slowly. "Garen, are you in there?"

After a slight hesitation, he says, “Y-Yeah, I’m here. What’s up?”

I round the corner and freeze. No. No, no, no. Not again.

“Dave?” I ask, even though it’s not much of a question.

Garen’s hands tighten on the edge of the counter as he meets my gaze in the mirror. At least, as well as he *can*, with one eye swollen most of the way shut and hidden behind an angry-looking bruise. “Some guy in the Target parking lot almost hit my car. I got out to yell at him, and he flipped out on me.”

“Then explain why you look like you’re about to cry,” I demand. He snorts.

“I’m not going to cry. How much of a little bitch do you think I am?” he asks. I take a few steps towards him and hook a finger under his jaw to turn his face towards me. He lets me move his head, but stares at the ceiling instead of into my eyes. I’m more than willing to wait him out. For nearly five minutes, we just stand there, each of us waiting for the other to move.

And then, just when I’m starting to wonder if it’s pointless, a tear rolls down his cheek, leaving a trail from his black eye to his chin. He immediately drags the back of his hand over his face and turns back to face the mirror, glaring at himself. I’m stunned to see how furious he looks with himself, almost as stunned as I am to see that he actually *is* going to cry. This new vulnerability is something I hadn’t ever counted on.

“It’s fine, Travis,” he says, his voice gravelly and thick. “I can handle it.”

Of all the lies he’s ever told me, this one hurts the most.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Prom, it turns out, is the Friday following the one when Ben asks me. Ben only admits this after I point out the ticket sale table in the cafeteria on Thursday. I glare at him. "So, were you planning to ever let me know, or were you hoping I might just happen to be wearing a tux when you show up at my house tomorrow night?"

Ben ruffles my hair affectionately and pecks a kiss on my cheek. "Don't whine. You can just wear the tux you bought for the wedding. It's really not a big deal, I don't expect you to wear a new one."

"Yeah, it's not like you have to worry about it matching a dress. Amy's all over my ass, telling me I need to make sure my vest is 'chartreuse.' What the fuck is 'chartreuse'? Is that like, blue?" Mason asks. I notice he's directing his question mostly to Ben and I, as though liking dick means we have to like interior design and color swatches, too.

Alex shrugs. "I think it's green. A kinda yellow-green, though. Like pus."

"That sounds fucking hideous. Why would she get a pus-colored dress?" Jeremy laughs. "I mean, I'm taking Sarah Abrams, and she said 'red.' That's it. Not 'scarlet' or 'mauve,' just red. So I'm gonna get a red vest for me, and a red corsage for her, and that'll be it."

"Dude, I think 'mauve' is purple," Mason says.

"So? I said it's *not* mauve, it's red. So I'm good."

"Are we even supposed to match?" I ask Ben. "I mean, I guess it makes sense when it's a guy matching a girl's dress, but we'll probably just look creepy and clone-ish if we're wearing the same thing."

"I don't know, I've never taken a guy to prom before. Should we like, Google gay prom etiquette or something?" Ben suggests. We grin at each other, but Jeremy is already sliding his phone out of his pocket to use the internet on it. He and Alex bow their heads together over the phone, conversing in low tones, and Mason turns to Ben, smiling a sleepy stoner smile.

"I'm surprised you two were allowed to go, after the thing over the loudspeaker," he says.

Ben shrugs. "I'm pretty sure Principal Hammond was afraid that we'd try to sue the school for discrimination if he stopped me from going to prom. Which I, you know, obviously wouldn't have done. Prom's one of those lame high school traditions that's *supposed* to be exciting, but is actually just a waste of time and money. Like getting a yearbook. Or, now that I think about it, going to the graduation ceremony at all."

"If it's so lame, why'd you want to go with me?" I ask, frowning. Sometimes, I wonder if Ben forgets that I'm not as anti-everything as he is. Yeah, dances are lame, but part of me enjoys the awkward pseudo-companionship I feel when all the classmates I hate want to sign my yearbook. Part of me is kind of excited that I might be the one making the cliché "the end of high school is the beginning of the rest of your life, but you'll never forget where you come from, woo hoo Lakewood!" speech at next year's graduation.

"Because I don't like stuff like prom, but I do like you," Ben says simply. "And also, you looked really fucking sexy when you're all suited up."

He leans over to kiss my smiling mouth, and after a few lingering seconds, something connects

sharply with the back of my head. "Ow! What the fuck?"

"You two faggots might want to rethink your plans for this weekend," says Logan, the asshole track team captain, circling around me to glare into my face. "Do you really think the rest of us want to spend our prom watching you guys give each other handjobs under the table?"

"How would you see us giving each other handjobs if it was happening under the table?" Ben asks, sounding genuinely confused. "Whatever. Doesn't matter, I was planning to just give him head in the bathroom anyway."

Lo flings out an arm and wraps it too-tightly around Ben's shoulders. "Don't get smart with me, you little cocksucker, or I'll—"

I am off the bench in a second, wrenching Logan's arm away and dragging him back from the table. "Look, Lo, I'm really flattered that you're so intent on proving to me how big you think your dick is, but knock it off. There's a line, and putting your hands on my boyfriend pretty much crosses it completely. If you do it again, I will fuck you up."

Logan snorts and brushes me off him, the way you brush a fly off your arm. "Do you think I'm seriously afraid of you, McCall? The idea of you trying to fight me is ridiculous. Who would you call for back-up? Your midget sex slave? Not so much. Maybe I'd be worried if you were still fucking your soldier-boy brother, 'cause I've heard him talking about shooting practice and combat training and tons of other shit like that. But you guys are just pathetic."

I'm so taken aback by the mention of Garen that I actually let go, giving Logan the chance to throw one last smirk at me and swagger off. He's actually out of the cafeteria before I sit back down, glaring at the table. It's sort of easy to picture Garen at Patton; lining up for drills, loading his practice rifle, getting into fights with his friends, being a general pain in the ass. The problem is, it's even easier to picture the dried blood on his lips and the sickly yellow bruises over his eye.

"You alright there, Trav?" Ben asks, glancing over at me. He's always telling me that he doesn't care if people treat him like shit for being gay, and apparently he's being honest; the idea of getting his ass kicked by Logan doesn't seem to faze him.

"Not really," I say slowly. "But it's not, you know... my place to say what I'm thinking about."

"Don't be an idiot," Mason says around a mouthful of bread. "Just spit it out."

Truth be told, my real concern is that Ben will break up with me for talking about this. But he was Garen's friend before he was my boyfriend, so maybe, even after the stunts Garen has pulled, it's fine? I sigh. "Did Garen ever tell you guys about his first boyfriend?"

There's a general murmur of dissent, and Jeremy adds, "Not really. Like, he mentioned he had one, but he didn't really go into details about it."

"I think it's like, three years too late to be getting jealous about that," Ben says coolly, and I slip an arm around his waist to give him a reassuring squeeze.

"No, no. That's not what I mean at all. I'm bringing it up because they got back together around a week or two ago."

"Yeah?" says Alex, raising his eyebrows. "Weird that he hasn't mentioned it. We went out for

coffee the other day, actually. Didn't say a word about it."

I'm momentarily stunned by the idea of them having coffee together, especially after what Garen did at the party during spring break. No one else seems to think it's weird, though, so I opt to drop it. "Well, long story short, the guys a piece of shit. He's dangerous, and I would prefer it if Garen never spoke to him again. But I don't know how to tell *Garen* that."

"Jeaaaaalous," Ben sings under his breath.

"So are youuuuu," Mason sings back, and Ben kicks him under the table.

"There's nothing to be jealous of!" I snap. "I'm serious, this isn't about me being some kind of possessive ex-boyfriend. This is about the fact that... look, this guy, Dave? He used to beat Garen up when they were together. And I don't mean he slapped him a couple times. He hospitalized him. Broke his nose and his ribs, gave him a concussion, kept beating him up for months even after that. Garen was fifteen when they started going out."

"Fuck," Ben exhales, and I nod.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Jeremy leans forward. "So, do you think he's going to start again?"

"He already *has*. It only took two days for Garen to come home with a split lip. Last week, it was a black eye. There hasn't been anything since then, but it's creepy. I've seen Dave, okay? He's a big guy, but he's closer to my height than Garen's, and he's not as, you know, muscular. Maybe it wasn't like that when Garen was a sophomore, but now, he could*easily* beat Dave in a fight. But he isn't. It's... it's like he *wants* Dave to kick his ass."

"Sounds like Ben and Ethan," Jeremy mutters, and Alex cuffs him around the back of the head.

"Dude. Don't," he says, then adds to me, "Jer's an idiot. Ignore him."

"What, that hasn't come up yet?" Mason says.

"No, it hasn't come up yet, you jackasses. Stop talking about it," Alex orders.

Ben, however, glances at me and says blandly, "The first guy I slept with, Ethan, and I used to have semi-violent sex. These morons saw a few bite marks and scratches, and blew the whole thing totally out of proportion."

Heat creeps up my neck, igniting my freckles in flames. "O-Okay. Yeah. I uh... Garen mentioned that you were kind of into that."

"What, you didn't know?" Jeremy says. This conversation needs to be over *immediately*.

"Jeremy, we've only slept together twice," Ben groans.

Mason leans forward and helpfully informs me, "Ben likes it rough."

"Shut up," Alex demands, with a little more vehemence than necessary.

I shake my head, trying to rid my mind of the image of Ben having perverted, kinky, dangerous sex with tons of different people. “Look, can we just go back to talking about Garen and his psychotic boyfriend?”

Mason shrugs. “I don’t know that there’s much you *can* do, man. He’s going to do whatever he wants to do, regardless of what you tell him. Maybe it’s best to just wait it out and see what happens. If things get really bad, I’m sure Garen knows how to take care of himself. Like Douchebag Logan said, G’s a badass Army-man. He’ll be fine.”

His assurances do nothing to quell the nervousness that twists my stomach into knots, but I drop it. I come home that night to find Garen in great condition. His black eye has faded to a very pale purple, and there aren’t any cuts on his face. He’s wearing a t-shirt, so I can see that there aren’t handprints on his arms, or scrapes on his knuckles from trying to defend himself. Not like he *would* try to defend himself.

The thing that gets to me the most is that Bill and Mom are stupid enough to swallow his bullshit excuses. Who is actually enough of a moron to believe that he could just *happen* to get jumped in a parking lot, only a few days after he *happens* to get a busted lip in a completely improbable almost-accident? How can they not see the connection between sudden injuries and a new, evil-looking boyfriend? Despite my growing frustration, I can’t seem to bring myself to tell them. Garen would deny it and accuse me of just being jealous. And the marks are all fading, so everything must be improving.

Right?

When school gets out on the day of prom, I text my sister, asking her to pick me up and bring me to a florist to get a boutonniere for Ben. She arrives ten minutes later, frantically rolling down her car window with a wild look in her eyes. “Holy shit, Travis. You’re going to *prom*?”

I am far too used to this exclamation by now to really react. I climb into the passenger seat and shrug, saying, “Yeah. Ben asked me, and, you know... he shouldn’t have to miss out on prom just because he has a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend. Can we go to the flower place now?”

“No, Travis,” she says in a tone of forced calm. “First, we need to see if we can go get you a haircut. You look horrible.”

“Aww, thanks,” I say flatly. “I don’t need a haircut. Ben saw me two minutes ago, he knows what my hair looks like.”

“Yeah, he knows you look like a Shih Tzu. I’m serious, I’m only going to take you to get his boutonniere if you get a haircut first. It might not matter to you, but it’ll matter to him,” Bree declares.

I sink down in my seat and grumble, “He cares about this stupid stuff even less than I do.”

Bree ignores me and guns it for the highway. Rather than take me to the barber shop that’s ten minutes from our house, she drives two towns over to the nearest mall. As we pass through the automatic doors, a sudden sense of forboding passes over me; this whole excursion is starting to feel way too much like a girls’ night at the salon.

“Bridget,” I say slowly, “I probably won’t even be able to get an appointment on no notice like this. Besides, I may be gay, but no guy is gay enough to want to get some spa treatment bullshit like—”

“Travis, you are such an absolute troll sometimes,” she growls. “Ever since you came out, you have been such a little brat. Stop acting so put-upon. If you didn’t want to go to prom, you didn’t have to accept the invitation. But no, of course you had to. Because ‘Ben shouldn’t miss out just because he’s gay.’ And I

completely agree with you, alright? But if you don't want to go, you shouldn't feel like you have to just to make a statement."

"I'm not trying to making a statement!" I snap.

"That's all you've been doing since Garen left! You didn't speak to me for weeks because you thought I broke up your relationship. You don't even talk to most of your old friends anymore. The only people you hang out with are Ben and Alex, who are gay, too. I just... I think you came out too fast, is all," she finishes somewhat lamely, dropping onto one of the benches near the door.

My mouth drops open a little, in an almost cartoonish way. "Th-That is really rich coming from you, Bree. Whose fault is it? Whose *fucking* fault is it that everyone found out? 'Cause last I checked, nobody knew about me and Garen before you went and shot your mouth off, and he got kicked—"

"I'm sorry!" Bree yells, and when a few people look over in surprise, she clamps her mouth shut until they pass. Then, more quietly, in a voice of forced calm, she repeats, "I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't reacted so badly, and I wish that Mom and Bill hadn't found out because of me. But you can't keep blaming me and acting like I was trying to attack you for being gay. You can't act like everyone hates you for being gay. It's not fair to us. Stop trying to use your sexuality to distance yourself from everyone."

"But that's just it. It *does* distance me. And no, I don't really want to go to prom that much, but if twenty years from now, Ben tells somebody he didn't go to his high school prom, it's not going to be the same as a straight kid who doesn't go to prom. People will think that he didn't go to prom because he couldn't, that he blew it off because his school wouldn't let him or because he couldn't find a guy who had the balls to go with him. And since the school doesn't give a fuck, well, I'm not going to be the nut-less douchebag who stopped him from going."

"I just think you should maybe be careful. Going to prom with another guy is going to make a big scene, and you know it. What are you going to do when Ben goes away to college in the fall?"

I have no idea.

"Deal with it, I guess," I say instead, looking away and sinking onto the bench next to her. "New York isn't that far away. We'll figure something out."

"I meant, what are you going to do at school? You have a safety net now, Travis. Your track teammates don't give you that much shit, nobody really tries to start fights with you, because you have this support system of other gay people and friends who don't care who you like. And once your friends graduate and you lose them, I'm afraid something is going to happen to you."

"I'm going to be fine," I say, but suddenly, it seems a lot harder to believe it. At any rate, it's a lot harder to believe I'll be okay than it is to believe that someone is going to eventually kick my ass, tag my locker, even just say something worse than what's already been said. "Nothing's going to happen to me."

Bree exhales harshly, glaring at the floor. "Fine. I mean, look, Travie. We fight a lot, and we don't agree on stuff always. Or, actually, ever. But you're my little brother, and I love you. I'm just trying to look out for you. So, please just think about what I've said."

I sigh and drag my fingers through my hair. "Yeah, sure. Not about getting my hair done, though."

"You're not getting it *done*, you're getting it cut. There's a difference. Now shut the hell up and just come with me?"

This is the moment where I discover that my sister is a lying bitch. After several minutes spent cooing over the “lovely natural wave” and “gorgeous honey blonde color,” the *hairstylist* – as Bree emphatically refers to her – chops off several inches, leaving me with closely cropped hair that she then attacks with a hairdryer, flat-iron, and half a dozen bottles of crap. When the stylist finally spins me chair so that I can see my reflection in the mirror, I can only blink at myself for several moments.

I look like a complete douchebag. My hair isn’t just styled; it’s *coiffed*. It looks just like James’ haircut, but it isn’t effortless, it isn’t tousled, and it isn’t sexy. It just looks weird. Regardless, I thank the stylist and tip her, privately grateful for the fact that my haircut only cost a tenth of what James’ probably cost. The first thing I need to do when I get home is wash this shit off my head.

The rest of the trip doesn’t go as badly. Bree brings me to a decently priced department store and helps me pick out a dark cobalt shirt and black silk tie that she insists will make me look like a badass. At the flower shop, she helps me dig through dozens of plastic boxes to find a carnation that isn’t half-dead. We return to the house with one hour left before Ben is supposed to be picking me up, and I make a beeline for the shower. Once all the mousse and gel and pomade, or whatever it is, is rinsed out, the haircut is actually decent. I call my thanks down the hall to Bree, who shouts back that she’s leaving for her boyfriend’s house and that I should put the flower in the fridge so it doesn’t wilt.

I peer into the box on the desk. It seems to be just fine, considering it’s only been out of a cooler for an hour or so. It’s not like me finishing getting dressed is going to make it die right then and there. I put on my pants, shirt, tie, and shoes, but leave the jacket where it is for now as I head back downstairs to the kitchen. The refrigerator door is already open, and Garen is standing in front of it, staring blankly into its depths. For reasons I choose not to inquire about, he is wearing nothing but a pair of flannel sweatpants.

“Hey,” he says, not looking at me, “do you know how to make guacamole? I want to make a huge pan of nachos and eat it all in like, five seconds. Seriously.”

I can’t help but snort. “Are you stoned?”

“No, I’m not,” he replies, managing to look convincingly indignant. After a few seconds, however, he shrugs. “Well, okay, yeah, I was earlier. I used to wake-and-bake a lot during my sophomore year, and I forgot how horrible it is to have the munchies when you *actually* have an empty stomach and no food in the house. But I’m not high anymore.”

“Sorry, I don’t know how to make anything. Can’t help you,” I say.

“Fuck,” he groans. “I’m starving.”

And he really might be. I’m unable to stop myself from looking him over, and I feel nausea bubbling in my stomach as I do it. God, he’s so thin these days. I can practically see his ribs. “Yeah. You should um... you should definitely eat something, though.”

He turns towards me finally, probably to make some biting comment, but he freezes when his eyes actually land on me.

I suddenly feel as if I’m not wearing a suit. As if I’m not wearing *anything*. His eyes move slowly down to the floor, then back up my body, hesitating briefly on my ties, then eventually settling on my hair. I reach up self-consciously to run a hand over it. “They cut it shorter than I was expecting. I look like an idiot, I know.”

Garen shuts the fridge door and takes a small step towards me. "You look gorgeous, actually," he says. "You uh... you look really, really great."

"Thanks," I say. We stare at each other, wide-eyed, for nearly a full minute before he turns to dig a bag of cookies out of the cupboard.

"So, you and Ben are going to prom, huh?" he says. "Alex told me about it when we went for coffee."

I shove my hands in my pockets and mutter, "I can't believe Alex is even still speaking to you at this point."

"I didn't say anything that wasn't true," Garen says with a shrug that makes me want to rip his arms off. "It's not like he can hate me for telling the truth. And it's not like he was doing that good of a job of hiding it, anyway."

"It still wasn't your place to out him like that," I argue. "Especially in front of his friends. Especially in front of the boyfriend of the guy he likes."

"I guess I'm just easily forgiven like that," Garen murmurs.

Not by me. Never by me. I don't actually have to say the words, because they are already hanging heavily in the air between us. He even looks like he's preparing to flinch. Instead of giving him that much, though, I shake my head. "So, what are you up to tonight?"

He takes a step back at that, almost as if he's trying to back away from my question. "Just hanging out, I guess."

His reaction is so strange, so evasive, that I know immediately what that means. "With Dave?"

He shrugs again. "Yeah. He's upstairs."

Just like that, I suddenly feel like I'm going to be sick again. "He's here? You brought him into this house?"

"Yeah, dude," Garen says, in a slightly feeble attempt at indignance. "He's my boyfriend. He can come over anytime he wants to."

"No, he can't. He isn't allowed to be here, if he's just going to..."

"Going to what?" Garen demands. I say nothing, and he is instantly in my face, close enough for me to feel his breath on my lips. "If he's just going to fuck me?"

Honestly, the idea hadn't even occurred to me. His near-nakedness is so far from the point right now that I actually need to look down to remind myself that he's clearly in his post-coital uniform. I clear my throat. "That's not what I was talking about."

"Then *what*? He can't be here if he's just going to beat me?" It's the first time he's actually confirmed it, and I wish to God he had said anything else. But I can't make myself un-hear the question, and he doesn't seem to want to take it back. For several long, horrible moments, we stand there and just stare. Finally, he holds out his arms, turning them over so I can see them from every angle. "Look, Trav. No marks. I'm fine."

He twists awkwardly to show me one side, then the other, but keeps his back pointedly turned towards the counter. When I reach for his hips, he moves towards me instantly, almost as a reflex. He regrets the move when I release him and duck around behind him. I inhale sharply.

"Fuck, Garen," I say quietly. His back is home to a gigantic, purple-black bruise. "What the fuck did he do to you this time?"

"He didn't do anything," Garen drones, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "I got into a fight in—"

"Yeah? A fight, a fucking fight? Where was it this time? The grocery store, Target, Walmart, Home fucking Depot?" I snarl.

"Starbucks, actually," he sneers back. "Somebody took the last piece of Very Berry Coffee Cake."

"I'm so sure," I say. He rolls his eyes once more and turns back to the fridge. Shaking with rage, I storm back upstairs, fully intending to barricade myself in my bedroom. I end up standing frozen on the threshold, however, because when I glance around, I realize that Garen's door is slightly ajar. I bang it the rest of the way open.

Dave is sprawled across the bed, naked except for a sheet draped across his hips, and holding a thick book in his hand. He scowls at me and says, "Knocking would've been appreciated, you know. Especially since I don't know who the hell you are."

I shut the door behind myself and lock it with a click, then stride across the room to lean right in his face. "Does it matter? You're in my house right now, so I'd really recommend that you shut up. Now, listen to me, because I'm going to say this once; if you hurt Garen again, I will kill you. I don't mean in a vague, trying-to-scare-you way, either. This isn't a threat, this is a promise. If I see another bruise, another scrape, another black eye, another *anything*, I will actually murder you. You will fucking disappear. Do you understand me?"

Dave's face turns purple. "What the hell has he been telling you?"

"He lies for you, of course. He says he gets into fights or car accidents or whatever, but I'm not an idiot. You used to beat him up when he was a kid, and you're beating him up now. And I am telling you right now, it's going to end immediately," I say.

He stumbles off the bed, wrapping the sheet more securely around his hips. "So, that's how you think it is. You think that what, we just sit there, watching TV, and all of a sudden, I reach over and punch him out?"

I stuff my hands in my pockets to stop myself from hitting him right then and there. "Pretty much, yeah."

"Bullshit," he says with a harsh laugh.

"I don't know what you said to get him to come back to you, but you need to—"

"I didn't say anything. *He called me up*. He called me a few weeks ago, said he had just gotten out of a relationship with some asshole and wanted to see me again. Said he was sorry he was such a brat when we were together and that he shouldn't have ended things with me, and if I was willing to try again, so was he. So, I said alright, and we went out to dinner. He kept telling me he couldn't believe our relationship had gone so wrong in the start, that it was all because he was immature and couldn't handle a real relationship yet."

"Or it was because you beat him," I say, but Dave talks over me as though I haven't even opened my mouth.

"So things were going great for the first couple of days. And then we're in my car, I'm driving, and he starts being a brat again, telling me how I suck at driving, how I don't know what I'm doing at all, I'm gonna get us lost, whatever. And I tell him, I say to him, 'man, if you don't shut up, you're gonna really piss me off,' and he keeps going, just shooting his mouth off. And he keeps touching everything, fucking with the radio and the air and just being a little asshole, you know? So I reach out and I push his shoulder to just get him to, you know, knock it off. Only..." Dave sighs and rakes his fingers through his dark, curly hair. "Look, he's not built like he used to be, okay? He says he lost a lot of weight after that guy broke up with him, and now he's just... he's weak. So I pushed him, just a little shove, and he goes flying across the car, smacks his face into the passenger window and splits his lip right down the middle. And I pulled over, I got him some tissues and stuff, kept apologizing, but he said it was fine, it was no big deal."

"It was a big deal to me when he came home with his mouth fucked up," I growl, but Dave waves me off.

"Yeah, but he just... he keeps doing shit like that. Nobody knows my triggers like Garen does, alright? He pushes my buttons more than anyone I've ever met, so he knows when he's saying something that's going to piss me off. And ever since we got back together, it's like all he does is try to get me mad at him. He'll flirt with other guys in front of me, or he'll talk shit, telling me I'm weak, telling me I'm not as much of a man as his last boyfriend. Fuck, he talks about that kid all the time, never shuts up about him. It's always 'Travis was so smart' and 'Travis was so hot' and 'Travis was so athletic' and what-the-fuck-ever. And I tell him, 'Garen, you gotta stop talking about your ex, you're supposed to talk about *me* like that, it sounds like you're still in love with him.' And he just goes 'yeah, so what if I am?' I mean, how the fuck would you react to somebody saying that to you?"

"So basically what you're saying to me," I say slowly, clenching my fists, "is that he's asking for it?"

Dave laughs hollowly. "He's doing a lot more than asking for it, man. He gets in my *face*. Not just verbally, I'm talking physically. He'll get in my face, my space, and he'll start giving me little pushes, saying shit like 'what are you going to do' and 'hit me' and shit like that. And I'm only human, okay? I can only take so much of that shit before yeah, you know what, I'm gonna push him back. And then he starts swinging, and I swear, most of the time, it's just self-defence. Whoever this Travis kid is, he fucked Garen up *good*."

"No, I didn't," I say flatly.

The silence drags out between us as Dave's body goes through a series of terrifying, strange changes. He begins to shake, his face more purple than ever, and he clenches his fists around the sheet at his hips. "You're Travis?"

"Yeah," I say.

"So you're telling me that this whole time, the guy who he won't shut up about, the guy who he's saying he might still be into, is living in his house? Is this some kind of joke?" he demands.

"No, it's not. I'm his stepbrother now, but I used to be his boyfriend," I say. Downstairs, the doorbell rings. Fuck, of course Ben would show up now. I round on Dave once more. "Look, if he's being that shitty to you, break up with him. Don't hit him. Don't fucking touch him again, or I'm serious, I'm going to kill you. Now, I think you should put your clothes on and get the fuck out of my house."

I stomp back to my bedroom to get my jacket, and can still hear Dave muttering curses even once I'm halfway down the stairs.

"Don't forget your flower," Garen says from the kitchen, and I veer off to grab it from the fridge.

"Thanks," I say grudgingly, not bothering to wait for a reply before I jog back to the front door and swing it open. "Ben. Wow."

"Good wow, right?" Ben says, grinning at me. I can only get so impressed by his suit – after all, I'm wearing one just like it – but he has paired his black jacket and trousers with an ice-blue vest and tie that are the exact same color as his eyes, which bear only the faintest traces of his usual eyeliner.

I lean down to kiss him once and confirm, "Good wow."

Neither of us is very skilled at pinning on our corsages, and I'm deeply grateful for the fact that there are no cameras here to capture the ineptitude. Eventually, though, we get into the SUV and head for the Waterfront Luxury Hotel in the next town over, where the prom is being held. It takes us almost half an hour to get into the parking lot because of the huge line of limousines, but the parking spaces are almost all free.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm too cheap to spring for a limo," Ben says, sticking his tongue out at me.

I snort. "Oh, yeah, you can tell I'm a big stickler for rules about luxury vehicles. I demand that you take me home right now."

"Aww," he says softly, "I thought I had to wait until *after* the prom to take you home."

A little shiver passes over me, and I try to hide my smile as we get out and head towards the glass front doors. There's a long line of people waiting to get in, and only one man checking off names at the door; score one for LHS prom-planning.

"Hey, Ben! Travis!" calls a voice from the middle of the line. We follow the yells and eventually find Jeremy and Mason standing with two pretty girls, one of whom is definitely wearing a pus-colored dress. We wedge ourselves into line with them.

Behind us, a few people groan. Someone yells, "Back of the line, queers!"

"Bite me, Neanderthal!" Ben snarls, and the guy – a football player, by the looks of him – blinks in surprise.

"Where's Alex?" I ask, placing my hand in the small of Ben's back to calm him. Mason shrugs.

"Haven't seen him yet," he says. "I'm not even entirely sure he's coming."

"No, he is," Jeremy corrects. "He said he'd be here after most of the people got in so he wouldn't have to wait in line. He's coming stag anyway."

For all its length, the line moves pretty quickly. It only takes ten minutes for our group to make it to the door.

"Last name?" drawls the man at the door, flipping through the pages on his clipboard.

"McCutcheon," Ben says.

More shuffling of papers. "Benjamin?" Ben nods. "And you signed up a guest named McCall. Which one is that?" He jabs his pen at the two girls, Amy-in-chartreuse and Sarah-in-red.

"Neither. That's me," I say, giving a small wave. The man blinks at the clipboard, then at me.

"No, I can sign you in next, young man. Right now, I need to see the person who 'McCutcheon-comma-Benjamin' signed up as his date. 'McCall-comma-T. D.' Where—"

"Yeah, that's me," I say irritably. "Travis Daniel McCall."

The man narrows his eyes. "I'm going to need to see your driver's license."

"Are you shitting me?" Ben demands.

"No, I'm completely serious, sir. Usually when a student shows up at one of these dates with someone of the same gender, it's because they're trying to sneak in someone who shouldn't be there. I'm going to see this man's driver's license so that I can be certain he's allowed to be here."

"He doesn't have a driver's license, because he doesn't drive," Ben snaps.

I brush my hand against his elbow. "It's fine, Ben. I've got my school ID." I fish the card out of my wallet and thrust it at the man with the clipboard. "See? Travis D. McCall. Grade eleven. Identification number eight, one, five, three, two, one, two, seven. Can we go inside now?"

"Not so fast. How can I tell that you're actually a student here?" the man asks, completely ignoring the card in my hand.

"Because you're looking at my student ID! It says it right on the top, 'Lakewood High School.' Why are you—"

"If you could just step off to the side for a minute, we'll settle this matter in a few minutes, once I've finished checking off the rest of the students. Now, may I have your name, please?" the man asks, turning to Jeremy.

"Jeremy Suffolk, and my date's Sarah Abrams. But I'm not going in without my friends."

The man heaves a sigh and turns to Mason. "Name?"

"Mason Kowalski," he replies, then hitches his chin at his date. "Amy Tremont. And I'm not going in, either."

"What seems to be the hold-up here, gentlemen?" says a pleasant voice from just inside the doors. I step forward to see Vice-Principal Jacobs looking back at us, her head cocked to the side.

"These young men and their dates are refusing to enter the building without their friends, who are being detained for security reasons. There may be a problem with the guest list," the door-man sniffs.

"There isn't a problem, though!" Ben bursts out. "He thinks that I'm trying to sneak someone in, even though my date's on the list. This guy checked ID and everything."

"Ben, we'll sort this out, please don't get angry," Jacobs says, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Now, who's your date?"

"I am," I say. She blinks at me, and I shift uncomfortably. The last time I spoke to this woman was the day I came back after my suicide attempt. Eventually, she cracks a smile.

"Oh, hello, Travis. I didn't realize you were coming to the prom tonight," she says pleasantly.

"Yeah, well, that remains to be seen," I say, nodding towards the checklist. "He doesn't believe I'm a student."

"Oh, no, no," she says quickly, slipping an arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. "Andrew, these are all Lakewood students. Ben, Jeremy, Mason, Amy, and Sarah are all seniors, and Travis is a junior. They can all be checked off." She gives us one last encouraging smile and whisks back inside. We file in after her, but I pause to glance at the doorman, only to find him glaring at me. Fucking asshole.

Things only get worse as the night goes on. I get shoved into a wall on my way back from the bathroom at one point during dinner, and take my seat again just in time to discover that someone came up to Ben in my absence and asked if he was running for prom queen. The jokes like that continue all through dinner. A guy from the next table over leans towards us and asks why neither of us is wearing a gown. Someone crosses the entire room just to ask Ben if he's "the girl" when we "do it." A girl I've never seen before in my life comes up to me and informs me that she'll probably throw up if she has to watch "two gay dudes grind up on each other on the dance floor."

"We shouldn't have come," Ben says, slouching down in his seat as yet another of his classmates returns to his table after criticizing us.

"I'm glad we did," I say, even though it's clearly bullshit. He just shrugs in reply.

Jeremy nudges Mason and points across the room. "Hey, at least Alex is finally here. Look."

I glance over and see Alex weaving his way through the maze of tables towards us. He looks good, like he might have even shaved with a fresh razor, for once. His suit, however, is a little disheveled; his jacket is unbuttoned to show that his shirt is untucked, and his tie is loosened. When he gets close to our table, he stumbles.

Oh shit.

"Hey, guys," Alex says, reaching out to ruffle my hair and then leaning over to press a loud kiss to Mason's cheek before he collapses onto the chair next to me.

"Hi, Al," Jeremy says cautiously. "You just get here."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah. Like, five minutes ago. I didn't really feel like doing the dinner thing, so I just skipped it," Alex says, bobbing his head.

Amy waves him off. "Oh, the dinner wasn't that great anyway. You didn't miss anything."

Alex's eyes seem to struggle to focus her, but he eventually gets it. "Amy, hi. You look really pretty. And your dress is a lovely shade of ch... *chartreuse*. And Sarah, you look really nice, too. I like your hair. Did you like, put some glitter in it?"

"Yeah, it's a special hairspray they used at the salon," Sarah says, nodding.

Alex nods back, then looks around the table until his eyes finally land on Ben. "What's up, Ben? You... you look really good, too."

"Thanks," Ben says flatly, staring at him. "Have you been drinking?"

Alex shakes his head. "Nah, let's not talk about that. Let's talk some more about how hot you look tonight. Seriously. Are your eyes always that blue?"

"Pretty much since the day I was born, yeah," Ben snaps. "I can't fucking believe you came to prom drunk. You could get expelled if you get caught."

"Which is why I'm not going to get caught, *Dad*," Alex retorts.

"You should be really fucking grateful I'm *not* your dad right now, because your dad would be screaming at you," Ben says. Alex shrinks back, looking injured. Ben sighs and stands up. "Look, let's go outside for a little bit. Some fresh air might help you."

Alex slouches down in his seat and says sullenly, "I don't want to."

"Al, please?" Ben says, holding out his hand. Alex glares at him, but eventually raises a limp arm so that Ben can drag him by the wrist out onto the balcony.

Sarah stands up. "I'm going to go see if I can get someone from the kitchen staff to maybe make him a cup of coffee. It might help."

"I'll go with you," Amy adds, jumping up and following her across the room. Mason sighs and stands to follow Ben and Alex out to the balcony. Jeremy sighs in frustration and plants an elbow on the table.

"God, I wish Alex would stop doing shit like this," he says. I frown.

"What, this is a common thing?" I ask.

Jeremy eyes me for a moment before he finally nods. "Yeah. Yeah, it's really common, actually. Probably sixty percent of the time we all hang out outside of school, Alex is drunk, or wants to be. It's really messed up."

I shift in my seat, suddenly wishing I were anywhere else. "So... so, does he have like, a *problem*?"

"Depends who you ask, I guess," Jer says with a shrug. "Mase and I think it's just... I don't know. I guess we figure it's just Alex being Alex. It's not like he drives drunk or gets alcohol poisoning. So I guess he's just a big drinker, and there's nothing wrong with that."

"And I take it Ben believes something different?" I prompt. He nods.

"He thinks it's unhealthy. Like, we all know that Alex knows how to have fun without drinking. He doesn't have to be drunk to be happy. But Ben reckons that it's a problem, because Al sometimes drinks alone and stuff, which is pretty weird. And, you know, there's his dad."

I blink. "Alex's dad is an alcoholic?"

Jeremy laughs, though it's without any actual humor. "*Huge* alcoholic. I've never seen him sober, actually, and I've known Alex since we were like, ten. And he's... well, he's a shitty dad, alright? He's such a

bastard to Alex, always telling him he's not good enough and stuff like that. But it's not like Alex can say anything back, because it's his dad, and he doesn't have any brothers or sisters, and his mom is dead, so his dad is pretty much all he's got."

"Fuck," I murmur. How can I have been friends with Alex for months and not know this kind of thing?

"And the worst part is that Alex sometimes... you know, he'll say stuff to get his dad pissed off. There are times when Mr. Baker goes days without saying a word to him, even if Al comes home drunk, or gets a bad grade in school. He just doesn't care. So Alex'll start mouthing off, just so his dad will finally say something to him, and Mr. Baker usually ends up screaming at him."

"He doesn't hit him, though, right?" I say sharply, and Jeremy dismisses me with a shake of the head.

"No, not at all. He just treats him so freaking badly."

He pushes my buttons more than anyone I've ever met, so he knows when he's saying something that's going to piss me off. And ever since we got back together, it's like all he does is try to get me mad at him.

I shake my head. "Yeah, but like, you can't really blame Mr. Baker for it that much, if Alex is like... goading him into it."

Jeremy's hand flies out and twists around my tie. "So, what, you're saying Alex *deserves* to get treated like that, just because he sometimes says stupid shit? Like, he's *asking* for it?"

"No!" I protest. "I'm just saying, it seems like Mr. Baker might just be an asshole. And if he always acting like that with everyone, does it really count as—"

"Verbal abuse still counts as abuse, Travis. The fact that somebody's just generally an asshole doesn't mean they get a free pass, especially where people they're supposed to love are concerned. Nobody deserves to be treated like that."

Fuck. I can't believe I actually left Garen alone with Dave. I can't believe I actually acted like it was okay, like anything Dave said about Garen asking to be hit, or deserving it, or starting it was warranted. Jeremy's right; nobody deserves to be treated like this. Alex doesn't deserve to have a father who hates him, and Garen doesn't deserve to have a boyfriend who hits him. This is all so fucked up. And I need to go home immediately. I need to tell Garen this.

"Travis," Ben says from behind me, and I jump a little.

"Ben, hi. Listen, I—"

"No, wait. I'm sorry, but I really think we should go. Alex can't be here, he's going to get caught, and he can't get expelled this close to graduation. So... I'm really sorry, and I'll completely understand if you're pissed, but I think maybe I should take him back to his house."

I stand quickly. "I'm not mad at all. I get it."

Ben lets out a relieved sigh and squeezes my hand. "Thank you. We managed to get him out to my car without anyone seeing, and Mason's with him now. He's going to drive you home in Alex's car, then come back for the rest of the prom. I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," I say, brushing his hair back from his forehead to press a kiss to his skin. "I'm glad you're

going to be taking care of Alex, alright? He's lucky to have a friend like you. And I'm really proud of you for it."

It's more than I could do for Garen, anyway.

"Let me walk you to the car, at least," Ben says. I drape an arm around his shoulders, and we slip outside in silence. Mason is waiting at the curb in Alex's car, the engine rumbling softly. Ben opens the passenger side door for me, just like a real live gentleman would.

"Good luck with Alex," I say, and he nods.

"Thanks," he says. We keep our kiss brief because Mason is looking pointedly away, and afterwards, Ben waits there on the sidewalk, watching us until we round the corner out of the parking lot. The drive back to my house is silent except for the murmuring of the radio, for which I'm grateful. I am too busy trying to formulate my strategy.

The first thing I'm going to do is order Dave to get out of the house. He'll probably yell and get pissed, so maybe I should have my cell phone handy, just in case I need to call the cops? Yeah, I should definitely be ready to call the cops. Once he's gone, I'll need to sit Garen down – correction, I'll need to make Garen get dressed, first. And then I'll sit him down, and I'll tell him everything he needs to hear. I'll tell him he deserves to be treated better, that he should never be with someone who would hurt him. He'll argue with me, and I'll argue back, but eventually, he'll have to believe me, because it's true. Eventually, he'll see that he's worth so much more than he realizes.

When Mason pulls up in front of the house, however, I'm relieved to discover that Dave has already left for the night. His car is gone, and neither Bree nor my parents have gotten back yet. *This is good*, I tell myself. *I can talk to Garen without any interruptions*. The front door is unlocked, and I head straight up to my room to change. This in itself presents a problem, actually. What the fuck do you wear for an intervention? Are my sweatpants and a t-shirt too casual? Should I put on a nice shirt? I finally decide to split the difference and don a pair of jeans and one of my track t-shirts.

Garen's door is shut, so I knock once. "Garen, it's me. Can I come in?" There's no response. Did he leave with Dave? Did they go out for coffee or something? I knock again. "Garen. Open up." I try the knob, and the door swings open easily. I only take two steps in before I lurch to a stop, my stomach rolling over.

Garen's body is positioned on the bed like a corpse in a casket, but not as neatly; his arms are draped across his chest, less like he's resting and more like he's trying to hold his ribs in place. I can't tell if his eyes are open or closed because his face is swollen with enough bruises to be almost inhuman. His face, his clothes, his sheets are all splattered with black-red ropes of blood, some of which still seems to be rolling in thick droplets from his possibly-broken nose. His mouth – that gorgeous mouth with perfect teeth and soft lips – looks like a crime scene, full of blood that he must be practically drowning in. At least, he *should* be drowning in it. That's when I realize the thing that's *most* wrong about this whole scene, even more wrong than all the gore and the bruises.

Garen isn't breathing.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Some strange, animalistic noise is torn from my throat, a sort of growling whimper I didn't even know I was capable of making. I stumble forward a few steps, but my legs are shaking so much that I end up on my knees and have to crawl the last two or three feet. "Garen?" I try to whisper, but no sound comes out. I try again, and now, almost too loudly, "Garen! Fuck, fuck, fuck." I lunge for his nightstand and pick up his phone, a Blackberry I don't remember him buying. The keys are tiny, and my vision keeps fading in and out of focus too much for me to actually identify the "nine" and "one." It takes several tries, but I eventually connect.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?" answers a fast-talking female voice on the other end of the line.

"I-I need to report an assault. My stepbrother's been beaten up by his boyfriend, I'm not even sure he's still alive. We're at our house, one fifteen Maple Street, in Lakewood. Please, I need an ambulance, the police, everybody," I say, my words tumbling over themselves and falling, pathetic and desperate, into the phone.

"Emergency response units are being dispatched immediately. What is your name?"

Like now's really the time for introductions? I exhale sharply. "My name's Travis McCall, my stepbrother's name is Garen."

"Travis, can you tell if your stepbrother is breathing or not?"

"I don't think, I mean, he doesn't seem like he is," I babble. Before the dispatcher can reply, I duck down to listen, hoping for something, anything that will convince me he isn't already gone.

And then I hear it, the soft, scratchy shudder of air making its way down his torn-up, blood-filled throat. I let out a noise that's somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "No, no, he's breathing. He's alive. But barely, I mean, I don't think he can last much longer, please—"

"Help is on the way, Travis, he's going to be taken to the hospital soon. Can you tell if he's conscious?"

"No, he's definitely not. He's not moving, there's nothing," I whisper. The dispatcher continues to ask me questions, little tidbits of information about how Garen's doing, if he seems to be getting worse. The quizzing only stops when I hear the door being thrown open downstairs. I hammer on the "end call" button and stuff the phone in my pocket, bolting for the door and shouting, "Here! We're upstairs, please come—"

The short train of paramedics hoist the gurney into the air, and I flatten myself against the wall of the hallway so they can move past me into Garen's bedroom. I inch back into the room after them, and they huddle over the body, checking his vitals and examining him, occasionally tossing questions over their shoulders at me. Does he have any allergies, when did this happen, how long has he been unconscious? My answer to each is the same, a resounding *I don't know*. Garen gets strapped down onto the gurney and taken back downstairs, and I follow, hesitant and useless. I am almost at the door when a woman in a police officer's uniform catches my arm.

"Travis McCall?" she confirms, and I nod. "I'm Officer DeStefano. I'm going to be one of the people handling this case. I'd like to bring you down to the precinct to ask you some questions, see if we can establish a timeline and some of the details of what happened tonight. Are you eighteen years old?"

Of course they want to question me. Of course I wouldn't actually be allowed to go in the ambulance with Garen's almost-corpse. I slump against the wall and shake my head. "No, I'm still seventeen."

"Alright, we're going to wait here until your parent or guardian returns, and then I'll take you downtown."

This is Lakewood; there is no downtown. I shrug. "I don't mind going now. I mean, I give my consent or whatever? I could just call my mom now and have her meet us there. I-I think Bill – that's my stepdad – would probably just go straight to the hospital."

"Of course. I'll wait here while you call them, then," Officer DeStefano says. I trudge a few feet away and pull out Garen's cell phone once more, dialing Bill's number with trembling fingers. He picks up on the third ring.

"Garen!" he says pleasantly. "This is a surprise, you almost never call me when I'm—"

"This is Travis. Garen's on his way to the hospital right now. I came home from the prom and found him... look, he's been beaten up. Really badly. I called an ambulance the second I found him, but he's not looking good," I say. The silence on the other end is so deafening that I actually squeeze my eyes shut and knot my fingers in my hair.

"Who did this to him?" Bill finally asks, in a voice halfway between a gasp and a snarl.

"The guy he's been seeing. Dave something, goes to Yale," and after that, it all spills out of me. "They dated at Patton, when Garen was a sophomore. Garen told me he was hospitalized once or twice. Well, that was Dave. Same goes for his split lip, his black eye, everything."

"Dave *who*? The boy he was with the night Evelyn and I returned from France?"

"Yeah."

Another silence, then--

"What are you doing now? Are you going to the hospital, too?" Bill asks abruptly.

"No, I'm with a cop right now. She says they want me to come to the police station and answer some questions so they can establish a timeline or whatever. You're with my mom, so can you just tell her that she needs to go to the police station so she can be there while they question me?"

"Tell the cop—" Bill pauses, and I'm suddenly uncomfortably aware that he sounds as close to tears as I'm beginning to feel, "—tell her that they had better find that little shit, they had better find this *Dave*—" he practically spits the word, "—and put him in a holding cell tonight, or he will be dead before morning. And if my son dies, even being locked up won't save him."

Stunned, I listen to the dial tone for a few moments before I can manage to make myself face Officer DeStefano. "My stepdad's on the way to the hospital, and my mom's going to meet us at the station. And... I think you should probably send someone out for the guy who did this. I don't, I'm not sure how you'd find him. But I know his first name is David, he's in his second year at Yale, and he used to go to Patton Military Academy, in New York. He drives a black convertible. A Lexus, I think. I don't really know much else about him."

Officer DeStefano frowns and asks, "How do you know it was him?"

"He's Garen's boyfriend. And he hits him, he always has. They've only been dating a few weeks, but they used to go out a few years ago. Dave broke some of his bones and stuff then, too," I say. Officer DeStefano blinks at me, and I add softly, "He gave Garen a black eye a week ago. A split lip a week or two before that. Garen asked me not to say anything, so I covered for him. I thought it might get better."

"This isn't your fault, Travis," Officer DeStefano says soothingly, placing a hand on my shoulder and steering me towards the door. "When we get to the station, you can tell the detective everything."

Outside, she beckons to another cop who's talking to one of the paramedics who arrived in what seems to be a second, unnecessary ambulance. The second cop introduces himself as Officer Lowitz and opens the door to their police cruiser, gesturing for me to get in. Just before the door closes, I hear Lowitz address a third cop, telling him, "Make sure they get pictures of everything. Upstairs, first bedroom on the left."

The ride to the station is mostly silent. Occasionally, DeStefano or Lowitz will make a comment about something being said over their radio, but neither says anything to me. I sink down in my seat and pull Garen's phone out of my pocket. It takes me a moment to figure out how to move around the main screen, but when I click on his text messages, the screen opens to a neatly organized series of text messages to and from James, listed in the contacts as Jamie Goldwyn. The conversation begins with a message from Garen, sent around the time I went upstairs to threaten Dave.

Fuckmylifefuckmylifefuckmylife. Travis is going to Ben's PROM. I'm going to go kill myself now...

Really? That's... nauseating.

I know. But fuckkkk, Travis looks so good in a tux. Why does God hate me?

Because you're a flaming homosexual. Everyone knows He hates our kind.

Not helping.

Wasn't trying. Look, if seeing him with Big Ben is so painful, maybe you should stop TORTURING him and try to win him back. He's got no reason to dump the midget if his other option is you being an asshole.

I'm not being an asshole, he is.

He's not going to be nice to you if you're not nice to him.

I don't want him to be nice to me, I just want him to realize he's still in love with me and run away with me and be with me forever.

Oh, well, as long as you're not expecting too much.

He still wants me, Jamie, I can tell. I'm pretty sure he's upstairs, yelling at my boyfriend and trying to defend my virtue or whatever right now.

Shut the front fucking door. Since when do you have a boyfriend?

Apparently, Garen never bothered to answer the last message, because the next two texts in the conversation are both ones that James sent. *Tell me some details!* and *Garen? You there?* I click back out of the James texts, and scroll through the rest of his messages. There's an unread message from someone listed in the contacts as Dave Walczyk.

im sorry, g. can we talk about this? call me whenever ur ready. im really sorry.

The police cruiser pulls into the parking lot of the station, and I shove Garen's phone back into my pocket. Officer DeStefano comes around to let me out, and I follow her into the building.

The Lakewood Police Department is a small building, comprised of a cluttered reception area and one short hallway, which is lined with doors to offices, and leads to a large holding cell. After stopping at the desk to have a brief, quite conversation with the officer there, Officer DeStefano leads me down the hall, and for a moment, I'm afraid she's going to put me in the holding cell. At last second, however, she turns to the right and pushes open a door. The room beyond is bare, except for a solid wooden table with six chairs around it, three each on two opposing sides.

"Take a seat, Travis. It's okay if I call you Travis, isn't it?" Officer DeStefano asks.

I nod and sink into the middle chair on one side of the table. "Yeah, it's fine. Call me anything you want."

"Alright. We're just going to wait here for a few moments, okay? Once your mom gets here, she'll come back, and you can make an official statement about what happened tonight. Detective Phillips will be handling this case, and I just want to assure you that both she and I just want to help you and your stepbrother, alright?"

"Sure," I say, shifting in my seat. "But... listen. Do you think Garen's going to be okay?"

"The doctors over at Lakewood General are going to do their best work to patch him up," Officer DeStefano replies, and I can't help but snort.

"Please don't bullshit me. I-I really want to know. Do you think he's going to live?" I ask.

It takes a few moments for her to reply, which really tells me all I need to know. "From what I heard at the scene, your stepbrother's injuries are very severe. It's going to take a lot of work to fix him up, but I promise you that he's in good hands right now. The best thing you can do for him is try to help us figure out what happened tonight."

The door to the room swings open, and my mom rushes in, trailed by a tall, dark-haired woman in a charcoal gray suit. Mom sits down next to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. "Are you alright, Travis?"

"I'm fine," is all I can manage. The woman in the suit takes a seat next to Officer DeStefano.

"Travis, my name's Detective Carolina Phillips. I'm going to be working on your stepbrother's case, and I hope I can count on your assistance in determining what happened tonight. Now, I'd like to record this interview so that we can keep your statement on file. Afterwards, one of our clerks will transcribe it, and you'll need to sign and date the written copy to affirm that everything has been recorded accurately. Is that alright with you?" When I nod, she takes a small silver tape recorder out of her pocket, switches it on, and sets it on the table between us, the microphone pointed towards me. She clears her throat and says, "This is Detective Carolina Phillips, with the Lakewood Police Department, in Lakewood, Connecticut. The time is-" she checks her watch, then the file on the table in front of her, "-nine twenty-four in the evening,

on Friday, May fifth. I'm speaking with Travis McCall in reference to the physical assault of Garen Anderson. Travis, could you please spell your first and last name, for the record?"

I do, and she asks me to tell my birth date, address, and telephone number. This whole thing is starting to feel a lot like filling out a magazine subscription. She also asks me to clarify that my mom is present during my questioning, and that I have given my permission for this whole thing to be recorded.

"Travis, can you please tell me your relationship to Garen?" Phillips asks.

Oh Jesus. I clear my throat. "Um, he's my stepbrother."

"And how long has he been your stepbrother?"

"Since April sixteenth, of this year. My mom married his dad," I say. God. If I keep my mouth shut, they're just going to figure it out eventually, or my stupid mom is going to say something, so, quietly, I add, "Also, Garen and I used to date."

Phillips blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"Garen and I used to date," I say, louder. When she blinks at me again, I hasten to clarify, "Before our parents got married."

"How long did you date?" Phillips asks. I have to admit, she's surprisingly quick to recover from weird revelations.

"A few months. From November of last year, to January of this year," I say.

That's enough to raise her eyebrows once more. "That's fairly recent. Were your parents dating at the time, as well?"

"Yes."

"Were you and Garen living together?"

"Yes."

"Were you sleeping together?"

My mom makes a little noise of disapproval. I feel a burning flush creeping up my cheeks. "Yeah. But, you know, we were both seventeen at that point, so it wasn't like, illegal. Not here, anyway."

"I see. Now, can you tell me why your relationship ended?" Phillips asks. Like she can't guess.

"Our parents found out we were seeing each other, and Bill kicked Garen out."

"Travis!" Mom says indignantly. To Phillips, she adds, "He didn't mean forever. W-We just couldn't put up with that under our roof, you see, so my husband asked his son to leave, but by the time things had cooled down, Garen had left town."

"He ran away, you mean?" Phillips asks. "Why didn't you file a missing child report?"

"I'm pretty sure my stepdad knew where he was the whole time. See, up until October, Garen went to

boarding school in New York, and that's where he ran to once he got kicked out. He was staying with his friend James. And, I dunno, when I met James, he basically said that Bill had been in contact with them. So, I guess Garen's dad knew where he was the whole time," I say.

"I see. Now, when did Garen return to Lakewood?"

"The day our parents got married. April sixteenth," I reply.

Phillips cocks her head to the side, just slightly. "Did you get back together?"

"Uh, no. I have a boyfriend now. A different boyfriend. We've been together since like, the end of February."

"Did Garen know?"

"Kind of," I say. When Phillips doesn't reply, I sigh and say, "Garen and Ben – Ben McCutcheon, that's my boyfriend – were friends before Garen took off. When James showed up the day before the wedding, he called Garen and told him I was with Ben. I guess that's why Garen came back."

Reliving all of these events makes me feel like some creepy, incestuous zoo animal. I half-expect Officer DeStefano to whip out a camera and start snapping pictures of me, things she can tack up on the wall and label "this kid screws his stepsibling." Phillips asks me some more questions about my relationship with Garen, and my mom begins tapping her foot under the table. Finally, after ten more minutes, the conversation turns to tonight.

"Can you tell me what happened tonight, in your own words?"

I hunch down in my seat a little. "I got home around six, I guess. Tonight was my boyfriend's prom, so I went upstairs and got ready. When I came back downstairs, Garen was in the kitchen. We talked for a little while, and then he said he was hanging out with Dave that night."

"Dave...?"

"Dave uh, Walczyk, I think. W-A-L-C-Z-Y-K. He's Garen's boyfriend. They've been dating for like, two weeks now, but they went out for something like four months when Garen was a sophomore at Patton Military Academy. Dave was a senior then. He goes to Yale now."

"Do you know how their relationship ended then?" Phillips ask.

I sit up a little straighter and square my shoulders. "Dave was abusing Garen."

"Physically or verbally?"

"Both, I guess. But mostly physically. They were dating for about two months when Dave beat him up so badly he ended up in the hospital. They stayed together for a few months after that, but the abuse kept happening, so Garen broke up with him."

"Now, you weren't friends with Garen then, correct? This is all stuff that Garen has told you since you met in the fall?" Phillips asks.

White-hot anger flares inside me. "If you're trying to say I'm making it up, or that Garen was, you should call his old school. There are probably hospital records that confirm it."

"We'll be sure to look into the incident. Now, if Dave had abused your stepbrother, why would Garen want to get back together with him?"

I shrug and slump down once more. "I think that was *why* Garen wanted to get back with him. Garen has a tendency to be sort of self-destructive."

"Self-destructive," Phillips repeats.

Shit. I have a sudden mental image of a court room, with everyone taking a turn on the stand, and a jury hearing my words played back to them. *Garen has a tendency to be sort of self-destructive.* They'll give each other knowing looks, they'll get into the deliberation room and say, *Well, the kid wanted it to happen. He wanted to self-destruct, so it's not really murder, it's just S&M gone wrong. Not guilty, I say! Community service, at the most!*

"What I meant was that he's been really upset lately. He doesn't like the fact that I'm dating Ben, so I... guess he started dating Dave to make me jealous. I think that mattered to him more than being in a stable relationship did," I say slowly. There. That sounds good, right?

Phillips and Officer DeStefano exchange a significant look, but before I can ask about it, Phillips says, "Alright. So, Garen told you he was going to be spending time with Dave tonight. Was Dave at the house when you were there?"

"Yes. When I found out he was there, I went upstairs to talk to him. We... I hadn't met him before, really. But I just told him not to mess with Garen again. He said Garen's been pushing his buttons ever since they got back together. He admitted to shoving Garen while they were in a car together, so hard that Garen hit his face on the window and split his lip. And it's not just that. A week ago, I came home and Garen had a black eye," I say. Mom leans forward quickly.

"He told us he got into a fight."

"He did, just not the kind you assumed it was," I snap. "Look, I'm here to make a statement, so that's what I'm doing. My statement is that I am absolutely positive that Dave Walczyk is the one who beat up Garen, because I am absolutely positive that he's done it before. That's it."

"Not quite," Phillips says, her voice slightly sharper than before. "I need you to tell me how you found Garen this evening."

"I don't know when I got home, but Dave's car was gone. I went right upstairs and changed out of my suit, then I went to Garen's room. The door was unlocked, so I just went in. And he, uh..."

He was lying there, looking like a smashed-up toy. There was blood everywhere, all over his sheets, his clothes, his bruised skin. I said his name, I said it over and over, and he still didn't – or couldn't – open his eyes.

"He what?" Phillips prompts, and I jump.

"Sorry. He um, his body was all... he'd been beaten up. Badly. He was bleeding a lot, and it looked like he had some broken bones, maybe. He was unconscious, but breathing. I called the ambulance. I guess that's it."

Even once my statement is finished, I am still stuck at the station for at least another half hour before I'm

allowed to leave. Mom says nothing on the way outside, though her face is tense with worry. I slip into the front seat of her car, and pull out my phone, tapping out a quick text message to Ben. *I know you're still with Alex. Call me in the morning. I need you.* His reply comes a few moments later. *Alex's sobering up by now, I just set him up in bed so he can sleep it off. I'm leaving now anyway. Want me to meet you?* It takes me several minutes to convince myself to send the text message, but as we pull into the hospital parking lot, I finally type out, *Meet me at Lakewood General Hospital. I think Garen might be about to die.*

Once the message has sent, I power down my phone and shove it back into my pocket. I wordlessly follow Mom into the building, through a maze of hallways she seems all too sure of. She must've called the hospital or Bill on her way to the police station, found out where they were keeping Garen. Sure enough, at the end of her little trail, Bill and Bree are both in the waiting room. Bree is sitting in one of the rickety chairs, with her legs drawn up to her chest; Bill is pacing in front of the double-doors marked 'intensive care unit' in large red letters.

"Bill," Mom says softly, "is he... how is everything—"

"We're waiting," Bill says flatly. "We've been here almost two hours, and they haven't told us anything yet. They said that when he was brought in, he was alive, but barely. They don't... he might not make it. That's all they seemed able to tell us. He appears to have a lot of internal injuries, and he might not make it through the night."

My sister's shoulders begin to twitch, and I perch on the arm of her chair so that I can sling an arm around her. There are tears streaming down her cheeks, but I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.

"Have you called Marian?" Mom asks.

Bill nods. "She's driving in from the City now. She'll be here as soon as she can. I promised I'd call her if anything—"

The ICU doors swing open, and Bill freeze mid-step, his eyes latched onto the man approaching us. "Bill Anderson?" A brief nod. "I'm Dr. Matthew Clarke, I've just finished working on your son. The good news is that Garen is alive, and we've been able to stabilize him fairly well."

I can't help but slip right off the arm of Bree's chair, down onto the floor, and bury my face in my hands. So much for not crying.

"His injuries, however, are numerous and severe. He is currently unconscious, and he may have a concussion. We're going to run some tests, some scans, but we should know more soon. I have every reason to believe he will make a full mental recovery, but when he first wakes up, he may experience some short term memory loss, frequent headaches, that sort of thing. There was also some minor internal bleeding, but fortunately, we've been able to stop it. One of the things that I believe will cause you the most concern is his bones."

"What happened to his bones?" Bree interrupts fretfully.

"Two of his ribs have been fractured, the tibia in his right leg is broken, and the index, middle, and ring fingers on his right hand are all broken. I don't *believe* his nose is broken, but because of the swelling and bruising all over his face right now, it's difficult to tell," Dr. Clarke says.

"Will he make a complete recovery?" Mom asks.

Dr. Clarke nods. "I believe so, yes. All of the breaks are clean, and Garen seems to be in extremely good

health, which leads me to believe that he'll heal quite well. However, there may be some lasting effects. There are a few cuts that seem particularly deep, so he may end up having some facial scarring, particularly on his left side."

It doesn't matter. I won't care if he comes out of this whole mess looking like fucking Frankenstein's monster. At least he'll be alive. I make my way carefully to my feet. "Can we see him?"

"I think it would be more than alright for your parents to see him, but I would caution very strongly against you or your sister going in anytime soon. It can be very upsetting to see someone you love in this condition," Clarke says, but I am already following Bill towards the double doors. He doesn't make any move to stop me; he may not even realize I'm standing behind him.

Garen's room is the first door on the left, just like it is back at the house. Bill pushes open the door and strides across the room. A chair has been positioned carefully at the side of the bed, and my stepfather sinks into it, his eyes blank as he stares at the beaten, broken body stretched out on the white cotton sheets. I linger in the doorway, first taking in all of the machines surrounding the bed. Their beeps spell out a soft little melody, which almost makes me want to laugh. Of course Garen would have music, even now.

Garen himself is still almost completely unrecognizable. Only a few square inches of his skin are still pale white, and the rest is just muddled shades of purple and red. There seem to be bandages on half of his body, and tubes and needles everywhere else. Fuck, it hurts even to look at him. I shut the door behind myself and lean back against it, sinking slowly to the floor until Garen's body is out of my line of sight.

Everything that has happened tonight has been all my fault.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

When I wake up early Saturday morning, my head is resting on Ben's lap. He is slouched down in one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs, still asleep, his head tipped back. I shift away from him as quietly as I can, and make my way across the room to Bree, who is sitting with a paper cup of hot chocolate and a worn magazine from one of the tables.

"Hey," I say, my voice more hoarse than I'd expected. "How is he?"

Bree flips the magazine shut. "Still unconscious, but they say he's stable now. And the doctors have splinted his fingers, wrapped his chest, put his leg in a cast, everything. Now we just have to wait for him to wake up."

"But he will, right? He'll wake up?" I ask. Slowly, she nods.

"I think so, yeah. Mom and Bill are in his room, if you want to talk to them," she says.

I shake my head and back away. "No, I have some calls I need to make. If Ben wakes up, tell him I went outside, alright?"

I stop by the hot chocolate machine and grab a tiny cup of it on my way outside. There's a worn mahogany bench outside the building, and I drop down onto it, tugging out both of the cell phones in my pocket. First, I turn on my own and send a mass text message to everyone I think will care. Alex, Jeremy, Mason, Corey. *Garen's in the hospital. He was attacked. Broken bones, still unconscious, but he's alive. Will call later with the details. Thought you should know.* They'll all reply as soon as they read the message, asking who did it, how badly he's hurt, when they can see him. I can't handle that bullshit right now, so I power off my phone and put it away once more.

Taking a deep breath, I click the center button to light up the screen of Garen's Blackberry. There's one new text from James, a brief line. *Seriously, G, call me.* I press the send button and raise the phone to my ear. It only rings for a second before he picks up.

"Mornin'," says the sleepy Georgia drawl on the other end. "You're up earlier than usual. And now, thanks to your dumb, hot ass, so am I. What happened last night? I texted you about ten times, and you—"

"James, this is Travis," I interrupt. A brief pause.

"Travis? Why are you calling me from Garen's phone?"

"I think you should pack a bag and get on a train to Lakewood. Garen's in the hospital," I say. "He was beaten up last night. He's got some broken bones, and he's still unconscious right now, but the doctor tells us he's going to be fine. But I think you should come see him. You can stay with us."

"H-How? Who did this?" James demands.

"The police are looking into it. But... I was the last person who saw him before he got beat up. He was with his boyfriend."

"I keep hearing about this boyfriend!" James practically snarls. In the background, I can hear the chatter of what seems to be fingers on a keyboard. "Who the fuck is he? G said you were yelling at him yesterday. *Why?* Garen doesn't *doboyfriends*, he's only ever dated two guys, he wouldn't—"

"Dave," I say quietly. "He got back together with Dave."

The silence on the other end is enough to make me almost physically ill. Eventually, however, the clacking of hands on keys resumes. "There's a train out of Grand Central at seven o'clock, and I fully intend to be on it. Google's telling me there's only one hospital in Lakewood, so I assume he's at Lakewood General, which I have the address to now. I'll take a cab from New Haven. If there's some kind of list I need to be on in order to see him, get me on it. Tell them I'm a cousin or something. I don't care. Just make it happen, alright?"

"Okay," I say, but the phone has already gone dead.

When I return to the waiting room, Bree is sitting between Bill and Mom. None of them notice me entering, and Ben is still asleep, so I slip through the double doors and into Garen's room. I have already shut the door behind myself before I realize there's already someone sitting next to his bed.

"Sorry. I didn't realize someone was in here," I say quickly. The woman in the chair turns her pale face sharply towards me, her dark green eyes flitting up and down over me, almost as if she's sizing me up.

"It's alright," she says finally. "Have a seat."

I don't want to, but the way she says it doesn't seem to give me much of a choice, so I sink down onto the chair on the opposite side of the bed. Garen's smashed-up face is like a magnet, drawing my eyes towards him; he still looks almost dead. I reach for his hand, but find that his fingers are all in splints. My own hand falls limply onto the bed between us.

"So," says the woman after a too-long pause, "you must be Travis."

Is there anyone in the world who doesn't know that I used to fuck my stepbrother? It's seriously starting to seem like there was a nationwide bulletin or something. Biting back this retort, I turn my attention back to the woman. Her dark brown hair is immaculately styled into thick curls that end just past her shoulders, and she is wearing a tailored black suit, though the jacket is thrown across the foot of the bed. Something about her is extremely familiar, but I am positive I've never spoken to her before in my life.

"Yes," I say as politely as I can manage. "Who are you?"

A wry smile twists across her lips. "I suppose we can give up the pretense of formality, and you can just call me Marian. After all, I'm just a few years and a constitutional amendment away from being your mother-in-law, the way my son tells it."

Oh holy shit.

"You're uh... you're Garen's mom?" I say hoarsely. She nods once.

"That I am. And I believe this is yours." I watch as she digs into the pocket of her jacket and pulls out a small silver object, which I barely catch as she tosses it to me. It's my class ring, split right down one of the sides, as if it was snipped off with a pair of bolt-cutters. On one side of the stone in the middle, the letters LHS glint up at me. I turn the ring slightly and blink down at my own initials, TDM.

"It's broken," I say.

"They needed to cut it off his hand so that they could splint his fingers," Marian says calmly. "I assumed those were your initials. Granted, I was only certain about the T and the M, but I couldn't think of anyone else. May I ask why Garen was wearing your ring?"

"I gave it to him... I don't really remember when. Sometime in November, I guess. Back when uh... before he left." She doesn't say anything, so I find myself sighing and leaning forward. "Look, Ms. Weisman—"

"Marian."

"Marian. Look. Can you just tell me how much Garen told you about what happened between me and him? Because I can't really say anything, if you don't already know," I say.

She reclines in her seat, her elbows resting on the arms of her chair and her fingers steepled together. "After that moron of an ex-husband of mine kicked him out, Garen called me. He confessed that he had been secretly dating William's fiancée's son for several months, and that everyone had just found out about it. I told him to drive to New York City, where I live. He did so, and he stayed in my apartment overnight."

"I thought he went right back to Patton," I say. Marian shakes her head.

"He told me the next day that he wanted to go back to Patton so that he could spend time with James, and I agreed. While he was with me, he told me quite a bit about you, actually."

"Like what?" I ask warily.

"He said that you either didn't realize you were gay or weren't out of the closet when he met you. Halfway through November, the two of you began dating. Just before William and your mother announced their engagement, unless I'm much mistaken. He also told me that he ended things with you when William kicked him out of the house. But that wasn't what really troubled me."

I frown. What the hell kind of person would find something more troubling than the idea of her son boning a stepsibling? "What do you mean?"

"My son is in love with you, Travis McCall, and he seems to be quite close to losing his mind, for not being with you. Naturally, this makes me want to murder you with my bare hands. Last time we spoke, Garen told me that you were seeing someone new, one of his friends from this shitthole town. Someone named Ben, who I guess is the boy in the waiting room. Does this Ben kid make you happier than my son did?"

I clear my throat and try to answer honestly, "He makes me happy in a different way. For different reasons."

"Travis, dear? I'm a lawyer. Please don't try to bullshit your way through a conversation, because I can promise you that I'm far better at it than you are," she says. When I open my mouth to speak, she cuts me off. "I don't doubt that you care about Ben. I don't doubt that he makes you happy. But there are some things I really have to wonder about. For instance, if you fell apart the same way Garen did, once things ended between you two. And if losing Ben would hurt you as much as losing Garen did."

"I *did* fall apart. That's part of why I'm not going to get back together with Garen. Because I can't be with someone who would ever want to hurt me like that. But really, I don't get it," I say. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that you think I should dump my boyfriend for your kid, even though he's my stepbrother?"

Marian begins to inspect her nails. "William's pretty much a moron, but he already chose his new wife over his son once. I don't think he'll make the same mistake twice. Besides, from what Garen tells me, your mother has the tendency to be quite the little troll. No offense, of course."

"None taken. It's pretty much true."

"Mm. What I'm trying to say is, just because your mother is married to his father, doesn't mean things will always be that way. You might not be stepbrothers forever. Regardless, I think you might have been good for Garen. For the first time in years, I wasn't getting weekly phone calls about booze, drugs, fighting, sex, and the possibility of being expelled. And at the very least, you're better for him than whoever did this to him now."

I shrug. "I get it. Really, I do. But I have a boyfriend, and despite what you may think, I actually do want to be with him."

Marian shrugs back. "It's your choice, Travis. I just wanted to make sure you know that I... well, I'm not quite sure I approve, *per se*. But if, at some point, you did decide you wanted to be with my son again, I would be hard-pressed to come up with a reason why it would be a bad idea." She gives another sardonic smile, suddenly looking very much like her son. "Besides, anything that makes William's life harder is bound to make *me* happy." I barely have time to return her smile before she clears her throat, suddenly cold. "Now. Tell me how he got this way."

I launch into the story once more, telling her everything I know about Dave, what happened at Patton, how Garen changed after he came back to Lakewood, the things I said tonight, how I found Garen. Marian's eyes darken more with every word I say. By the time I get to the part about being interrogated by the police, she is trembling slightly.

"Yes, one of the women from the police department came by earlier. Detective Phillips, I think she said her name was. She told me they were working on finding Dave, that he was one of their primary suspects," she says.

I snort. "Primary suspects? He's the *only* suspect."

"Actually, Detective Phillips warned me that they were looking into someone else. Someone who they believe is as likely a suspect as Dave," she replied.

"Who?" I demand. She simply looks at me, and after a moment, my skin seems to ice over. "Me? They think I did this to Garen?"

"Phillips told me that, given your past relationship with Garen, and the current, tumultuous state of things, you were almost as much of a candidate as Dave is. You don't look like you've been in a fight, and you have an alibi, but they plan to question you some more. I've also been told that you have a history of mental problems. You're currently on medication, you've been in therapy for over a year."

"My doctor took me off medication a while ago," I hastily correct.

"I also hear that you were briefly institutionalized. Thirty days in a psychiatric hospital."

I stare at her, stunned. How does she know about that? Of all the skeletons I've hidden in my closet over the years, this is the biggest. This is the one thing that is never spoken of, never mentioned, not even in the privacy of our own home. No one knows about that, except for my parents, my sister, and Corey, who

really only found out because he demanded to know why I missed almost a month of school. My grandparents have no idea, my cousins have no idea, my aunts, uncles, everybody. Ben still doesn't know about that, even after the hours we've spent together, telling each other every single dirty secret. Fuck, I never even told *Garen*. How can his mom know about it?

"It's not what you think," I say slowly. "It wasn't because I was crazy. Not really, alright? My mom... she just didn't know how to react after I, you know. After I tried to kill myself. She was still having a hard time with things after the divorce, and I guess I was just... another unnecessary burden. She couldn't afford to be watching over me all the time, making sure I was doing okay, so she put me in a hospital for most of November, and a little of December. They kept everyone there under surveillance, had us go through a lot of really intensive therapy, all that bullshit you'd expect. After thirty days, she was, I don't know, more *prepared* to deal with me, so she pulled me out of it and had me start weekly therapy sessions with Dr. Baker, the psychiatrist that the hospital recommended for me. Look, Marian, I was suicidal, not homicidal. I don't hurt people. Especially people I care about."

In a way, it's almost cathartic, to finally talk about this, after all this time. Mostly, though, it's just fucking terrifying. Marian hasn't blinked once the entire time I've spoken. Finally, she reaches out and takes Garen's limp hand, turning his arm gently until his wrist is bared.

"I noticed this earlier," she says, running a fingertip over the 'T' tattooed across his wrist. "I guess it's fairly new. Since he met you, at any rate. He certainly never told me he was getting it, probably because he knew I wouldn't have allowed it. I despise tattoos. I'm not quite sure how much Garen's told you about our family, but my father was imprisoned in Dachau, during the Second World War. He didn't have an ID number tattooed on him – only the prisoners from Auschwitz did – but even now, I can't see any tattoo without thinking about the camps, and what my father must have been through. Garen was never that fond of tattoos either, for various reasons. I think in a way, it was out of respect for his grandfather, but for the most part, he just used to say that he couldn't imagine ever giving a shit about something long enough for it to make sense to get it permanently inked into his skin. Music, maybe. He said that if he ever got a tattoo, it would have to do with music, because that's all he cared about. But here he is. 'T.' Doesn't exactly take a genius to figure out that it's for you."

"I'm sorry," I think I say, but my mind is racing too much to be sure. I should know these things, Garen and I should've talked about these things. God, why didn't we ever have a conversation about anything *important* when we had the chance?

"Don't be. My point is, Travis, that I believe my son cared about you more than anything. More than the proclamations he used to make about what he'd never do. More than music, I suppose. I don't think he would have gotten this done if he didn't feel that way. And though my son has his flaws, he has a good heart, and a good mind, and I am sure he would only ever fall in love with someone who deserved him. I choose to believe you are too good of a man to ever hurt my child this way," she says.

Wordlessly, I push up my left sleeve and extend my arm so that she can see the small black 'G' tattooed onto my own wrist. She blinks at it for a moment, but I still don't speak. The tattoo says so much more than I ever could. Just then, I hear muffled shouting from the waiting room. Marian seems completely unwilling to leave Garen's side, so I trudge back out into the waiting room to see what's happening.

James Goldwyn is standing in the middle of the room, looking prepared to bring down unholy hellfire on anyone who plans to prevent him from seeing Garen. This, of course, includes my mom.

"Only family members are allowed in at this time," she says, stone-faced.

James snorts. "I'm a hell of a lot closer to being family than you are."

I duck back around my mom. As the door swings shut behind me, I hear James mutter something, to which my mom retorts, "Travis is Garen's brother."

"Open your eyes, you stupid cow. Travis is Garen's *lover*. *I'm* Garen's brother."

I open Garen's door again, just wide enough to poke my head inside. Marian is exactly as I left her, staring wide-eyed at Garen's body. I clear my throat. "James just got here, and my mom refuses to let him in to see Garen. Could you—"

"Oh, Jesus Christ," she mutters, storming from the room on the loudest pair of heels I've ever heard. I trail after her, arriving in time to hear her say, "Jamie, get your scrawny ass into that room right now."

James bolts for the door, pausing in front of me only to say, "Thank you for calling me," and kiss me, catching half my mouth.

Mom is practically shaking with fury. "You have no right to—"

"Shut up, Evelyn, I've got every right. He's my son, not yours, and James has been his best friend for years. William would've let him in, too."

"I am part of Garen's family, whether you like it or not," Mom snaps.

"Is that what you tell yourself?" Marian sneers. "You hate my son. Everyone can see that. I'm not sure why, honestly. Maybe you hate seeing a reminder that William had a life long before you, and he'll have one long after he's wised up and divorced you. Maybe it bothers you that Garen finally got your *obviously, flamingly gay son* to come out of the closet. Or maybe you're just a control freak who can't handle the idea of something beyond her circle of influence. I don't know what it is, Ev, and I don't exactly care. Whatever it is, I'm sick of it. So, from now on, leave all Garen-related decisions to me or William. Clear?"

This is one of the best moments of my life. Garen's mom is my hero. She turns on her heel and heads for the hospital cafeteria, muttering something about needing a cup of coffee. Rather than face the wrath of my mom, I dart back into Garen's room. James is slumped in Marian's vacated chair, his face blank and paler than I've ever seen it.

"He's going to be okay," I say quietly, and James jumps.

"Of course. I just... didn't expect him to look this bad. This is even worse than he looked last time this happened," he says. I fill him in on Garen's assorted injuries, answer all the questions I can. Eventually, there is nothing else we can do but lapse into silence. We sit there for the better part of an hour, but that's all I can take; James keeps dozing and forcing himself awake every few seconds. He clearly didn't sleep on the train ride down, and this is just getting ridiculous.

"Do you want to go back to my house and sleep? I can give you my house key." God, I hope they took the blood-soaked sheets as evidence.

James shakes his head. "I called a hotel nearby and made a reservation. Someplace called the Pettigrew? I've already stopped by and dropped off my duffel."

"You should go sleep. I can call you if... he wakes up," I say. It's so hard to stop myself from imagining the other end of the spectrum, having to call and tell him that Garen is dead. It takes several more minutes of coaxing, but eventually, I get him to agree. He pauses to text his room number to Garen's

phone, still in my pocket, just in case anyone needs him.

More people start to come after that, meaning I guess Mom has relaxed her “only family members allowed” rule. When Ben wakes up, he comes to sit with me for a while, but half an hour later, he reluctantly admits that he has to leave for work. I hate to see him go; being without him makes me feel so much more alone. After he disappears, Alex stops by for an update. I explain everything to him, including the conversation with Garen’s mom.

“It’s a lot to think about,” he says, once I’ve finished.

“Yeah,” I agree, though I can’t help but think that part of him must expect something else from me. What, though? ‘She’s absolutely right, of course I should be with Garen, how ‘bout you take Ben off my hands’? Alex seems prepared to stick around for a while, but I find myself just... wanting to be alone with Garen again. I glance around the room, trying to find something I can say that might persuade him to leave. Finally, I realize that a jacket is draped across the back of the chair he’s sitting in. “Could you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” he says quickly, and I feel a little guilty for wanting him to be gone. Not guilty enough to stop wanting it, though.

“James left his jacket here when he stopped by earlier. Could you bring it to him? He’s staying at the Pettigrew Hotel, room six-thirteen,” I say.

“Of course,” Alex says, standing and flinging the jacket over his shoulder. “Listen... I know things have been weird between you and I lately. Especially considering how I acted at prom. So... I just wanted to say I’m sorry. And I’m trying.”

“Trying?” I echo.

He looks like he’s going to be sick. “I’m trying to back off him.”

It’s the closest I’m every going to get to a confession of his feelings for my boyfriend, and it’s more than I want. But I smile and say blandly, “I know. It’s cool, man. Don’t worry about it.”

Still, I’m glad when he leaves. Marian returns for another hour or two after that, but she ends up leaving for the main lobby around noon, telling me that she needs to make some calls to relatives. ‘Just in case’ is how she says it. I try not to let myself hear her.

At one o’clock, I retreat to the lobby for a cup of hot chocolate, and return fifteen minutes later to discover there’s been no change.

At two o’clock, there’s still no change.

At three o’clock, there’s still no change.

At four o’clock, there’s still no change.

At four sixteen exactly, Garen makes a small noise, halfway between a groan and a gasp. I lurch forward in my seat and say, “Garen?”

“Shut up,” he croaks. “Where am I?”

I want to grab him, shake him by the shoulders, squeeze him until he cracks another few ribs. I settle for gently placing my hand over his unbandaged fingers. "The hospital. Lakewood Gen."

"Fuuuuuuck," he says, drawing out the word into half a dozen syllables. "Did I get hit by a fucking car? I feel like *shit*."

"Actually, Dave attacked you and almost beat you to death," I say flatly.

Garen might blink at me; it's hard to tell through the bruises. "Oh. Right. That."

"What *happened*?" I demand. "You were fine when I left, and then when I got home... I thought you were dead."

"Pretty short story. You left, I went upstairs. Dave and I argued. It became a fistfight. I lost. I guess I passed out, after? I don't know. The end." He shifts, then winces. "Has he come to see me?"

Unbelievable. Unfuckingbelievable. I clear my throat. "If he had, I would've killed him. If I ever see him again, I will kill him. If you keep dating him, I will kill him. If you don't make a complete recovery within two months, I will kill him. Are we clear?"

He seems to want to fight me on that, if only out of pain-in-the-ass instinct, but his injuries must hurt more than he had expected they would. "Crystal. He was beginning to bore me, anyway," he says with a shrug that seems to cause him agony. "Jesus. He really bruised me, didn't he?"

"More like wrecked you. Three broken fingers, two fractured ribs, broken tibia. The doctor told us you have to stay in a wheelchair for a month, until your ribs heal. After that, you can switch to crutches for the remaining few weeks it'll leg for your leg to be fine. He also says you might need to go to physical therapy to retrain your fingers, if you ever want to play guitar like you used to."

Garen is quiet for several minutes. I begin to wonder if he has passed out again, but just when I consider going for help, he raises his unbroken hand and drags his fingers through his hair. That's all he seems able to do until finally, he says in a hoarse voice, "I was afraid it was going to be like that. I mean, afraid. When... when he had me on the floor? He'd already gotten dressed by then, and I dunno, I guess it's a Patton boy thing. We all keep wearing our combat boots, even when we stop going there. You have no idea how much it hurts to get kicked in the chest by somebody wearing combat boots. I swear, Travis, I could *feel* the crunch of my ribs breaking. It was excruciating. I think I'm only conscious now because this handy IV seems to be loading me up with painkillers. A-And then, my leg? That was uh... that was when I was on the ground, too. I collapsed, I just couldn't stand anymore, not with how much he was punching me. I hit the ground near my desk... with my legs still out. When he kicked my shin, my leg got caught on desk, but he just *snapped* it. The way a fucking ninja snaps a board that's braced on two cinderblocks, right through the middle. I was almost unconscious by the time he stomped on my hand, you know. That's why broke my fingers, I guess. And really? I'm not lying to you when I say that I didn't care. The ribs, the leg, the fucking trainwreck I know my face must be. None of that fazed me. But when he broke my fingers... all I could think was, 'There goes my guitar. There goes the music. There goes the only thing that's keeping me alive anymore.' So, here I am. And now I have nothing."

"You'll be able to play again, Garen," I say. My voice sounds thicker than usual, and I wonder vaguely if I'm crying. Not like it matters, considering he is, too. "I promise everything will be fine. Just trust me on that."

He nods dazedly, still not looking at me. "Okay."

I stand up. "I'm going to go find a doctor, let him know you're awake. I guess I'll round up everybody. Bree and Bill are both here, obviously. Your mom's down in the lobby. And James is at his hotel, but he made me promise to call if your condition changed."

"Wait!" Garen calls when I'm halfway to the door.

I turn back to look at him. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," he whispers. "Everything is wrong, Travis, so please just... sit with me. Just for a little while. I promise you can go get everyone soon, but for now, just please stay here with me. Don't leave me again."

Everything inside of me is battling for what to say. He needs a doctor. He needs his parents. He needs his best friend. But still, I find myself sinking down onto the chair next to him and taking his hand. "Of course. I'll stay here for as long as you need me."

Chapter Forty

When Garen is finally released from the hospital on Wednesday, everything is terribly, drastically different. While Marian and James go to pick him up, Bill and I tear the plastic off the new mattress and set it up in the den. The old mattress is lying somewhere in the town dump; bloodstains are hard to get out, and anyway, it's not like he can get upstairs in his wheelchair. Bill drags in a nightstand, too, and I transfer all of Garen's clothes from his dresser upstairs to a wooden chest in the corner of the den. The house was built to include a rarely used half-bathroom just off the kitchen, but the fact that the only two showers are both upstairs is proving to be a problem. I have no idea how that's going to work out; Garen has already requested that his "ex-boyfriend be left out of *any* plans that have to do with bathrooms." Instead, I have been put on food detail.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, the second Garen's new electric wheelchair clears the front door. "I could get you something to eat."

"I just want coffee. And I can get it myself, thanks," he replies, rolling right past me. Most of the swelling in his face is gone, but he still has two black eyes, a gash across his left cheekbone, and a split lip.

"Make sure it's decaf," Bill calls after him. "The doctor recommended avoiding caffeine while your body gets used to being on painkillers."

"Alright, I'll find something else to drink," Garen says. That is too agreeable to be a good thing. Sure enough, I follow him into the kitchen and find him reaching for one of the beers in the refrigerator door. I knock his hand back and shut the door with my hip.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's *exactly* what he had in mind. Go over to the table. I'm going to make you a sandwich," I say.

Even as he does what I say, Garen snorts. "What are you, my wife? I'm sure Big Ben is thrilled that you're being forced to be my manservant."

"Ben wants you to get better just as much as everyone else does," I say, grabbing the peanut butter from the cupboard. The house phone rings once, but someone else apparently gets it. "And James calls him that, too. 'Big Ben.' Why?"

As if summoned by his own desire to hear people talking about him, James saunters into the room. "'Big Ben' like the clocktower. It's ironic, you see, because he's a midget."

"He's only four inches shorter than me, and that's not what I meant. I get the irony. I get why you call him that. But I don't get why Garen does." I turn to address Garen once more. "Why do you act like he wasn't your friend first, long before I ever laid a hand on either of you?"

Garen shrugs. "We all like to pretend. I pretend Ben was never my friend. Ben pretends he hasn't had a creepy, obsessive crush on you for years. You pretend you don't still kind of want to suck my dick. Alex pretends he's a straight guy who's not embarrassingly in love with Ben. We all tell the lies that help us sleep at night."

"Wait, Alex is in love with Ben?" James says, blinking at us both. When we nod, he gives a small laugh. "Oh, dear. That's awkward."

I want to ask what he means, but at that moment, Bill enters and takes a seat at the table, across

from Garen. "Detective Phillips just called. She had some news about your case."

"Don't call it that," Garen mutters. "Don't call it my case, like I went and started all this."

Bill ignores him. "She told me that they questioned Dave Walczyk. He brought in a lawyer, of course, and denied doing anything—"

"Of course," James echoes under his breath.

"—but his alibi wasn't strong. He also had clearly been in a fight. His knuckles were bruised and scratched, he had some blood on his shoes. Your blood. He's been arrested on charges of assault and battery."

For a while, all Garen does is blink. I wonder if it hurts him; the skin around his eyes is still so bruised, and every time he shifts even a little, he seems to wince. But right now, he is stone-still. After almost too long, he shakes his head. At first, I think he's trying to clear his mind, but then I realize that he's trying to say no. Finally, he says, "Get him released. I don't want to press any charges."

"Please tell me you're joking," James says quietly.

Bill is anything but quiet. "For fuck's sake, Garen! You're lucky I haven't had him *shot* for doing this to you."

"If you change your mind about that, just ask James," Garen says. "Wouldn't be the first time he shot a guy for messing with me."

"Garen, shut up," James says sharply, but the damage is done. My mom is standing in the kitchen doorway, looking absolutely terrified. She and Garen make one fleeting moment of eye contact before he rolls himself back out of the kitchen. I turn back to the counter, staring at the half-made peanut butter sandwich. When I hear Mom and Bill both wander back out, I fling both halves of the sandwich into the trash can.

"Sophomore year," James murmurs, and I turn to face him. He at least has the decency to look a little ashamed. "Garen used to... look, he and I were part of a group of about six guys. Kevin, Andrew, Colin, sometimes Glen. Now, we all used to do some bad things, but Garen was the worst of us. He had the most volatile hook-ups, he got in trouble the most, and he definitely was the biggest user. Particularly when it came to coke. We all tried it, but Garen was the one who developed a real taste for it, so he was the one who had the connections. There was this kid, Seth. Seth Hayden."

I have a sudden flash of Garen standing in front of me in the school hallway, holding a cell phone with pictures on it of us kissing. *With the angle and the shitty light quality, I was able to convince some people that it's not you, it's a guy named Seth Hayden who I went to boarding school with.*

I lean back against the counter and cross my arms. "Yeah. Garen mentioned him once."

"Well, Seth was – and still is – a fucking insect, really. A truly disgusting individual. He was Garen's dealer. Still is, I guess, on bad days. He's the one who sent along the coke Garen was snorting at that party, right after he came back," James says.

"Yes, drug dealers suck, I get it," I interrupt. Doesn't he realize that I try to block out as much of that night as possible?

"The point is, Seth would sometimes fuck Garen over. One time, Garen went to him to buy some weed, but Seth only had joints that were laced with PCP. He neglected to tell Garen this, just sold it to him anyway, and fuck, Garen freaked out *hard*. I used to tell Garen he couldn't buy from Seth, because Seth was a shithead who only cared about making a few dollars, but as you know, Garen has that delightful tendency to be reckless. Anyway... during sophomore year, Seth sold Garen some cocaine that was cut with Ritalin. Most people call that 'shit coke,' because it gives you a speedy little high, but it's cheap. Garen shared some of it with Dave—"

"Fuck!" I burst out. "Why does every shitty story involve Dave?"

"Listen to me. I'm sure Garen told you about The Argument." I can actually hear him emphasizing it with capital letters. "The first time he and Dave ever got into a real fight. The one that put him in the hospital. You know, the *first* time this happened."

"He told me about it. He didn't tell me it was about drugs, though," I say, stunned.

James shrugs. "Apparently, Dave didn't like cheap highs. He beat the shit out of Garen for giving him shitty drugs, and, well... Seth was in our squad. That's how he and Garen met, actually. We had all of our Military Leadership Education classes together. Including, of course, marksmanship."

"Oh my god."

"The day after it happened, when Garen was still in the hospital, I went to class and made sure I was standing next to Seth. While loading my rifle, I pretended that it had jammed, acted like I was trying to fix it, pointed it at Seth's leg, and shot him. I claimed it was an accident, and all the teachers and faculty believed me. There was a disciplinary hearing, but it was determined that I hadn't been in a proper frame of mind to be operating a weapon, because I was too upset over my best friend being hospitalized. Seth told them it was an accident, too, because otherwise he would've had to confess that I was pissed that he sold my best friend bad drugs. But he knew it was on purpose. Everyone did."

"So, what? They just let you off with a warning?"

"Hardly. I was briefly suspended from classes, and had to do two hundred hours of community service. And I was banned from attending any classes that involved weapons for one full calendar year, which really meant I missed three semesters of M.L.E.P. classes. I spent my senior year taking more classes than anyone else, to make up for it. But it's been about two years now, and Seth Hayden still walks with a limp. And he stopped selling Garen bad coke. So, I suppose it's a win."

James seems willing to give me as much time as I need to process this, because he simply sits down at the kitchen table and waits. I sink onto the floor and stare at my hands.

Truth is, I would do the exact same thing to anyone who I thought was responsible for hurting Corey like that. Or Ben. If I had to see either of them lying in a hospital bed because of a few bad decisions, I'd be all too willing to hunt down the guy who helped him make those decisions. So, why haven't I done it for Garen? Why have I let this even become an issue of whether or not Dave will suffer any consequences?

"This is all my fault," I say softly.

Quietly, James slips from his chair onto the floor and crawls over to me, sitting cross-legged directly in front of me, like a schoolboy waiting for storytime. "If you hadn't confronted Dave, if you hadn't left... no, none of this would've happened. You probably did the worst thing you could've done. No one

should ever confront an abuser about the abuse, then leave him alone with the victim. It was stupid, and it was careless, but it's not entirely your fault. Garen... wanted this. He wanted to get hurt, I just don't think he bargained for getting hurt this badly."

I bury my face in my hands, determined not to cry. It takes several minutes to get myself under control, but James waits patiently for me to speak again. "I didn't mean just this one time. I meant it's my fault in a larger, much more cosmic sense. He's right. I should've just waited for him to come back. I—"

"No, shut up," James interrupts. "Look, I love Garen more than anything, but leaving like he did and then expecting you to be waiting when he finally got around to coming back... that was fucking selfish. Particularly since he only came back because he found out you were seeing Ben. If you had stayed single, he probably would've stayed away. Garen craves you in an almost inhuman sort of way, and yes, I want nothing more than for him to finally be happy, but I don't know that being with you will make him happy. I think... he might just need to self-destruct for a little while."

I scramble to my feet. "You keep saying that, James. You keep telling me how he's going to self-destruct, or have some mental breakdown, or just go batshit crazy. So, whatever, I guess this has happened before, I guess you're used to it, but I'm not. And I'm not going to sit around and watch him go *insane* for a while. I'm done with it. I'm done with him."

My attempt to make a dramatic exit is slightly ruined by the fact that I nearly crash into Garen on the way out. His wheelchair is parked right next to the door, and the panic in his eyes tells me that he was listening to every word. "Travis."

"No, Garen, shut up," I cut him off. "I'm serious. I have to focus on keeping myself sane. It's bad enough I have to worry about Ben all the time. I can't deal with you, too."

"I know," Garen says quickly. "I'm sorry. Really, I am. I'll stop doing all this shit. I'll go back to being normal, I promise."

The scary part is, he does it.

On Thursday night, I come home from work to hear voices coming from the den, Garen's new bedroom. I drop my backpack by the couch and pause, trying to make out what's being said.

"And this one's the middle C, right?"

"No, that's B. Shift over one."

"Right, right, got it. Why do you even still have such basic music?"

"I wrote it. Jane's taking lessons now, so I just made some really basic tunes for her to practice."

I push open the door without knocking. Both of the boys at the piano swivel around to look at me. Well, Ben turns his body; Garen rolls back so that he can turn the entire wheelchair around, and says, "Hey, Trav."

"Hey," I echo, taking a few steps forward so that I can brush my hand across Ben's shoulder. Garen doesn't even flinch.

"I was thinking about stuff last night, and realized I'll probably go insane if I have to go six weeks without playing any music. Since these stupid splints make it impossible for me to go the fingerings on a

guitar, I asked Ben if he'd try to teach me some one-handed piano."

Ben nods. "He's actually really good. You know, for a gimp."

"Shut up, McCutcheon, or I will use my one non-broken leg to kick your ass," Garen replies. He flexes his good hand and settles it on the piano keys to try playing the notes. I'm surprised how fast his fingers are able to move, actually. He seems to be a quick learner.

"I'm kind of starving right now, so I'm going to go make myself something to eat. Do either of you want anything?" I ask.

Ben stands. "Yeah, I'll come with you."

"I'm good," Garen says, shaking his head and repeating the same series of notes on the piano. He pauses and offers me a quick smile. "Thanks, though."

Seeing Garen be normal is almost more disturbing than seeing him be crazy. Over the next few days, he makes a genuine effort to be cheerful, or at least more cheerful than he's been before. More than once, I come home to find him in the living room with James and my sister, watching a movie, or in the den, practicing piano for another lesson with Ben. When Marian leaves for New York again, he swears to call her every night to let her know how he's doing, and actually keeps his promise. He even tries to ignore my mom, despite her constant snide remarks about what a pain in the ass it's been to make our house as handicap-accessible as possible.

Garen's discussion with Bill about dropping the charges against Dave is had in private, nearly a week after he gets home. Dave has been out on bail for several days now, but the question of resolution hasn't been addressed yet. After nearly two hours in the den, Garen and Bill emerge to announce their compromise; Bill will let Garen drop the assault and battery lawsuit, provided that Garen files for a restraining order against Dave.

Everything goes to hell, though, almost two weeks after Garen is released from the hospital. I have turned the kitchen table into my base camp for most of the week; it's senior exams week, and, since most of my classes are full of seniors, I'm forced to take mine, too. I make it through my first two days with no trouble, but Wednesday is Calculus. So, of course, I spend Tuesday night in the kitchen, with an entire year's worth of notes scattered across the surface.

Around eleven thirty, Garen rolls into the kitchen. "You should really go to bed."

"So should you," I reply. "Your pills seem to knock you out early these days. I can help you get into bed, if you need it."

"I can handle it. And I'm not tired, anyway. Figured I would come out here and write a little, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I say, swiping a pile of notes down the table so there's room for him to join me. He rolls up to the table and sets up a few blank sheets of paper and some pens. We work in silence for almost another hour, but by that point, my notes have become a blur in front of my eyes. I lean back in my chair and rub my palms against my face. "Fuck. I'm so tired, but I've got so much left to study."

"Want me to make you some coffee or something?" Garen asks. I nod, and he backs away from the table and towards the counter. He doesn't seem to have any trouble getting work done; his paper is covered in his scribbled, all-capitals writing, all under the title 'Dave.' Christ, why is he writing a song about that

asshole? When I'm sure he's busy measuring coffee grounds into the machine, I turn the page slightly towards me.

I knew it would end up something like this

I reached for your hand, and you gave me your fist

All your excuses are so hard to resist

I'm still looking for love where it doesn't exist

C: If you just wanna fight

Maybe you can spend the night

You're more coherent when you're screaming

I like you better when I'm bleeding

If you don't wanna say

Sorry, I'll still let you stay

And I promise that I'll ask for more

I like you better when I'm on the floor

All these nights later, my bruises still ache

It's reassuring to know that my bones can still break

Forgetting the pain was my biggest mistake

I'll deal with the scars, if they'll keep me awake

C: If you just wanna fight

Maybe you can spend the night

You're more coherent when you're screaming

I like you better when I'm bleeding

If you don't wanna say

Sorry, I'll still let you stay

And I promise that I'll ask for more

I like you better when I'm on the floor

Garen's hand comes down on the paper with enough force to make me jump. When I look over at him, the muscles in his jaw are tightened with barely concealed rage. "I really don't remember saying you could read that."

"Dave was telling me the truth, wasn't he?" I hiss. "You wanted him to hit you."

The responding laugh is hollow. "I thought Dad said you and Bree had both been given speeches about how abuse is never the victim's fault."

"I'm not saying it was your fault, or that what he did was right," I say, "but I think it's pretty clear that you knew what you were getting yourself into."

He sets the coffee mug down on the table. "It wasn't that I wanted him to hurt me, necessarily. I just wanted to feel something."

"And a broken leg is just as good as trying to be happy, right?"

"I can't be happy. Not without you. I've tried, I swear, but nothing works. Every time I think I'm starting to get better, that this hole in my chest is starting to close up a little, you bring Ben around, and I fall apart again. And you get, I know you do. You get that sometimes it's better to hurt than to be numb, or you wouldn't have done this." He grabs me by the wrist and pulls up my sleeve, running his palm over my scars.

I yank my arm away. "It's not the same."

"Yeah, it is. Travis, I miss you so fucking much. I know I swore I'd shut up, but I can't deal with it anymore, I can't keep waiting and hoping and being disappointed. So, I'm going to try, and ask you one last time."

"Garen, stop," I plead. This is it, this is the ultimatum I've been trying to avoid since he came back.

In a show of strength that shocks me, coming from someone as injured as he is, he grabs one of the legs of my chair and drags it – and me – as close to him as his wheelchair will allow. "Leave Ben. He'll hate you for a while, but he'll get over it, because he doesn't love you the way I love you. Hell, he could be with Alex, finally, they could be good for each other. And you and I... we were so amazing, Travis, just think about it. Remember the night before I left? You promised to be with me forever. And before that, you accepted this—" I almost choke when he digs into his pocket and pulls out the ring. *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*. He curls his hand around the back of my neck and draws me closer so that our foreheads are touching. "You need me, Trav, just like I need you. From the moment we met. From the first time we kissed, fuck, don't you remember? You didn't even realize it was me, but you still wanted me, because something inside of you, something right down in your soul told you that you had to be with me. You weren't even sure if you were gay or not, but you took a chance on being with me. The only guy I'd ever dated before that had beaten the shit out of me on a fairly regular basis, but I took a shot on you. Let's try again. I promise you, things will be different this time. I won't get mad at you for anything, or ask you to hide us from anyone. I won't let anyone else kiss me, and I'll stop using, and I-I'll go back to school, I'll get a job, I'll go wherever you want me to go for college, I'm *serious*. I will do anything to be with you, and I'll never leave again. Please. Just give me another chance. Just leave Ben."

For a few wild seconds, I want to say, *Okay*. I want to call up Ben right now and tell him that, no matter how amazing he is, no matter how fantastic of a boyfriend he is, no matter how much I love him, Garen still got there first. I want to bring Garen into the den, stay in bed with him for the rest of my life, tell him, *Alright, I believe you, I know things will be different this time*. I want to make things work with him. It

can be like he says it will be, all I have to do is say I'm in. All I have to do is nod once, and he'll know.

And then he kisses me, and I want to die. I can't go through this again. I can't kiss him back and know that it'll tear Ben apart when he finds out. I can't put up with seeing Ben kiss Alex again, or with being the one who destroys everything I have with Ben, who ruins something that's so, so good.

I plant my hands on the armrests of Garen's wheelchair and shove him backwards as hard as I can so that he goes rolling back towards the counter. "No. You say this is the last time you'll ask, so this is the last time I'll answer. I'm not leaving Ben. I want you to be happy, but that's never going to happen if you keep up these stupid delusions of yours. You and I are over. Do you understand me? Over. I really thought you were making an effort so that we could go back to being friends, but it's fucking pointless. You and I were never friends; we just fucked. Stop trying to use the whopping three months we spent together against me. Yeah, I said I'd marry you, but you said you'd never leave me. So, I guess we're both liars. You can throw that stupid fucking ring in the trash, for all I care. We are not together. Get that through your head."

"This can't be what you really want," Garen says, somewhat desperately.

"The only reason you're saying that is because it's not what *you* want. But you know what I want? I want to date a guy who doesn't leave me. I want to date a guy who doesn't do a fuck-ton of drugs, or get himself almost beaten to death just so he can *feel something*. I want to date a guy who actually listens to me when I speak."

"I listen to you," Garen says weakly. I stand so quickly that my chair topples over, and cross the kitchen to sandwich his barely-bruised face between my hands.

"Then listen to me right now. We. Are. Over," I say. He squeezes his eyes shut, like avoiding my eyes will make the words not true. But, as I stalk from the kitchen and up into my bedroom, those words feel true for the first time in months.

Chapter Forty-One

On Saturday, Ben graduates from LHS.

On Sunday, James takes the train back to New York for his own graduation.

And on Monday, Garen loses his fucking mind.

The last bell of my junior year rings at two o'clock, and I immediately head to my locker with a trash bag. All of my textbooks have been returned; all of my papers have been turned in; everything left is trash. I dump all the paper scraps, torn book covers, and pen caps into the bag. My pictures are taken down with more care; the half-dozen shots of Ben and I – sitting together during dinner at prom, at Alex's various parties, in his room, cooking with his little sisters – are at eye-level or higher. Below that, my entire first semester is taped up. Faye and I on a class trip. Miles and I using the jelly from a donut to draw dicks on the pastry case window at the Daily Grind for the next crew to clean up. Corey and I flipping off the camera, exhausted and sweat-soaked after a track meet.

At the very bottom, below my class schedule, below a magnetic pencil cup, below a to-do whiteboard, is a shot Garen had slapped there in December. "Come on," he had said at the time. "I've got some of you in *my* locker." I had asked him to show me, but he had refused. Now, I drop to my knees and pluck the picture off the door. In it, Garen is propped up in my bed, shirtless, with his guitar in his hands and a lazy, sexy grin on his face.

I tuck it into my backpack with the others and stand, tossing the trash into a bin at the end of the hall. Halfway to the front door, I freeze. The senior hallway is directly to my right, empty now that everyone has graduated. A sudden thought strikes me, and before I can think better of it, I am jogging off down the hall. Three twenty-four... three twenty-five... three twenty-six... Three twenty-seven. It takes me a moment to remember the combination, but eventually, I dial it in. Six, twenty-five, eleven. The door pops open, and my breath catches in my throat.

I hadn't expected it to be still full. I had assumed that sometime in mid-March, when the letter came saying that Garen had missed thirty-five days of school in a row and was therefore expelled, someone would have dumped it all. But no, it's all still here. His textbooks – I'll have to turn those in at the office. And his notebooks – those can be brought home. It's the other things that shake me. A long, dark green scarf draped over one of the hooks, a stack of CDs on the top shelf, a black tote bag full of sheet music, guitar books, spare picks and strings. And the photographs.

Some of them are of bands – Snow Patrol, Death Cab for Cutie, Bright Eyes, Brand New – and others are people I don't recognize. Some of them are attractive boys in khaki pants, Oxfords, and ties, which I assume would make them old classmates from Patton. I recognize James in a few of the shots, beautiful even as a freshman, always with his arm slung around Garen's shoulders. Garen barely looks like the same person, with his self-conscious eyes and his curly hair. Below those pictures, there's one of his parents. It must be old, because they look happy together. After that, there's a picture of the Testarossa, gleaming in front of a large blue house I don't recognize. Maybe it's the old house, in Ohio. Or his mom's house, in New York.

Below the car, there are four pictures of me. A shot taken with Bree, a few days after we met, all of us looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. Another of me, sitting at the kitchen table, my eyes focused on a textbook and my middle finger raised nonchalantly towards the camera. Then. Of course, there are the photos of us "after." After we got together, after everything changed. No wonder he refused to let me see these months ago; I would've made him shred them. The first is of me sitting on his lap, possibly on the living room sofa when no one was home. I'm probably crushing him, and his arm is

twisted at a strange angle to get us both in the frame. In the second photograph, I am sprawled across his bed, sleeping, with my homework surrounding me. And there, right at the bottom of the door, is one of us kissing.

How is it even possible that these pictures exist? How did I, closeted and terrified, let him create such a paper trail? I snatch them all off the door and stuff them, along with the CDs and scarf, into the music bag, which I jam into my own backpack. The notebooks get dumped in the trash, and the textbooks get carted up to the main office.

Outside of the school, I am only able to take a few steps towards the sidewalk before I am stopped in my tracks by the blaring of a car horn. I glance up, purely out of instinct, and there it is. Garen's Ferrari.

Which is impossible, because only Garen drives the Ferrari.

And Garen is in a wheelchair.

I take a couple of slow steps towards the car, and sure enough, the passenger window rolls down, and Garen leans over, grinning at me from the driver's seat. "Need a ride?"

"How are you driving? You have a broken leg," I say, but when I open the door, a pair of crutches is already leaning on the seat. It takes me two seconds to add the weeks in my head, and another half-second to be fucking *furios*. "You're still supposed to be in the chair. The changeover isn't supposed to happen until Friday, at the earliest."

"So I'm a few days early. It's not a big deal. I'm actually really good on crutches. Besides, I can just work the pedals with my other foot—"

"Garen, you're crushing your leg. You can't even use one of your hands to steer. Aren't you in pain?" I demand. His answering smile is a little lopsided.

"Nah, I'm fine."

I stuff my backpack into the backseat and storm around the car to wrench open the driver's side door. "Are you high?"

Garen rolls his eyes. "Stop being dramatic, T. I'm taking the painkillers that my doctor prescribed. Okay, so, I may have crushed them up and snorted them instead of swallowing them with juice, but it really is the thought that counts."

"Is that all you're on?" I ask.

"I'm also a little drunk."

"Are you on cocaine?"

"Maybe that, too, yeah."

"Get out of the car."

He goes back to rolling his eyes, but he at least hands me the crutches and lets me help him out of the car. "What do you want now? Are we going to throw down, or just make out?"

"Neither. Come on," I say, leading him around to the passenger seat. "I'm not letting you drive like this."

He sinks obediently into the passenger seat, but smirks and says, "This is illegal, too. You don't even have your license."

"I have my permit, and this is a better alternative. Now, can you please explain why the hell you thought it was a good idea to come pick me up while stoned and, to use your words, 'a little drunk'?"

He laughs. "Open your eyes, Travis. I've pretty much been high since last Thursday. High off something, anyway. It started with the painkillers, but I'm starting to run low, so I switched to blow on Saturday night. I don't get why you're making this into such a big deal. It's not like I haven't done drugs before."

"Have you been addicted before?" I ask, belting myself into the driver's seat and slowly easing out onto the road.

He ignores that, just twists to face me and slouches in a way that can't be good for his barely-healed ribs. For several long moments, there is nothing but silence. When I roll to a halt at a stop sign, I glance sideways at him. His face is a confusing mess of pain and amusement. I open my mouth to speak again, but he cuts me off with, "Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Excuse me?" I say. Fuck, he must be more high than I thought.

"Last Christmas. Did you like it?" he repeats.

"It was fine," I say, trying not to remember the way he had carefully stacked his Hanukkah presents in the living room with the Christmas tree, and refused to open them until the same day everyone else was opening their own gifts. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I made out with your boyfriend on Christmas. Do you remember that? Back before you two fell in love, or whatever, before you even talked. I went over his house, and he kissed me, and I kissed back. And you forgave me for it, you stupid shit, but do you remember what you said to me after I told you what I'd done?"

"That you were a douchebag, probably," I mutter. Garen rocks forward suddenly, catching a fistful of my hair and twisting my face towards him. It hurts like fuck, and all I can see now is his tense face. Thank God I'm still at the stop sign. When he speaks next, his voice is almost a perfect imitation of mine.

"Do you wish I could be him for you? Do you wish I'd dye my hair dark and cut it so scene so you could pretend I'm him while you're fucking me?"

He releases me just a suddenly and sinks back against his car door. I turn back towards the room and slowly roll out through the intersection. "Is that really what I said?"

"Word for word," he replies stonily. "I have a tendency to remember the things you say. Or at least, the important things, or the scary ones. And anyway, I just think it's funny. You were so afraid of me leaving you for Ben, or cheating on you with him, and here we are now. He's afraid of you cheating on him with me."

I pull into the driveway, park the car, and cut the engine. "What are you afraid of?"

“Nothing,” he says, throwing open the door and practically hurling himself out onto his crutches. “The only thing I was ever afraid of was losing you. I was afraid that if you stopped loving me, I’d die. And guess what, I’m still alive. Sort of. So, I have nothing left to lose. I have nothing to be afraid of.”

His eyes are blank, so blank it almost hurts to look at them for too long. I toss the keys to him – he doesn’t reach for them, and they hit the ground – and head into the house, upstairs to my bedroom. A few moments later, I hear the car start up again. Fuck him. If he wants to destroy his leg, or crash into a tree, that’s his problem. It’s not my job to care anymore.

The problem is, I do care. I care in the worst, most painful way, and once more, it seems like there’s only one real way to fix this horrible feeling inside me. It’s not like I can talk to anyone – Ben and Alex have gone up to New Haven for the day to check out the college Alex will be starting at in the fall. Corey’s got plans with Shelley. My family seems to be permanently absent, these days.

I dig through my closet, trying once more to find the tin with my razor blades in it, but of course, it’s still missing. Since the house is empty, it’s not like there’s anyone to start an argument if I dig through other people’s stuff. I search through all of Mom’s stuff, then my sister’s. Of course, there’s a possibility that either one of them would’ve just trashed the razors if they had found them. Or that it really was Ben who stole them from me ages ago. Downstairs, I hear the front door open and slam shut, followed by the halted, uneven click of crutches on the floor.

There’s also the possibility that, during one of the bipolar swings where he does care about me, Garen took them.

I’m not afraid to tear his room apart. It’s messy as fuck, and he’s still going to be stuck downstairs for a while. The bloodstained mattress is gone, but there are still dark stains smeared across the carpet where he collapsed while Dave beat him. His sheet music is spread out over the floor, and his guitar is still propped against his desk. I head there first, figuring there are only two drawers anyway, which would make it the most obvious place to hide something.

In the first drawer, I find a package of gummy bears, a pack of cigarettes, a silver Zippo, and an empty silver flask.

In the second drawer, I find my tin of razors.

What the fucking fuck? I empty both drawers onto the floor and drop down onto the carpet, staring at the contents. It... makes sense that Garen would have stolen my razors. He knows about my habit, and considering he alternates between not giving a fuck about me and wanting to marry me, it’s not exactly surprising that he would’ve stolen them during one of his more lovesick moments.

My skin is still too small to hold me in, my head is too small to hold in all these thoughts. I pull off my t-shirt and flip open the tin, selecting the sharpest razor I can find. I press the blade against the skin of my bicep and dig it in. The line of blood that it leaves makes my skin buzz and my face flush. For a moment, I have to close my eyes, if only to stop myself from becoming even more light-headed. Once the sharpness of my euphoria passes, I drop the blade back into the tin and push it aside.

The cigarettes are a little disturbing, even though the package is unopened. I know that Garen used to smoke, back when he was at Patton, but their presence is a reminder of a time period I like to pretend he never endured. I unscrew the cap on the flask and sniff it, but it doesn’t smell like anything, so it’s clearly been empty for a while. I kick everything, except for the gummy bears, under the bed and sprawl back across the floor. I tear open the package and eat the bears one by one, taking my time and

making sure I chew each one individually, until it's nothing but sweetness dissolved on my tongue.

"Ugh, *fuck*," Garen groans from downstairs. I sit up, my stomach aching full of candy, and try to listen, but there's no more noise. Tossing the empty package in the trash can, I head downstairs.

"Garen," I say, but there's no reply. I head for the kitchen and lurch to a stop in the doorway. The sink is splattered with some sort of dark, red-black liquid, and now I'm certain I'm about to be sick all over the linoleum. I stumble back towards the door, hoarsely saying, "Garen, why the fuck is there some *blood* or some shit all over the kitchen?"

The door to the den is closed, but I throw it open without knocking anyway. The guy sitting at the piano bench, however, is not Garen. For a moment, I think it's Ben. His hair is short and dark, and the hood of his sweatshirt is pulled up, like Ben's usually is. But then I notice that there's a silver ring through the left side of his lip, and that's he's too big to be Ben. He looks bored, even from behind a pair of aviator sunglasses.

"Sorry," I say awkwardly. "Um. Do you know where Garen is?"

He pushes off the hood of his sweatshirt and slips off the glasses, but it still takes me a moment to realize that this *is* Garen. For too many minutes, we just stare at each other. Finally, I can't stop myself from whispering, "What the fuck did you *do*?"

He laughs a little. "To the sink? It's just dye. I can go wash it, if it bothers you that much."

"No, I don't care about the sink. I meant... your hair. Your *mouth*."

"I wanted a change, so I dyed it black. And I still wanted a change, so I cut it off. Not all of it, just... a lot of it. Same style, I guess, just a lot shorter. And I still wanted a change, so I pierced my lip. I'm trying to psych myself up to do the other side. I once fucked a guy who had two lip rings, and they looked really cool. He said they're called snakebites," Garen says softly. I shake my head.

"I don't understand," I say. "I don't understand why you're doing this, why you'd make yourself look like a completely different person on a fucking *whim*."

And then I get it.

Do you wish I could be him for you? Do you wish I'd dye my hair dark and cut it so scene so you could pretend I'm him while you're fucking me?

"I told you," Garen says quietly, "I wanted a change."

"Garen," I murmur. "You need to stop this. You're scaring me."

That makes him laugh. "There's nothing to be scared of. It's just a stupid piercing, and a stupid haircut. I don't get why you're making it into such a big deal."

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe because you're on drugs all the time, and you're doing horrible, stupid shit to yourself. Maybe I'm just worried about how far you're going to take this," I say.

Then, all I can do is watch in stunned silence as he props a mirror up on the piano, grabs another silver hoop from off the keys, and, with deliberation and an almost unnerving calmness, stabs the point of it right through the right side of his lip. He doesn't even wince this time. I watch him clean a bit of blood off

his mouth, and wipe down his hands. Once he is finished, he pulls the hood back up and smiles at me. "I swear, Trav. It's not a big deal."

I don't even recognize him anymore, and this time, it has nothing to do with the hair or the lip rings.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mom, it turns out, is even less fond of Garen's drastic change of appearance than I am. She is in the bathroom when he makes his grand entrance at dinner that night.

"I didn't know we were ordering out," he says, pulling a carton of lo mein towards himself.

"Garen," Bill says sternly, "you're supposed to switch to crutches on *Friday*. You could refracture your ribs."

I snort. "That's what I said."

Bree glances up from her plate and gives a little squeak of horror. "Oh my god, what did you do?"

"Also what I said," I mutter.

Garen shrugs. "I've had the same haircut for ages now. I got bored of it."

"So... you decided to get Ben's haircut instead?" Bree asks.

"I don't look like Ben," Garen snaps.

"Yes, you do," I say. "That's why you did it."

As though called in to provide evidence of this very statement, Mom chooses that moment to sail back into the room, saying, "Travis, I didn't realize you invited Ben to—Jesus Christ almighty! Garen, what the hell did you do to yourself?"

"He felt like a change," Bill supplies, "but really, the wheelchair is the actual issue we should be focusing on here. This could be very detrimental to—"

"Take them out," Mom says in a low, deadly voice. "I do not approve of facial piercings, especially on my children."

"Lucky for you, I'm not your child. I'm not anyone's child, I'm eighteen. If I want to pierce my lip, I can. If I want to get a tattoo, I can. Which, by the way, I did, back in November. So did Travis."

"Garen!" I hiss, but his name is barely out of my lips before he reaches across the table and yanks up my sleeve, holding his 'T' up next to my matching 'G.' I wrench my arm away, but it's too late. Bree is already spluttering on a mouthful of soda, and Bill is already burying his face in his hands. Mom, however, still seems focused on the snakebites.

"Take them out, or I will take them out for you."

"If your fingers come anywhere near my mouth, I will bite them off your fucking hands," Garen warns. "It's my body, I can do what I want with it."

"Even mutilate it?" Mom counters.

Garen laughs. "Wrong son, Ev. You want to talk self-mutilation, maybe you should direct your attention to Travis."

The cut under my shirt, still fresh enough to sting, suddenly feels white-hot. I am certain they all know it's there, like there's a spotlight on it or something. I can't believe he's saying this. He knows that they never knew about the cutting. He knows that my parents, my sister, everyone except Faye and Corey thought that I just up and tried to kill myself one day, without anything leading up to it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Another laugh. "The hell you don't! Alex told me you started slitting your wrists *again* after I left. Or, maybe it was dating Ben that got you started again. Birds of a fucking feather, right? Does cutting yourselves mean you two finally have something in common besides my cock?"

"Alex is a liar," I say. Alex is a *traitor*.

"Yeah? So, I suppose he lied about blowing you, too, huh?" Garen says, picking at his finger splints and staring at the floor now. "God, Trav. Sex with three dudes since New Year's. Quite the little slut, aren't you?"

The laughter comes rushing out then, completely beyond my ability to stop it. "That's really rich, coming from you. You've slept with like, thirty guys."

"Actually, the real number's quite a bit higher than that. I downplayed it so you'd stop overreacting," Garen says, now seeming completely bored with the conversation.

"Classy," I say, my face burning with either humiliation or rage, I'm not sure which. "Anything else you lied to me about that you'd care to share now, at the worst possible moment, in front of our fucking *parents*? Since you're apparently telling all of my secrets, you might as well tell some of your own."

"Alright," Garen says, finally meeting my eyes. "I fucked Ben while you and I were dating."

For several moments, there is nothing but awkward, slightly stunned silence. Finally, I stand and shake my head. "You're full of shit."

"No, I'm not," Garen says, scrambling for his crutches so that he can come limping after me as I head for the front door. "Christmas Eve, when I was over his house. He practically begged me for it, and you know how much self control I have, so I—"

"Garen Michael Anderson!" Mom roars from the kitchen. "Come back here! We are not finished with this discussion."

"Ben wouldn't have done that to me," I say. Garen laughs.

"Are you seriously that stupid? Ben *hated* you then. Sure, he had some pathetic, stalkery little crush on you, but once I started dating you, you became person number one on his shit list. I think that's why he was so eager. Letting me screw him was probably the best way he could get revenge on you for not dating him first."

"Fine!" I burst out, spinning around so quickly that he crashes into me, nearly hitting the floor in a tangle of limbs and crutches. I help him straighten up, despite my better judgement, then step back. "Fine. Maybe Ben would've done that *then*. But would you? I mean, tell me the truth already, for once in your life. Did I really mean that little to you that you didn't hesitate to cheat on me with the first guy to offer?"

"Yes," Garen says flatly.

This house is huge, but it's still too small for me to breathe right now. I back up until I hit the front door, then fumble for the knob behind my back. Garen glances at the door, then back at me, and I say, "Thanks, G. Next time you have one of your ridiculous, bipolar little breakdowns and try to kiss me, or propose to me, or convince me that I should leave Ben for you, I want you to remember this moment. I want you to remember what you just said to me, and why I'm walking out right now."

I don't give him time to respond before I bolt. As I'm jogging down the driveway, I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Ben's number.

"Hey," he answers, with a smile in his voice. "How was your last day?"

"Are you home yet?" I ask.

"Yeah. Alex and I just pulled into the driveway like, five minutes ago. What's up?"

"I'm coming over. Leave the back door unlocked."

I snap the phone shut before he can reply, and take off down the street at sprint. I should've just stolen Garen's car. It would be faster, and a much, much more satisfying revenge. I'm still not that great at driving a standard; maybe I would've wrecked the engine by not shifting properly. Or, that failing, I could've crashed it into a tree, or driven it somewhere and slashed the tires, or set it on fire. Taken his guitar with me, put it through the windshield. Wreck everything he loves, since he's clearly taken it upon himself to wreck everything I love.

I arrive at Ben's house soaked in sweat and breathing hard. There's a stitch in my side, but I continue up the driveway at a brisk walk, and circle around the back to push open the sliding glass door. When I slip through the door into Ben's bedroom, he and Alex, both of them sitting on the bed, look at me.

"What's going on?" Ben asks.

"Did you and Garen sleep together while I was dating him?" I ask.

"Um," Alex says, "I should probably go."

When he stands up, I grab his shoulder and force him back down onto the bed. "No, you can stay. Answer the question, Ben."

"Why are you asking me this now?" Ben asks. "You and Garen have been broken up since January. If I *did* sleep with him while you were dating, it was almost half a year ago."

I snort. "So, that's pretty much a 'yes,' isn't it?"

"Alex, I'll talk to you later. I think I need to—"

"Got it," Alex says. He takes a few steps forwards, then pauses to grab my wrist. "Remember what I keep telling you. You hurt him, I murder you."

I wait in silence until he has left, then turn my eyes back towards Ben. "Why did you do it?"

"Why are you asking me this?" Ben demands. "Did he tell you to do this?"

"He told me that last Christmas, he slept with you. I know you kissed him, because he told me that the night it happened. But he didn't mention sex until just now. How could you not tell me about this?"

"I didn't tell you because it didn't *happen*. He's lying, Travis," Ben snaps. "Now, do you want to hear the truth, or not?"

I have no idea. I pace back and forth for a few moments, before finally slumping against the wall, waiting. "Fine. Yeah, I do."

Ben shifts back until he is leaning against his pillows, then opens his mouth to speak in a low monotone I haven't heard him use in months. "On Christmas Eve, Garen came over sometime around noon. He helped my mom fix the lights on our tree, and he baked gingerbread cookies with my little sisters. He likes kids. Did you know that?" I don't say anything, so after a moment, he continues. "Around four, we took them sledding. Stayed out until about seven. After that, he and I came back down here. It had been a good day – the best day I'd had in a while – so I kissed him. He was surprised at first, but after about five seconds, when I crawled into his lap, he started to kiss me back. We kissed for a few minutes, and he let me take off the sweater he was wearing. He unzipped my hoodie, he touched my chest. I asked him to fuck me—"

I am going to be sick.

"—and he told me to get off him. I didn't, so he picked me up and put me down on the bed. I asked what was wrong, even though I knew. He said he was in love with someone else, that he had already crossed the line. And then he went home to you. So, are you satisfied?"

I have no idea what to say anymore. I'd been so prepared for the fight that now, I just feel stupid. "Yeah."

"Great. I'm not," Ben says, and suddenly he's on his feet, in my face. "I can't believe you had the balls to come into my house and get pissed at *me* because your exboyfriend told you he cheated on you with me. If you want to get mad at Garen, get mad at Garen. But don't drag me into it, because I've done nothing wrong. I've been a good boyfriend to you since the first fucking day you—"

"I know," I say quietly. "I'm sorry."

Ben's eyes are still flashing, though he seems to have stilled slightly. We stare at each other for a while, and eventually, he wraps a hand around my arm – right over the cut, though I try to hide my wince – and pulls me down onto his bed. We settle into each others arms, each of us avoiding the other's eyes. I am the first to speak.

"He told my mom."

Ben looks up at me through his eyelashes. "Told her what?"

"Everything," I say hoarsely. "Told her that I've slept with you. And that I hooked up with Alex. He... he told her about me cutting, too."

"Hadn't she known?" Ben says, frowning. I shake my head.

"No. I only told Corey and Faye, back when it was happening. Garen only knows because Faye told him. And, obviously, you figured it out yourself. I told Alex. So, only a handful of people are supposed

to know. But now everyone in the house does. He just *announced* it at dinner,” I say. “I’m lucky I never told him about the night I tried to kill myself, or else he would’ve just told everyone all the details of that, too.”

Ben makes a small noise of agreement, and suddenly, I feel my face heat up. How could I be stupid enough to bring that up? Note to self: if you’re talking to someone who doesn’t know the details of something, don’t mention said details. As if reading my mind, Ben burrows deeper into my arms and murmurs, “I don’t care if you don’t want to tell me. It’s your story to tell, so don’t think you have to go and bare your soul or whatever.”

“No,” I say slowly, “you probably should know.”

But not without some preparation, first. We head upstairs and sit down at the counter in the kitchen. Ben makes us each a cup of tea, and I manage to scrounge up some biscotti from the cupboard. Once we are both settled, I take a sip of my tea, pause, and say, “I told you about how I started cutting. How it was the only thing I could think to do after my dad left and my mom stopped speaking to me.”

I wait for Ben to say something, but he just nods. I continue, “I tried to kill myself for... pretty much the exact opposite reason. Everyone thinks that it was because I was so lonely, or that I had no one to talk to. But I wasn’t lonely. It’s impossible to feel alone when you have all these people, all these friends, or your mom, or your sister, just constantly wanting to be around you, to talk to you, to find out why you seem so *sad* all the time. I wasn’t lonely, I was suffocating.”

Being here, sitting here and drinking tea like this is a normal conversation, is making me go insane. I retreat to the basement bedroom again, and begin to pace the room once more. “And the thing is, no one was talking to me, they were talking at me. Telling me what I needed to do, who I needed to be, what I was supposed to be thinking. I mean, my mom was constantly pushing me to get better grades, or help around the house more, or clean my room better. Nothing I did was ever enough, and she kept telling me it, over and over and over. And that just made my friends rag on me all the time, constantly wanting to know why I was bothering to obsess over my homework, why I couldn’t blow off a family function just this once. They didn’t get why I wouldn’t just be normal. They thought I should be hanging out with them, or going out on dates. And I know you understand what it’s like, alright? I know you get how suffocating it feels when everyone wants something from you and they want it right now.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ben says softly, and I feel a sharp rush of shame. Even with his scars all over his wrists, he is so much stronger than I could ever be.

“But I was young, and I was stupid, and I was under so much pressure from every side. I didn’t know what else I could do. I had already started cutting myself, and that helped, at first. It gave me some sort of focus besides what people were telling me to do. But after a while, that became just another thing I had to worry about. I was trying to make myself stop, or I was scared someone would find out. Did you know I actually hadn’t cut myself for over a month before the attempt? But even that became something else. It was just another thing I had to add to my list, another thing I had to make sure I did as expected with. And it was just too much. Too much to deal with, too much to listen to. And I could only think of one way to silence it.”

Before I even realize he has stood up, Ben is in front of me, catching my face between his palms. “For the record? I’m unbelievably glad you didn’t succeed.”

“Sometimes, I’m not,” I mutter. Ben forces me to sit down on the edge of his bed so that, for once, we’re closer to eye level.

"Travis, listen to me," he says. "Sometimes, you do incredibly stupid shit. You have a one-track mind a good portion of the time, and you can be a little callous when it comes to respecting other people's feelings. And, obviously, you have this hugely infuriating blindspot when it comes to Garen—"

"So, are you actually trying to talk me into a second suicide attempt right now?"

"—but you are still the smartest, hottest, best-intentioned, most incredible person I have ever met in my life. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and you make me embarrassingly happy. If you hadn't come into my life, I would probably not even qualify as a human being anymore. All of the shit I've had to put up with, between your homophobic mom, your psychotic ex-boyfriend-slash-stepbrother, your shitty, reputation-obsessed friends? It's all been worth it. You're worth anything. So, please. Don't think that you should ever do anything to hurt yourself."

I shrug out of my t-shirt and drop it onto the floor. For a moment, Ben just looks bewildered, but then I grab his hand and run it over the cut on my arm. "Too late, I guess."

"No," he replies, recovering pretty remarkably. "It's not too late. Because you're going to learn and grow from this experience."

The trite expression is what really gives it away for me. I reach for the zipper of his sweatshirt, and his hand twitches towards it, as if to stop me. I freeze him with a look, then finish unzipping the hoodie and push it off his shoulders. His own wrists are lined with fresh cuts, little barely-scabbed marks that can't be more than a few days old.

Birds of a fucking feather, right?

"Are you planning to learn and grow, too?" I say.

"Yeah," Ben says, joining me on the bed and burying us both under a mountain of blankets. "It's the first thing on my to-do list, I swear."

I spend the night at Ben's house. It's easier than going back home and getting caught in the middle of the inevitable blow-out my mom and Garen are having right now. At the very least, it's better than having to talk to someone – any of them – about any of the accusations Garen made at dinner. I leave in the morning, sometime around ten. Ben is still asleep, so I scribble a note on a Post-It and stick it to his door. *Thank you. I love you. -T.*

When I finally stroll back into my house, almost everyone is gone. Bree still has another week of school, and Mom and Bill both have jobs, so it's not like I'm surprised. Garen is sitting on the couch, his back unnaturally stiff and his eyes fixed on the wall straight ahead of him.

"Are you in a coma or something?" I ask wearily.

In response, he reaches out towards the coffee table and picks up a small glass full of a dark amber liquid. He pauses, takes a sip, then says, "No."

"Are you drunk?" I ask.

"No."

"Are you okay?"

"No."

I sigh and head for the stairs. There is no way I can just sit here and watch him self-destruct all over again. At this point, I am unwilling to even keep him company while he ruins his life. He'll just use it against me.

"I'm sorry," he says, when I'm halfway up the stairs. "I know you don't believe me. I don't really care that you don't. But I still feel I should let you know."

"Apology accepted," I say, barely able to keep the sarcasm from leaping out of my throat and swallowing him whole.

"Sometimes," Garen says slowly, "I do things without being able to stop myself. I say things, and even while the words are coming out of my mouth, I don't know why I'm saying them. Or, I'll do something, and the whole time, I'll be thinking to myself, 'I need to stop this, this isn't right, what am I doing?' But it just keeps happening. I let it happen. It's like I'm stepping outside of my skin, and someone else is doing these things in my place. Someone else is ruining these lives."

"It's not someone else," I say sharply. "It's you. You're the one who's ruining my life. And Ben's life. And your own."

"I know," Garen murmurs, his unblinking eyes still fixed on the wall. "I'm just not sure how to stop it."

I descend the stairs once more, cross the room, and take the glass of alcohol out of his hand. "It's not like this is going to help, you know. This is only going to make things worse."

"It's my only option," Garen replies. "I'm out of painkillers—"

"You still had some yesterday," I interrupt.

He smiles, blandly and still without moving his eyes. "Yes, but then I took them. Funny how drugs work. You have some, and then suddenly, you don't. I'm all out of blow, too. I called Seth. He says he won't be able to come out to see me until the weekend. And it's not like I know any dealers in Connecticut. I could always just go try to find one, but they tend to be a little suspicious of white boys with vintage Ferraris and multiple broken bones."

"Here's an idea," I suggest loudly. "*Stop doing fucking drugs.*"

He pauses for just long enough for me to wonder if he's actually considering it. Finally, though, he takes the glass from my hand and takes another sip. "I'm not too sure I can do that anymore. But thank you for your concern."

"Concern doesn't even begin to cover it anymore," I say. He shrugs.

"I don't think you'll have to be concerned for that much longer, so you shouldn't worry. Dad and your mom were up all night, screaming at each other. Must've been three in the morning before they finally stopped. Being such a good little boy, I tried not to listen, but I couldn't help overhearing some parts. You know, the usual. 'That boy is a monster, he has been nothing but trouble since he got back.' 'If your son hadn't broken Travis, if he hadn't ruined my poor son, none of this would be happening now.' 'He should've just stayed away, everyone was better off without him.' That kind of thing. And my dad may hate me sometimes, but he tends to get defensive of me if *other* people start to express their hatred. I'm fairly certain that one of them will have filed for divorce by the time you start school."

It has been so long since I let myself believe that there'd be a time when Garen wouldn't be my stepbrother. The idea is too foreign right now; I've got no idea what to do with it. I cough. "So, then what? I mean... you know what I'm saying. What are we supposed to think of each other if they get divorced?"

At last, Garen turns his eyes towards me, and I instantly wish he hadn't. Looking into his eyes and seeing that cold, dead expression is so much worse than seeing it directly towards the wall. "We'll be the same thing you think of me as now. Nothing."

Chapter Forty-Three

When I come home from work around eight o'clock on the following Wednesday, I almost trip over Garen. He is lying in the middle of the entrance hall with his guitar, just like he was the first time I ever saw him, and when I glower down at him, he grins at me. "My finger splints came off today."

"Congratulations," I say, only a little sarcastically. Part of me wants to stomp on his hand and rebreak those fingers, just so he knows what it's like to hurt for longer than five weeks. But another part of me looks at the guitar he's holding so carefully, and thinks, *fuck yeah, Garen*.

He sits up, swinging his leg cast awkwardly in an attempt to cross his legs. The attempt fails, and he gives up, slumping against the wall instead. "Yeah. The thing that sucks, though, is that my fingers have been held straight for over a month now, so it's like I've completely forgotten how to play guitar. I know all the chords, but my hand just won't *move* like I want it to."

I step over him and head for the kitchen to make myself a sandwich. "Well, you've got time to figure it out."

"Not really," he says, clambering to his feet and hobbling after me without his crutches. "I have a gig on Friday."

He says it almost hopefully, and I decide it's best to kill whatever ideas he has swimming around in his head right now. "I'm not going. Like, if you're about to ask me if I'll go, the answer is no."

He laughs awkwardly, dragging a hand through his black hair. "You... kind of don't have a choice? It's at the Grind. I uh, told Jerry that it'd be cool to come back and play there again sometime, and he said I could do it on Friday. He said the customers really liked my music when I was there the first time."

"Garen," I say slowly, as calm as it's possible for me to be under these circumstances, "I think you're beginning to take this stalking to a whole new level. What part of 'I have a boyfriend, I don't like you, stop following me around' is unclear?"

"It's not about you!" Garen bursts out. "Look, if you want me to act normally, you have to let me get back into a routine of—"

"I gave up hope of you acting normally weeks ago," I interrupt. "Seriously, I can't believe that *I'm* the one who sees a therapist, when obviously you're the one who's batshit crazy. This is fucked up, okay? You need to stop this. You can't keep talking to me like we're friends, you can't come to my place of work and act like it's totally cool."

"It's not about you," Garen repeats, though this time, his voice is weak.

I snort. "Oh, really? Then show me the songs you're going to play."

"Bite me," Garen says. Like that could mean anything other than that I'm right. I abandon my half-made sandwich on the counter and stalk out to the den. Somehow, he has kept the room neat, which only makes it easier to find his music. The pages of lyrics are piled carefully on the piano bench, the corresponding sheet music stacked on his bed.

"Travis, stop!" Garen orders, lunging for the papers. I dodge him and flip through the pages until I find something that looks promising.

"There's a ring on your finger that you wear so well, If you promise that you love me, then I promise I won't tell."

And that's as far as I get before he tackles me, and we both crash to the floor.

"Give me the fucking papers!" he yells, scrambling for my hands. *Fuck* the papers, this is insane. I fling the papers across the room, and once he has gathered them up, we both stand, though he does so a little more slowly.

"You need to get your shit together," I say slowly, my breath still coming in short bursts. "This is insane. This is inhuman. You need to stop doing this."

"Every time I try to be normal around you, you just get mad at me!" Garen groans.

"Because you're not trying to be normal. You're trying to make things like they were when we first met, like you think you can just start all over, and I'll forget about Ben like I forgot about Blaire. That's not how this works. You don't get to press 'reset' and act like the past six months haven't happened, like you never left," I say. He opens his mouth to speak, then flinches when I step towards him. That hurts a little, even now. I take the papers from his hands, and this time, he doesn't fight back. "This needs to stop. I'm serious. It's getting to the point where I don't even know how to exist in this house with you. I'm so worried about setting you off, or bringing you down. You scare me, Garen."

"I don't mean to," he says in a small voice.

"It doesn't matter. You're up, you're down, you're all over the place. You're high all the time. And seriously. *Stop writing me love songs.*"

"I can't help it! This—" he grabs the papers back so forcefully that some of them tear, "—is all I can write anymore. Pathetic, emo little songs about you, or creepy, violent songs about Dave, or terrifying, terrified songs about me. Everything is going to shit. And you keep telling me you want me to stop using, but the only times you like me are when I'm high! When I'm high, you laugh at my jokes, and I'm happy, and we get along so well, and everything's great. This is me sober, Travis. This is me at the end of my fucking rope."

"Well, maybe you should talk to Bill about getting some help. You could start seeing a therapist, too. Or maybe you could... I don't know. Go somewhere," I say.

He goes rigid, and for a moment, I'm afraid he's going to fly off the handle again. But at last, he sits down on the piano bench and says, "What, you think I should check into rehab? Or a goddamn psych ward?"

"Why not? I did," I say, and he looks up at me sharply. Guess his mom never let that one slip after all. "I went after the suicide attempt. Mom checked me into it."

"Did it suck?" Garen asks, and I laugh.

"More than anything. But it probably helped."

He turns his eyes back to the floor, looking like he's in a coma once more. I go out into the kitchen and out on a pot of coffee. By the time I have poured him a cup and brought it back into the den, he seems slightly better adjusted. "I'll make you a deal."

"Of course you will," I say. I've seen enough episodes of *Intervention* to know that people like this always want to make deals.

"I'll talk to my dad. I'll tell him everything, if that's what you want. But let me get through this week first, okay? I'm performing on Friday night, at seven o'clock. Jerry said I could have half an hour. Just... give me that half hour, and I'll talk to Dad on Saturday morning. I'll even set my alarm for like, nine in the morning, so that I'll actually wake up for it, okay? But you have to let me just do what I need to in order to get through the rest of this week. Let me write what I wanna write, let me drink what I wanna drink, let me take what I wanna take. If you let me have these next two days, I'll tell my dad everything. I swear."

I sigh. "You haven't given me any reason to believe you."

"Fine," he says, standing once more and hobbling over to his bed. He digs through the pocket of the jacket he had flung down on it, and fishes out his keyring. I watch as he flips through a few keys, finally finding two that are identical. He removes one and tosses it to me.

"What's this?" I ask, looking down at it.

"Collateral," he replies. "That's the spare key to the Testarossa. If I haven't talked to my dad by noon on Saturday, the car is yours. You can keep it, you can sell it, whatever. And then you can tell my dad everything, too."

I stare down at the key, turning it over and running my thumb over the stallion logo. "This has got to be a joke. You're honestly trying to tell me that if you don't talk to your dad by twelve o'clock on Saturday, I get to have your Ferrari?"

"Yes," Garen says. "If you want me to sign some sort of agreement, I'll do it."

"No," I say, pocketing the key. "I believe you."

I believe that he will talk to Bill. I guess I forget to believe that he will spend the next two days "doing what he needs to do."

On Thursday afternoon, I enter the den to find the most organized version of chaos I've ever seen. There are two ropes strung up across the room, each secured to the bookshelves against the walls. Pinned neatly to the ropes are page after page of sheet music. I blink around the room until finally, my eyes fall on Garen. He is sprawled out on the floor on the other side of the piano, scribbling furiously into a notebook. When he catches sight of me, a huge grin spreads across his face. "Hey! I haven't seen you all day. What's up?"

"Uh... nothing, really. Just came to see how you are," I say slowly. His eyes are bright, but there are dark circles under them, like he's been up all night.

"I'm *fantastic*. It sucks that Jerry's only going to let me play for half an hour, because I've got like, fifty songs that would be perfect. Seriously, I feel like I'm just cutting open my veins and bleeding out all this music onto the pages. It's amazing."

He knows nothing about what it really means to cut open a vein. Right now, I'm surprised he can even remember how to work a pen. I nudge another one of the papers towards him with the toe of my shoe. "Alright. Just... try to get a good night's sleep tonight, alright?"

He snorts. "Yeah, I will. Of course."

If Thursday is a high day, then Friday is nothing but low. When I come downstairs at two in the afternoon, entering the kitchen for the first time all day, Garen is sitting at the kitchen table, still writing in that same notebook. This time, however, he looks up at me with dead, glassy eyes. "Morning."

I stare at the glass next to him, obscenely full of whiskey. "Dude, it's the middle of the afternoon. Please tell me you're not drunk already."

"I won't tell you if you don't ask me," he says, and he takes another long, vaguely sloppy sip of whiskey. This is too much. I turn around and head back into the den. His Blackberry is sitting on top of his bed, the message light blinking. I pick it up and scroll to the inbox, where two unread messages await him. The first is from James, and says simply, *Is there a reason you're completely ignoring me lately?* The second is from a number listed as belonging to Seth Hayden; *if u expect me 2 be running back and 4th between nyc and ct all the time 2 give u more stuff, ur going 2 have 2 start paying me more \$\$\$*. I scroll through the contacts list and type both James' and Seth's numbers into my own phone. Tossing the phone back onto the bed, I return to the kitchen.

"Can I borrow your car for a bit?" I ask.

"You don't even have a license!" Garen groans, suddenly letting his head drop onto the table with a loud crack. "How is it even possible that you don't have your license, you can't drive a standard, and I'm still going to say yes? It's not fair. I should be able to say no to you." I open my mouth to reply, but he waves me off and sits up to take another swig of booze. "Just go ahead, it's fine. You have the key anyway, so just go do it."

I don't want for him to change his mind. Instead of heading out to the car, I run back upstairs and kneel in front of my computer. I bring up Google and type in *Patton Military Academy address*. It pops up as the first result, and I plug it into Mapquest to get driving instructions. Once those have printed, I finally head out to the car.

I get stuck in traffic, and the drive ends up taking over two hours, during which I start to get pretty damn good at driving a standard. When I finally pull through the gates of Patton Military Academy, I'm a little stunned. It doesn't *look* like a high school. It looks like a goddamn Ivy League university campus. The buildings are all stately brick cathedral-looking things, and there are trees everywhere. Not to mention, there are dozens and dozens of incredibly attractive boys in rumpled uniforms. I pull into a visitor parking lot, and am in the process of locking the car when a voice from about thirty feet away curiously says, "Garen?"

I turn quickly and find myself facing a group of four guys who look only slightly older than me. One, a blonde with dimples, seems to have been the one to speak. He shakes his head. "Oh, sorry, man. One of our friends has the exact same car, so I—"

"No, this is Garen's car," I say quickly, jogging over towards him. "He let me borrow it."

A redhead behind the blonde snorts. "That's a first. He doesn't even let James drive it."

"I'm actually looking for James," I say. "Could you please tell me where his dorm is?"

The boys look vaguely uneasy. I wonder how many guys have showed up, begging to be shown to James' room. The blonde is the one to answer. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea. James is kind of a private guy, he doesn't like that many people just showing up? You could come to the dining hall with us and wait there. We're about to grab some dinner."

"No, thank you," I say in a voice of forced calm. "I really just need to talk to James."

"Look, bro," another of the boys says, "we don't even know who you are. So we can't just—"

"I'm Travis McCall," I interrupt, and yes, it is a little bit satisfying to see the way my name registers with them. "I'm Garen's stepbrother, slash ex-boyfriend, slash the reason he was kicked out of our house, slash the person he was running from when he came here. James knows me, okay? And I need to talk to him about Garen."

"Yeah," the fourth boy says. "He lives over in Whitman Hall. We'll bring you there."

"Each of these boys, I soon discover, has hooked up with either Garen, James, or both. Rob, the redhead, tells me that he once got drunk and let James kiss him, though he is quick to tell me that there was no tongue, so "it practically doesn't count." Drew, one of the brunettes, admits to having hooked up with Garen after a school play rehearsal once during their junior year. Jacob, the other brunette, tells me that he gave James a handjob during physics class the previous semester. Andrew, the blonde, sheepishly admits that he has slept with both of them.

"So, obviously you slept with Garen, since you dated him," Rob says as we all ascend the stairs to the third floor of Whitman Hall. "Did you ever get with James?"

"I didn't meet James until after I started dating the guy I'm with now," I say.

Drew smirks at me. "That doesn't exactly answer the question."

"No," I say, knocking on the door they gesture to. "I never got with James."

The door flings open, and James blinks at me, clearly surprised to see me. "Travis," he says after a moment, and then he greets me with a brief, unexpected kiss on the lips. "Good to see you. Come on in."

The boys behind me exchange knowing looks, and I glare at them as we all pile into the tiny dorm room. It appears as though James lives alone, though there is an empty bed, a second dresser, and a second desk on the opposite side of the room. Garen's old side, I guess. James opens the mini-fridge that is situated halfway under his bed. "Can I get you a water?"

"No," I say sharply. "I need to talk to you about Garen."

"It would be nice if someone did," James mutters. "He stopped returning my calls a few days ago."

"Well, that's because about a week ago, *he lost his fucking mind.*"

James kicks the fridge shut. "What are you talking about?"

"Last Monday, he showed up at my school to pick me up. He was *supposed* to be in a wheelchair, so he shouldn't have been driving. We fought about it. Then I realized he was completely fucked up. He eventually confessed that he had snorted his painkillers, done a few lines of coke, and gotten 'a little drunk' before he came to get me. We kept fighting the whole time I was driving home. A few hours later, I came downstairs to find out that he had dyed his hair black, and cut most of it off. He also pierced his lip, twice. Not *got* it pierced. Pierced it himself, right in front of me, just shoved the fucking ring through his lip."

“Holy fuck,” James says so softly I’m not sure he even realizes he is speaking. “I loved his lips.”

“Well, now he’s got snakebites. That night, he got into a fight with my mom at dinner, during which he felt it was appropriate to tell her all the details of both of our sex lives, as well as bring up our matching tattoos. And then he told me that he cheated on me when we were together. He said he slept with Ben. He was drunk on this past Tuesday, stoned on Wednesday and yesterday. When I left today, he was drunk. In the middle of the fucking afternoon,” I say. “He promised me that he would talk to Bill tomorrow morning, talk about getting some sort of help. He swears that if he doesn’t do it, he’ll let me have the Testarossa. He is *losing it*, James. I’m scared.”

James grabs an olive-drab-green knapsack from the closet and stuffs a change of clothes, his toothbrush, and a cell-phone charger into it. “Andy, tell Mr. Stratford that I’m sick or something. I’ll be back later.”

He tails me out to the car, and once we are safely back on the road, he turns in his seat to face me. “He didn’t cheat on you, by the way.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

“Yes, it does. Don’t you remember what I told you last month? He lies when he’s losing it, he makes things up so he can pretend he doesn’t care. But he cared about you. He wouldn’t have slept with anyone behind your back, especially not Ben.”

“I don’t care,” I say, even though I so, so do. We make the rest of the drive in silence. By the time we get to my house, it’s already five forty-five. I enter the house to find Garen staggering out of his den-bedroom on crutches, his guitar case slung across his back.

“Oh, you’re here!” he says. “Cool. I was going to ask Bree for her car if you didn’t get back soon.”

“I’m back, but you’re not driving anywhere,” I say. At that moment, James edges past me into the house, his wide brown eyes fixed on Garen. Garen’s face falls.

“Jamie,” he says. “What are you doing here?”

James says nothing. After almost a full minute, he steps forward and drags his fingers through the black spikes of Garen’s hair. “I don’t understand what you’re doing to yourself.”

“Jamie,” Garen repeats in something almost like a whimper.

“You are such an amazing, beautiful man,” James continues softly. “You are brilliant, you are talented, you are gorgeous, you are perfect, so please, tell me why you’re destroying yourself like this.”

The tenderness, the raw, unabashed love in James’ eyes is suffocating me. I turn and head back outside, muttering, “I’m going to be late for work.”

“I’m coming with you!” Garen bursts out, limping quickly after me. “I have to go to my gig. I have to do it.”

I have no strength left in me with which to argue. I stay silent as I strap myself into the car, waiting to see what James says. The two of them converse in low voices on the porch, and finally, just as I’m shifting into reverse, they both clamber into the backseat. James warns him, “You’re not performing for

another hour, right? Well, you and I are talking about this. That's not up for debate."

The rest of the drive to the Grind is silent. I park around the back, in the employee lot, but send them around the front while I come in through the employee entrance. Miles nods curtly at me as I tie on my apron and set about refilling the coffee machines. I can't help but watch out of the corner of my eye, trying to see if Garen and James seem to be making any progress. Their entire conversation is conducted through low murmurs that I can't hear, but that's good. At least no one's shouting.

At seven fifty-five, Jerry heads over to their table to talk to Garen. Garen puts on a fake smile and makes his way up to the platform where performers sit. He perches on the edge of the stool and flicks on the microphone before turning his attention to the pretty substantial crowd of people, eagerly awaiting his voice. "Hey. I'm Garen Anderson. I've performed here a few times before, so some of you might recognize me. I'm going to play a few songs for you tonight."

Someone in the back yells, "Hell yeah!" and everyone – even Garen – laughs.

"Thanks. So uh, this first one is called 'Lines.' And it's for the guy who told me to stop writing him love songs," he says, and he turns his eyes briefly towards me. "I hope you hate it."

I do. Even before he plays a single chord, I hate this song and everything it stands for. I shove past Miles and shut myself up inside the storage room. I can hear the guitar playing, hear Garen's voice, as beautiful as ever, but I'd rather be in here than out there, hearing yet another fucking song all about me. A few moments later, the door swings open and Miles steps in, eyeing me warily.

"I think you should listen to this," he says.

I shake my head. "Nope. No, I can't do that. Sorry."

"Travis, I don't know what's been going on with you for the past few months. God, we haven't even talked since February or something."

"Yeah, because apparently when Faye decided not to be my friend anymore, she won the custody battle of all our mutual friends," I snap.

"Faye and I broke up a couple of weeks ago," Miles says calmly. "Things change."

"And some things," I gesture towards the door, towards Garen, "never change."

Miles reaches back and pushes open the door again, just enough that I can hear Garen's aching voice head into what must be the chorus of his song.

And I do lines because you hate the lines I write about you

And I take pills because the doctor tells me that I have to

I empty bottles because maybe there's a message inside

I tell lies because everyone likes me better when I'm fine

Miles lets the door fall shut again. "That sounds pretty changed to me. The Garen I used to know was happy. He was fun. And he definitely wasn't an obvious drug addict, which is what that guy out on stage is."

"I don't know what happened to him," I say hoarsely. "He came back in April, the day my mom married Bill, and ever since then... he's just ruined. All he does is drink and get high and fight with me. I don't know what to do. He scares me, Miles, and I'm just so fucking... I can't deal with this shit. He's not going to be happy until I break up with Ben, and I know you all think that Ben was just a rebound or whatever, but I really love him, I swear. I don't want to leave him, but I don't want Garen to freak out anymore either."

"Hey, hey, hey," Miles says sharply. "I never said Ben was a rebound. I've been going to school with the guy for years now, and he's cool. I can see why you like him. And, that aside? It is not your job to save Garen from himself. You can't handle that. Fuck, man, you barely know how to handle *you*. All you can do at this point is tell Bill that he needs to figure something out with Garen. Because that?" He gestures towards the door again. "That's not okay. That's not healthy."

"I know," I say quietly. "I'll talk to Bill tonight. Thank you."

Miles lets me take a longer break than I actually am entitled to. I linger in the back room until I hear the final applause, then head back out front. Garen and James are waiting for me by the counter.

"I called a cab," James says. "I'm going to bring Garen home, and then I'm heading out to the train station. We've talked about everything... I think things will be okay now."

"I already told you both," Garen mutters. "I'm talking to my dad in the morning. Like I said, setting my alarm for nine and everything."

"Your car depends on it," I point out, and he even manages a small smile. James leans across the counter to kiss me on the cheek.

"Thank you for coming to get me. Have a nice summer," he says, and I nod as he heads for the door. Garen hesitates next to me.

"Did... did you hear any of my songs?" he asks finally.

I nod slowly. "I heard part of one, yeah."

"Oh," he says. "Good."

When he is halfway towards the door, I can't help but call after him, "Of course I like you better when you're fine. But I wish you didn't have to lie to make people think you're alright."

He doesn't say anything, just continues out the door. I glance over at Miles, who shrugs. Pretty much my entire life can be summed up with a shrug. My shift continues until ten o'clock, and when I finally get home, I'm shocked to discover that Garen is actually there. Right where he's supposed to be. Well, sort of.

"Aren't you supposed to be staying down in the den for another week?" I say, nudging open the door to his bedroom.

Garen shrugs. "I can move around fine without crutches, so it seems stupid to stay downstairs. Besides, I'm just up here to grab a sweatshirt."

Sure enough, he's wearing my old LHS Varsity Track hoodie, which he claimed for himself ages

ago. I glance towards the mess I left on the floor the previous week, and so does he. "Guess you went looking for your razors."

"How do you know that's what I was looking for?" I demand.

"Because that's the only thing that's missing," he says with a shrug. "I'm sorry I took your stuff. But... I obviously did it with good intentions."

"Yeah," I say, and unable to stop myself, I add, "What's with the cigarettes and the flask?"

"James brought them when he came to stay," Garen says. "I left them in our dorm room by accident."

"I didn't know you smoke," I say, frowning.

He shrugs again. "I used to. At dinner, the day after I moved here, Bree mentioned something about her boyfriend smoking. You made a face and said you'd never date a smoker. I haven't had a cigarette since that night."

I don't know whether to be amused, embarrassed, or touched. I settle for muttering, "I'm sorry I ate your gummy bears."

He laughs. "It's fine. I've got more. You should probably go, though. Since I'm getting up at nine and everything."

We bid each other goodnight, and I retreat to my room, feeling hopeful for the first time in ages. Maybe this could work out. Maybe, just maybe, everything will be fine in the end.

Sure enough, the alarm clock on Garen's cell phone starts blaring at nine on Saturday morning, loud enough that even I can't sleep through it. He, however, must be able to, because it goes on forever. After a good four minutes of it, I throw off my covers and storm across the hall, throwing open the door to his bedroom. The cell phone is sitting on the floor in the center of the room, so I grab it and switch it off before slowly sitting down on the ground. There are four piece of paper, folded in half to stand as little tents. Each one has a name on it. Dad. Evelyn. Bree. Travis. I pick up the one with my name on it and flip it open.

Dear Travis,

The note addressed to my father tells him everything that has happened since I came back to Lakewood. My end of our bargain is therefore fulfilled, and I will be keeping my car. You can keep the spare key, if you'd like. I think it would be best for everyone if I left again. None of you deserve to go down with me. Don't bother asking James where I am, because he doesn't know. No one does. I hope you have a really great life. Say goodbye to the guys for me. I hope everything works out with you and Ben.

I love you, always. I'm sorry, for that and for everything.

Yours,

Garen

I flip open Bree's card. The message is similar; *I'm sorry, but I have to leave again. You were an amazing friend to me during the brief time we've known each other, and I will miss you like hell. By the*

way, try not to start doing drugs at any point in your life, because they're really hard to stop. Good luck at college in the fall, and even better luck with your art. And don't blame Travis for me leaving. This isn't about him, it's all about me. Sorry. Love, Garen.

The note to Bill is a full page of tiny writing, and yes, it seems as if he really did tell his dad everything that's happened since he came back. The drugs, the truth about everything that happened with Dave. Everything. Finally, I open Mom's card, which is the shortest of all.

Evelyn,

You win.

G.

Chapter Forty-Four

I snatch up the letters and the phone, and storm from the room, my heart slowly creeping out of my chest and into my throat. As I pound down the stairs, I scroll through Garen's contacts and dial James' number.

"Good mo—"

"Is he there with you?" I demand. "He said he wouldn't be, he said you'd have no idea, but I don't believe him, I can't."

James yawns. "What are you talking about, Travis? And by the way, you should really just add my number to *your* phone and stop calling me from Garen's, if you intend to be harassing me like this constantly."

"Garen is gone!" I snap into the phone. "He left notes for everyone, saying he was leaving. Some bullshit about not wanting to drag anyone else down with him? He wrote in the note to me that he wasn't going to tell anyone where he was going, not even you, but I had to check. Do you have any idea where he is?"

"No, I don't," James says sharply. "Do you know when he left?"

"I have no idea. Sometime between ten thirty last night and nine o'clock this morning. Please, James, I know you're his best friend, but if he's there with you, you can't cover for him. You have to tell me."

"I'm not covering for him!" James bursts out. "Lord, Travis. I am more invested in Garen's well-being than you will ever be. He is my best friend, he is my *brother*, and if I had the slightest idea where he could be right now, I'd find him."

"Good. He left his phone here, so just... call me back on it if you find out anything else. I need to go tell Bill," I say, ending the call and stuffing the phone into my pocket. When I pass through the kitchen doors, Bill looks up, smiling, from his cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Travis," he says.

I thrust out the letter that Garen left for him. He frowns, but takes it and flicks it open. I watch his eyes rocket back and forth as he skims it, and by the time he gets to the closing, his hand is shaking. "Is this a joke?"

"No," I say. "No, it's not. I found it in his room. He left them for everybody."

Bree looks up from her cereal, and I hand her the letter with her name on it and stuff the others into my pocket. Bill stands so suddenly that his chair tips over. "Is his car gone? Did he take it with him? Have you called—"

"Of course I called James," I interrupt. He says he has no idea where Garen is, and he seems to mean it. The car's gone. I don't know where he's going. Bill, I'm *scared*."

He begins to pace back and forth across the kitchen, clutching the letter in his fist. "I don't understand why he'd leave again."

"Maybe he's just in a bad mood or something," Bree suggests, almost desperately. "Maybe he's just upset, and he'll come back. He came back before."

I shake my head. "He won't come back. He left his phone so we can't contact him, he took everything he could need. And he's afraid of what would happen if he came back, he's scared of you making him go away."

"Go away?" Bill splutters. "Go away where?"

God, I've already said too much. But at this point, it's not like it can hurt. I sigh. "Rehab. Or a psych ward. Or both. He's really messed up, Bill. Ever since he got back, all he does is drink and do coke and try his hardest to ruin *everything*."

"I think we should go after him," Bree says quickly. "Isn't there something in his car that we can use to track it?"

"It's a vintage car," I reply, "so I'd doubt it. The only way I'd really know how to find him is by asking James, but he had no idea Garen was even planning to leave. He's freaking out. Maybe you could call Marian? I know he went to see her last time."

"Of course, I will," Bill says.

"Maybe he just went back to Patton," Bree suggests.

"He wouldn't do that. It's where he went last time, he wouldn't make himself that easy to track down," I point out.

"Fine, so *you* come up with something, then," she snaps.

Let me go after him. I will feel my way to him, I will track him with my soul. His skin will say my name, his bones will scream for me to follow.

"I don't know," I say instead. "I just feel like we should be doing something other than sitting here, expecting it to turn out like it did last time."

Bill grabs his coat from the back of one of the kitchen chairs. "I'm going down to the police station to file a report. I don't think they'll be able to do anything... he's not a minor, and he left of his own accord. But I have to try."

After the front door clicks shut behind him, Bree turns to me. "Last time he left, he told you he was leaving immediately. But he went to see Ben, instead. Do you think maybe he did the same thing this time?"

"It's possible," I say, even though it's kind of not. "I'll call around, see if anyone's willing to help look. Maybe you could check out some of the places he's likely to go? The Grind, local music stores, stuff like that."

She sails out of the room without another word. Well... I know Garen definitely won't go to Ben this time, so who would be his second choice? Taking a seat at the table, I pull out my phone and call Alex. He picks up on the third ring.

"lo?" he mumbles through a sleep-heavy voice.

"Garen ran away again," I say. "He left notes for everyone in the family, saying he had to leave, that it's the best for everyone. Has Garen come to see you? Do you know where he might be?"

"No idea," Alex says, clearing his throat. I can hear the creak of bedsprings, like he's sitting up. "Do you want me to try calling him?"

"He left his phone here."

"James, then?"

For a moment, I'm distracted. "You have James' number?"

Alex hesitates, then finally says, "Yeah. We uh, met at the wedding, remember? And you had me bring him his coat while Garen was in the hospital. He's... a cool guy. We talk sometimes."

"Oh. Well, I already called him, so it's not worth bothering. He doesn't know anything."

"Give me like... ten minutes to get dressed, and then I'll come pick you up. We can go look for him," he says. "I have some ideas."

I have just enough time to take a quick shower and get dressed before Alex pulls up. As I'm jogging down the driveway to his car, I send a quick text message to Ben. *Garen ran away again. Alex and I are going looking for him. I'll come by later to tell you about it.* As soon as I'm buckled into the passenger seat, Alex peels out of the driveway. "Why did he leave this time?"

"He and I made a deal. If he didn't tell Bill everything about his drug use and general craziness by noon today, I got to tell him. And I got his car. But that's like, irrelevant. I don't know how long he's been planning to leave, but he seems to be really gone this time. I'm just... scared. Last time he left, he was at least clean. He was fine on his own. This time, he's so fucked up, I'll be shocked if he's alive in a week."

"Fuck," Alex mutters. "Have you checked anywhere specific yet, to see if you can find him?"

"Bill went to the police station to make a report, but he's also calling Garen's mom to ask her to search Garen's old New York haunts. My sister said she was going to The Grind, and if he's not there, she's going to go to some of the music stores she knows he—"

Suddenly, Alex stomps on the brakes, then pulls a quick U-turn in the middle of the street, muttering under his breath, "*Music.*"

"The hell?" I say, staring at him.

"Music. The music room at LHS? We all have keys to it. *Garen* has a key to it. And maybe he went there, thinking everyone would forget that he could," he replies.

For the first time today, I feel a flicker of hope. It suddenly doesn't seem so impossible that Garen – that all of us – will make it out of this alive and well. As we pull into the LHS parking lot, that flicker of hope explodes into a full-blown inferno. Garen's car is parked in the lot. Practically before Alex has stopped the car, I tumble out and sprint over to the Ferrari. The doors are unlocked, the key is in the ignition, and there is an envelope on the passenger seat. I pick it up; it's a money envelope, the kind banks give out with a withdrawal, but when I tip it onto my palm, only a piece of paper and two cards fall out. The paper is a withdrawal slip for three hundred and forty-six dollars, time-stamped eight thirty this

morning. It's such a random number that I assume it must be everything in his account. I turn the two cards over; the first is his credit card, the second is his driver's license. I put everything back into the envelope and slip it into my pocket as I walk back to Alex, who is leaning against the wall of the school. "He emptied his bank account and ditched his license and credit card. I guess he's trying to make it harder to track him down. Can you get us into the building?"

"Of course," Alex replies. We circle around to the back of the school, and he unlocks a door I had no idea existed. The music room, which I've only been in twice in the three years I've been going here, is mostly prepared for summer hibernation. The chairs are turned over on top of the tables, the music stands are arranged neatly at the edge of the room, the blackboard has been washed, but in a second – less than, even – I know Garen has been in here. The chair at the teacher's desk is turned around the wrong way, and I can perfectly picture him swinging a leg over it and straddling the back. If that weren't enough, the silver, Hebrew-inscribed ring that I stuffed into his hand the night after he returned is lying next to the computer mouse. I cross the room in three strides and jostle the mouse. The screen flickers to life, revealing two open windows. The first is a train schedule to New York City, and the second is a description of bus fares out of the city.

"Looks like he went to New York after all," Alex mutters, peering over my shoulder. "Bet I know why."

"James?" I suggest, but Alex shakes his head.

"His dealer still goes to Patton, remember?" he says, pulling out his cell phone. I glance over just in time to read the text before he sends it. *J—garen took / is taking a train 2 nyc. think he's meeting w/ seth. see if u can find him first? xo alex.* The "xo" part is a little baffling, but I decide that I don't have enough energy to ask what that's about. Instead, I simply say, "Can you drop me off at Ben's house? I want to tell him what's going on."

Alex clenches his jaw, but says nothing as we head back out to the car. The drive is silent, and when we finally pull up in front of Ben's house, he turns to me and says, in an awkwardly comforting tone, "We'll find him eventually, you know."

"Yeah," I say. He'll probably just be a corpse by that time. The sliding door at the back of the house is unlocked, and I slip inside. Ben is sitting on his bed, his head in his hands. He only straightens up when I enter.

"So, yeah. Garen left again," I say. "He took off, and none of us know where he is." Ben says nothing. His brow furrows, and he frowns at the floor, but still, no words. I continue, "He left me a note. Bill, Bree, and Mom, too. I talked to James, and Bill's calling Marian. I think they're going to make sure he's not running around New York."

Still nothing. "Alex and I have been looking all over Lakewood. I guess Garen broke into the music room at LHS, because there's some... I don't know, evidence that he was there. His car's in the lot, but he's gone. We think he left it there, probably got a cab. The computer in the music room had train schedules to New York, so I guess he's headed there after all." Ben glances at me, then back at the floor. I step towards him. "In order for this to actually qualify as a conversation, you kind of have to talk."

"I want to break up."

And suddenly I wish he had just stayed silent. I lean back against the wall, staring at him. "Are you serious?"

He nods slowly. "Yeah, I'm serious. We're over."

I'm going to be sick. I take a hesitant step forward and, when he doesn't object, I sit on the edge of his bed. For a long moment, neither of us speaks. Finally, I have to ask, "Are you breaking up with me because I care that Garen's gone?"

He shakes his head. "No, I'm breaking up with you because I'm in love with you."

"That makes no sense," I say around a soft laugh. He suddenly swings a leg over me so that he can settle into my lap, facing me and running his fingers through my hair. His eyes can't stop roving over my face, like he's afraid this is the last time he'll ever see me, and I'm unable to stop myself from kissing him. He kisses me with equal fervor, and I slide my palms down his back so that he shivers. When he tries to pull back, I lace my fingers together at the nape of his neck and murmur, "No, please."

"Travis, stop," he whispers. "Stop. It's over between us."

"I don't understand," I protest.

"I can't keep doing this. I can't be with you, knowing what it's doing to everyone," he says. "Every time Garen sees me touch you, I can see part of him dying. And I know that seeing him go crazy like this is killing you. I can't deal with it anymore. I love you too much to put you through this."

"You're worth it!" I say. "God, Ben, please. I don't want to lose you, I can't. It doesn't matter how much it hurts, I want to be with you. You're everything to me."

Ben shakes his head. "No, I'm not. I know you're in love with me, but I know that you're still in love with Garen, too. And that's okay. Really, I don't hold it against you. But as long as you and I are together, he's going to suffer. And as long as he's suffering, so are you. So, here it is. I'm letting you go."

He tries to shift off of my lap, but I grip his hips. "No. No, no, no, please. I don't *want* you to let me go. I want you to be with me. I want you to stay with me."

"Stop it," he says, wrenching my hands off of him and standing up. "You're making this so *hard*, Travis. Just let me do the right thing, I don't want to regret this."

"You will! You'll regret it, so please, don't do it. It's not the right thing, it can't be—"

"It *is*. Things can never work out between you and I. There's too much other shit going on. It's not going to work out, and I'm not going to drag it out any longer. It's just going to destroy both of us," Ben says.

And really, what can I say to that? He's right. Of course he's right. I stand slowly, wondering if my feet are actually capable of carrying me towards the door. I'm supposed to leave, right? He doesn't want me here anymore. He doesn't want me. I clear my throat. "Okay. I understand." He gives me a very small, sad smile. I wonder if he's always been this beautiful, or if I'm just finally noticing now that he's not mine anymore. I can't move, not if it means walking out of this house and never getting to touch him again. Still, I have to ask, "Do you want me to leave now?"

"Yeah," he says softly, "but first, I need you to kiss me, just one last time."

I am pressing him back against the wall, almost before the words are even out of his mouth. We kiss desperately, feverishly, both of us sliding our hands over the other, trying to memorize every inch of

skin. When I slip a hand under his sweatshirt, brushing my fingers across his stomach, he lets out a soft sigh, and I want to die. How could he possibly think that this should end? How could he possibly think it would be a good idea for us to never be able to do this again? But then he is pulling my hand away, bracing his palms on my chest to push me back a few feet. "You need to go. I'm serious."

My stomach is turning, my heart is breaking, but what can I do? I nod and reach past him to open the door. "Alright. I'll... I don't know. Am I still allowed to call you sometime?"

"Of course you are," he says, his face softening. "Travis, you're one of my best friends. And you're... god, I'm so in love with you. None of that has changed. I just don't think we should be in a relationship right now."

I let my feet carry me to the door, let him guide me outside. I don't walk home as much as I *wander* home. My legs seem to be working, but barely, and I'm sure that it must take me twice as long as it should. I collapse in my bedroom sometime around noon, and manage to make myself lie there for the better part of the afternoon. A little after four, however, my pride, my self-control, my everything just goes away, and I find myself dialing Ben's number. What will I say to him? *Change your mind, take me back, you're mine, I'm yours, maybe we can get through this together.*

It doesn't matter, anyway; he doesn't pick up.

Chapter Forty-Five

I wake up on Sunday morning to hammering at the front door. For a while, I just lie in bed, waiting for someone else to get it. When it eventually occurs to me that Bill had mentioned something last night at dinner about going to New York to meet with Marian – Bree had demanded to come along, Mom had refused to go, saying she had work – I roll out of bed and patter downstairs. The second the door is open, Alex is gripping the front of my t-shirt and shoving me back against the wall. “Where is he?”

“Who, Garen? We still haven’t found him. Bill’s going to—”

“Not Garen! *Ben*. I’m talking about Ben. Where is he?” Alex demands. Somewhere in my gut, I go cold.

“What do you mean?”

Alex lets me go and gives a sharp little bark of laughter. “You expect me to believe that you don’t have the faintest idea where he went? He’s your boyfriend, Travis, of course he told you.”

Okay, that hurts. I shake my head slowly. “He broke up with me, right after you dropped me off at his house. And he wouldn’t return my calls last night. I figured he was just... I don’t know. I figured he didn’t want to deal with me.”

Alex stills, staring at me with a slightly dazed expression. “He broke up with you?”

“Yeah,” I say, leading him over to the couch to sit down. He trails after me like he’s stuck in a trance, and when he finally slumps down next to me, he seems to come to life once more.

“He’s still gone, you know,” he says. “I’ve got no idea where he is. His mom called me this morning, freaking out. She said that Ben hadn’t been home for dinner last night, and that he wasn’t there in the morning. Said she was going to be calling Jeremy and Mason right after me.”

I slouch down in my seat, covering my face with my hands. This can’t be happening. I refuse to believe that both of my ex-boyfriends – God, please let it get easier to think of Ben as my ex-boyfriend – could disappear within twenty-four hours. “Have you tried calling him on his cell phone?”

“Of course,” Alex says flatly. “He doesn’t pick up. He responded to one of my text messages, but it was just... all it said was ‘Can’t answer the phone now. Driving. Will call you when I have news.’ The fuck does that mean? When he has news about what?”

“He must have gone after Garen,” I say. He must’ve gone after Garen for *me*. I finally drop my hands away from my face, only to find that Alex is staring at me with a look that is simultaneously blank and enraged.

“Of course,” he says for the second time. “Of fucking course, it makes so much sense. Really, why didn’t I think of it sooner? Of course Ben would go running off to find Garen, of course the boyfriend you cheat on and treat like shit would do everything in his power to find the boyfriend you won’t even agree to date.”

I stand shakily and head for the kitchen. He does not want to play this game with me right now, he does not want to start this fight. “Shut up, Alex.”

“Listen to me!” Alex practically screams at the back of my head. “Ben is my best friend, and you

have been nothing but horrible to him since the first second you two laid eyes on each other! You were so sweet and caring and what the fuck ever, at least until Garen came back. And then you kept making 'mistakes' like kissing your ex. You can't kiss someone by mistake, Travis. Every kiss means something."

"Yeah?" I cut across him, yanking open one of the cupboards to retrieve a drinking glass. I fill it up with water, but my hands are shaking too much for me to raise it to my lips. "So, what about when you and Ben kissed at the party? I guess that one meant something, too."

Alex goes white. "I wasn't talking about that."

"I know, because you never want to talk about yourself. But seriously, *let's*. Because trust me, man, your life is at least as fucked up as mine. We all saw how you reacted when Ben kissed you that night, but you act like nobody's allowed to acknowledge what we all figured out ages ago. I mean, what, do you need me to get you a beer out of the fridge before you're okay to have a conversation about it?"

"Don't talk about me like that," Alex snarls. "You know *nothing* about me. You're fucking projecting your pathetic problems onto me, you're trying to turn me into Garen, just like you tried to turn Ben into him. And now Garen's turning himself into Ben, so really, your life is just one constant mistake, isn't it?"

"Just because you need to get wasted before you're man enough to kiss another guy, doesn't mean you're not as queer as the rest of us!" I say. The second the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. Alex looks like he's about to throw up, and, without knowing what else to do, I shove the glass of water at him. He takes a sip from it, then dumps the rest down the drain. We stare at each other for nearly a full minute.

Finally, he stumbles back a few feet to lean against the kitchen table. "At least I'm really in love with him. At least I don't want him as a substitute for Garen."

"I'm really in love with him, too," I protest, but Alex just shakes his head.

"No. No, if you were really in love with him, you would've never gotten involved with him. But instead, you had to be selfish as fuck, you had to go and make him fall for you, just so you could break his heart the second Garen showed up again. If you loved him *half* as much as I do, you would've let him go."

"Is that what you did?" I ask.

He looks away. For several long moments, he just stares at the floor. I wonder if he didn't hear my question, but that's insane. The house is dead silent, except for the two of us. Eventually, though, he sits down in one of the chairs and rests his forehead against the edge of the table. "I'm sleeping with James Goldwyn."

Of all the things I expected him to say, that is at the absolute bottom of the list.

"Um. Excuse me?" I say.

"Garen's best friend, James. I had sex with him the day after prom, the day after Garen was admitted to the hospital," Alex says hoarsely. The words come out quickly, as if he can't keep them in anymore, not after hiding this for over a month. "When you asked me to bring him his jacket, I went to his hotel, a-and we... it was my first time. He was only in town for a little while longer after that, but we, you know, we met at his hotel room a few more times. Two. Three, maybe. We've been texting a lot since then, I guess."

"Yeah, I saw," I say softly. *J—garen took / is taking a train 2 nyc. think he's meeting w/ seth. see if u can find him first? xo alex.* Obviously.

Alex shrugs. "Yeah."

"So are you two, uh... are you like, dating?" I ask. This conversation is so surreal. My first ex-boyfriend's best friend (slash ex-fling) and my most recent ex-boyfriend's best friend (slash ex-fling) are now suddenly together. My life is a soap opera.

"No," Alex says quickly. "No, it's not like that. We're not... James dates a lot of people, you know? He's not like Garen, who usually only has sex with people, never really gets involved on a deeper level. James is more than willing to do the boyfriend thing, he told me he's had like, twenty boyfriends so far. But I'm just... I don't want to get involved with him like that, not yet."

"Are you still freaking out about figuring out you're gay?" I ask. More than anything in the world, I can relate to that.

"No, not really. And besides, I'm not—"

"Alex, dude, sex with another guy usually makes you gay," I interrupt. Isn't this part of the conversation over?

He laughs and shakes his head. "What I meant was, I'm bisexual. Not just gay. But that's not the problem, either. I just don't want to get into a relationship right now. I'm not ready. Especially because... I'm in love with Ben."

I hate hearing that, even if it's what I've been waiting for him to say for months.

He continues, "That's kind of my point. You don't *think* before you get involved with people, Travis. You didn't think about the consequences of dating your future stepbrother before you got involved with Garen. You didn't think about how hurt Ben would be if he realized you still wanted Garen. You didn't think about how much it would destroy Garen if he ever came back and realized what was going on. It's really shitty that you do this, okay? It sucks that you just throw yourself into these relationships without thinking about what it'll do to other people."

"It doesn't matter anymore," I say. "Ben and I are over. Garen and I are over. I'm alone now. And it's probably going to stay that way."

Alex bobs his head sort of aimlessly for a second, and then he gives a little, unexpected laugh. "Ben is still in love with you, even if he broke up with you. I've known him for years, he doesn't change his feelings that quickly. It's impossible for him. And, according to you, you still care about him, too. So, I guess it's possible that you guys are finished, but I doubt it. And, well, you and Garen..."

He trails off, looking slightly uncomfortable. I have to wonder who I'm talking to now. Is this Ben's friend, Alex? Garen's friend, Alex? Mine?

"Yeah?" I prompt.

He shakes his head. "You and Garen aren't over, either. You and Garen will never be over. You guys are still ridiculously, inexplicably in love with each other, and everyone knows. Seriously. *Everyone.*"

That declaration provokes a brief image of all my friends and family, shaking their heads, rolling their eyes, demanding to know what the hell is wrong with me. The whole thought is probably a lot closer to reality than I want it to be.

I intend to say, *I'm not still in love with him*, but it comes out as, "I don't want to still be in love with him."

Fuck everything.

"Yeah, well, I don't *want* to be in love with a guy who's constantly telling me I'm like a brother to him," Alex says, scowling. "I guess we're both fucked."

"Pretty much," I agree. The tension between us seems to have passed, for the most part, and I am suddenly so unwilling to continue this discussion, so I add, "Do you want to watch a movie or something?"

He pauses, seems to mull it over for a while before saying, "Alright, sure. But try not to molest me or anything, okay? I know your crisis mode seems to involve finding yourself a new boyfriend, and I'm not into you like that—"

I shove him off the chair, and we retreat to the living room to watch whatever fantastically mindless action movie is playing on tv. It's sort of nice to have a chance to just hang out with somebody, without having to worry that he's going to leave any second now. But it's also sort of horrible, because we both keep digging into our pockets to check for missed calls, voicemails, text messages. Anything that will tell us where the same two boys are. But we are both left unsatisfied, and by the time late afternoon comes around, we are both just restless.

And then the front door bangs open, and they tumble in.

Both of them.

Clearly, Ben was not expecting to see Alex and I sprawled out on the couch together, because he freezes, even though he's practically collapsing under the weight of Garen—fuck, *Garen*. My heart drops right out of my chest, through the floor, into the dirt under the foundations of this house.

Garen looks like a zombie. His skin is pale – bordering on pasty, actually – except for the dark circles under his eyes, which could be either from not sleeping or from getting punched. There's a bit of dried blood on his face, which lends itself to the "getting punched" idea. The black dye seems to already be mostly faded from his hair, but surprisingly, neither of his lip rings seems to be infected. His glassy eyes seem incapable of focusing on anything, and he can't manage to keep himself upright. The sweatshirt – my track hoodie – he was wearing the last time I saw him is gone, and the blue t-shirt he's wearing now is dirty and torn.

For a long moment, none of us move. Finally, I stand and move to Garen's other side to help Ben settle him on the couch. The second Ben is upright, Alex flings an arm around him, dragging him into a bone-crushing hug that paints an expression of shock across Ben's face.

"Don't leave without telling me again," Alex orders. "Next time, I go with you."

"Hopefully there won't be a next time," I say. "C-Can one of you call my stepdad? Please?"

"Of course," Ben says, carefully extracting himself from Alex's grip. I am disturbed to finally notice that he's got a split lip. Christ, did Garen do that to him? As he passes me on his way to the house phone

in the kitchen, I snag his arm. It's supposed to be a hug – at least, that's what I intend to do, when I wrap an arm around his waist. But somewhere in the movement, intentions get blurred, and then I'm brushing a brief, soft kiss to his mouth. It lasts half a second, and then I'm whispering, "Thank you."

He nods shortly. "Of course."

Alex meets my eyes as Ben leaves, and I open my mouth to apologize, but he just waves his hand, as if to say, *I'm used to it by now*. On the couch, Garen gives a little bit of a groan. Without really meaning to move, I drop to my knees in front of him and catch his face between my hands. "Garen, what happened to you?"

"Fucking... fucking *midget* should've just left me alone... shouldn't have fuckin' followed me," he grumbles.

"Where did you go, G?" Alex asks, joining him on the couch.

Garen slumps sideways against him. "Two one six." He's gotta be high, because that makes absolutely no sense. Seeing our blank faces, he adds. "Five, five, five, eighteen, sixty-seven." A phone number, which'd make two one six an area code... to where? When neither Alex nor I says anything to that, he rolls his bloodshot eyes and says, "I went *home*, you morons. Back to Cleveland."

"Garen, you don't live in Ohio anymore. You live here," Alex says. He shifts off the couch and helps Garen carefully lie down across it.

Garen buries his face in his hands and mutters, "I wish I were dead."

Neither Alex nor I know what to say to that. Thankfully, Ben comes back out of the kitchen. "I got Bill's number from the notepad by the phone. The train back from New York got in about half an hour ago. They should be here sometime soon."

Garen whimpers and throws himself into a sitting position. "Fuck that. Fuck no, my dad's not gonna see me like this, he can't see me like this, all strung out, all fucked up. Fuck this, I'm getting out of here."

Alex and I manage to restrain him for long enough for Ben to join Garen on the couch. He hooks an arm around the green-eyed boy's shoulders and wrenches him flat so that Garen's head is pillowed in Ben's lap. Then he says simply, "We're not letting you leave."

There isn't enough fight left in Garen, I guess, because he just lies there after that. Sometimes he makes awkward eye contact with Alex, but mostly he just stares up at Ben. Anywhere but at me. He is almost calm again by the time the door is thrown open for a second time. In fact, when Bill steps forwards, followed by my sister, all Garen does is blink once. After a too-long hesitation he whispers, "Hey, Dad."

"Garen," Bill breathes, "how did you get like this? Where have you been? Why did you—"

"I can answer most of those questions," Ben interrupts quietly, "you know, if it'll make things easier for Garen." When no one objects, he begins, "Yesterday, Travis told me that he and Alex had found proof that Garen had been in the music room at the high school. I went to go see what they'd found. The computer was on a page that showed trains to New York City, but I didn't think he was going there to see James, since it sounded like he was trying to disappear for real this time. So, I assumed that he was going to see that guy, Seth. The one who uh..."

The story falters there. Obviously Garen is on drugs right now, but it's a whole new matter to discuss it

casually with Bill sitting right there. This isn't a problem, though, because suddenly, Garen sits up and says, "Seth is the guy who has been dealing me drugs for the past few years."

"Christ," Bill grinds out through clenched teeth.

"When I left Lakewood, sometime really early on Saturday morning, I took a train to New York. I wasn't planning to stay long, because I knew people would find me if I hung around Patton for too long. I bought a bus ticket, then took a cab to Patton to see Seth. Between my train ticket, the cabs I'd taken, and the bus ticket, I had practically no money left. But, you know, I-I had to... coke's not free, okay? It's not, and I needed it, but I couldn't a-afford it. So, you know, Seth and me, we worked out a deal—"

I can feel my stomach rolling; I wonder how much longer I'll be able to listen before I throw up.

"—and then I got scared, because I knew people would figure out where I was, and I had already bought a ticket to Cleveland, so I went, and I got on the bus. And I was fucked up, so the ride must've been a few hours, but it felt like it was a lot faster, it felt like it was like, half an hour, tops. But, you know, between the detour to New York and the time I spent at Patton, I guess it balanced out, because I got off the bus at the station in Cleveland, and Ben was just standing there, waiting for me."

"I knew that Cleveland was the only place besides Patton and Lakewood where he had any real ties, so I sort of took a gamble on it," Ben explains. "Since he'd left his car in the Lakewood High lot, I knew he'd have to take the bus in, so I just drove to the station – it was only about an eight hour drive, maybe less. I stayed there all night, I was practically about to pass out by the time he showed up."

"That was around two in the morning," Garen says flatly. "We were both dead tired, so I called one of my old friends. He let us crash at his apartment for a few hours, just to get some sleep."

"Then we came back," Ben finishes with a shrug that's too tense to mean he's telling the truth.

And of course, Garen shakes his head and says flatly, "No. Then we started to come back, stopped for coffee at a rest stop, I blew a guy for drugs in the parking lot, and Ben beat the shit out of said guy."

"Garen," Ben snaps, but Garen just shrugs.

"What? It was impressive. He was a foot taller than you. You should be proud."

"Ben," Bill says, reaching out and grasping Ben's shoulder, "thank you. There are no words I can use to express how grateful I am for this. You... you saved my son. You brought him back."

Ben just looks uncomfortable. I ache for the flush creeping into his cheeks. "It's nothing, Mr. Anderson. But um... I feel like Alex and I should go? This is more of a... I don't know. Family thing, I guess."

Before Bill can protest – not that he seems inclined to—Ben and Alex both stand and head quickly towards the door. It only takes me a second to convince myself that it's okay to follow them. Ben is halfway down the driveway before I catch him. He doesn't seem terribly surprised when I throw my arms around him, crushing him to my chest. "Thank you. Thank you so much. God."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving," he mumbles from somewhere around my collarbone. I want to kiss him again, want to knot my fingers in his hair and drag him up to my bedroom to show him just how much this means to me. I want to tell him that I don't care if this is a totally inappropriate time to have this conversation, because I want him to take me *back*. But then I hear Alex's car peeling out of the driveway, and the voices in the house are starting to get too loud for comfort.

I let go of Ben.

"Call me later and let me know how everything works out, okay?" he says.

"Will you pick up this time, or will you be halfway to fucking... Oklahoma or something?" I ask, and he laughs a little. Laughing is good. I need to know that any of us are still capable of it.

"I'll pick up," he promises. "Bye, Travis."

I wait until he has driven out of sight before I go back inside. From the tail end of the conversation that I've walked into, Garen is pleading for the opportunity to go take a shower and get some fresh clothes on before this discussion goes any further. "Please, Dad. I feel disgusting, I feel like shit. I'll tell you everything, I promise we'll talk this all out, but I just... please let me get out of these clothes."

He looks like he wants to get out of his *skin*. There's a prickle of rage boiling under my skin, and I briefly allow myself to wonder what *really* happened between him and Seth when he went up to Patton yesterday. Bill seems to be thinking along the same lines, because he softens a little and finally concedes, "Alright. Go shower, put on some clean clothes. I'll make a pot of coffee. And then we talk, Garen. About everything."

Garen nods shortly, and I duck back into the kitchen so I won't have to watch him stagger up the stairs. Bree is sitting at the kitchen table, hugging her knees to her chest. I sit down across from her.

"He's really messed up," she says quietly.

I don't really know a way I can deny it and seem sane, so I settle for nodding slowly. "I guess so, yeah."

None of us speak much after that. It doesn't seem like there's anything that can be said. Bill makes the coffee, as promised, and we each have a cup. Even Bree, who usually *hates* coffee. The pot is emptied too quickly, so Bill sets about making another. The seconds tick by.

The thing is, I have taken too many showers with Garen to believe that he's really still in there. It takes him about five minutes, on a slow day. Something is wrong. I excuse myself quietly and slip upstairs. Sure enough, the bathroom door is open, and the shower, though running, is empty. I check his bedroom, then mine, then Bree's. All of them are empty. I check Mom and Bill's room as a sort of last resort - empty - and then find myself facing the last door on the floor. Bill's study. I push open the door.

Garen is sitting at the desk, a glass of whiskey in one hand, a Glock in the other. Every drop of blood in my body turns to ice. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting," he says. He takes a sip of the whiskey and adds, "And drinking."

"I meant the gun, Garen. Why do you have a gun?" I ask, my voice hitching.

"This is my father's Glock 36," he says, turning it over to admire it from another angle, "and in approximately three to five minutes, I am going to shoot myself in the head with it."

I stumble forward, my hand outstretched, and then suddenly, the muzzle is pressed against my forehead. "Really, Travis? Rush the guy with the gun, that's your brilliant plan?" he demands, sounding more irritated and exhausted than homicidal.

The place where the steel meets my skin is freezing cold, and I'm about ten seconds away from pissing myself. I manage to force out four words. "Please don't kill me."

In an instant, the gun is lying on the desk, and Garen is staring at me, looking like he's about to vomit. "Are you fucking kidding me, Travis? I'm not going to kill you, *fuck*, I could never do anything to you. Look at what I'm doing. I would, quite literally, rather die than keep hurting you."

"Just stop doing drugs, stop running away! Stop writing me sad songs, stop getting yourself hurt, and then you won't be hurting me anymore. You don't need to kill yourself, you just need to stop being a *dick*."

He bursts out laughing at that, but there are tears shining in his eyes, so I'm not sure it counts. "You don't get it. It's not just about you. It's me. I'm the problem. Don't you know how I got Seth to give me drugs before I went to Ohio? Weren't you listening? I sucked him off for a single line. Seriously. And when I started to come down, I let him fuck me in the ass. That bought me a gram. I have actually started whoring myself out for drugs."

"You're addicted to cocaine," I say through gritted teeth. "That's what addicts do. But we can get you help. You can get clean."

"Getting clean won't help!" he cries. "There's something wrong *inside me*. Even without the drugs, even forgetting all about you, I am wrong, right down to my soul. It's not something you can fix. All you can do is let me get rid of it--"

He reaches for the gun again, and I know, I just *know* that if I don't move, he will shoot himself with that gun, and my entire world will end. Without pausing to consider the stupidity of what I'm doing, I dive headlong over the desk, tackling him off the chair and wrestling him to the floor. It's too late, though, the Glock is already in his hand, and we're both screaming at each other. I have no idea what he's saying -- it seems to involve a lot of "Get off of me! Let me go, I *hate* you!" -- and honestly, I'm not too sure what I'm saying either -- something like, "I'm not letting you go! Drop the gun, Garen, drop it!" He scratches at my skin hard enough to draw blood, trying to claw his way away from me, and I keep banging his wrist against the floor, trying to break his grip on the gun. Even now, thirty pounds lighter than he was when I met him, he is still so much stronger than me, and I know that I'm going to lose this battle soon enough. So, I draw back my fist and punch him in the face as hard as I can. Pain shoots up my arm, but he falls back on the ground, stunned and bleeding from the nose, and the gun goes skittering across the floor. We both scramble after it, and I manage to kick it out of the room, into the hallway. Garen stands and bolts for the door, and I throw myself after him, pinning him to the hallway wall with my full weight.

"Stop it!" I am yelling in his ear. "Stop, Garen, I'm not going to let you do it. I'm not going to let go of you!"

Bill and Bree come sprinting up the stairs. Bree is the first to see the gun, and she points a shaking finger at it, whispering, "Oh my god."

Bill grabs the gun and steps back, clutching it with two white-knuckled hands. "What's happening? What are you two doing?"

"Get off of me," Garen groans. "Just let go of me, Travis. Give me the gun, I need the gun, please, I want to fucking die--"

"No," I say, catching his face between my palms and pushing his hair away from his eyes. "Garen, look at me. I'm not going anywhere, not now. I'm not going to let you hurt yourself. I love you too goddamn much to let you do that. If you die, I will die. We're going to get you clean, we're going to get you help."

He twists away from me to face the wall, and bangs his head against it three times, his eyes squeezed shut like he's trying to stop himself from breaking down in sobs. "I'm so fucked up, Travis."

"Yeah," I say, because who am I kidding? As he sinks to the floor, I drop to my knees so that I can keep my arms around him, and whisper, "Yeah, you are. But we all are. And we're going to get through this together. I promise, okay?"

Unable to speak anymore as the aching, heart-breaking sobs finally take over, he nods.

Chapter Forty-Six

Garen is admitted to the Lakewood Rehabilitation Center the following day. I am sitting next to him in the waiting room as he fills out one of the entry forms; on the line designated “reason for admittance,” he carefully prints *cocaine addiction, alcoholism*. There’s a brief pause during which his hand shakes so much that he needs to put the pen down and shake out the tension. Then he picks it up again and adds *nervous breakdown* to the list.

“I don’t get why I have to write all this down,” he says, twisting to look at his father, who is seated on his other side. “You told them everything over the phone.”

“I told them that my son needed treatment for drug and alcohol dependency, and possibly some psychological issues. I didn’t tell them the details. That’s up to you,” Bill says simply. Garen scowls and slouches down in his seat, scribbling out the rest of the information the form requires.

When an attendant comes to collect him, he asks if Bill and I are allowed to go with him for the rest of his preliminary evaluation. I don’t want to go, but the attendant ushers us into the office after him. The three of us sit down on one side of the table, and the attendant takes the completed form, gives it a quick once-over, and says, “My name is Cheryl, I’m going to be handling your entry to LRC today. Garen, I have to commend you for making the decision to enter treatment for your problems. A lot of people never do that. You should be very proud of yourself for having the self-awareness to realize you need help.”

“Yeah. Proudest moment of my life,” Garen murmurs.

“I’d appreciate it if you could tell me more about your problems with drugs and alcohol. Not all of the details, of course, that will be covered during your therapy sessions. But if you could tell me more about what specifically made you realize that you’d reached the point where you needed to enter treatment for addiction.”

Garen is silent for a long moment. When I glance over at him, he is rigid in his chair and staring at the floor. Apparently, he hadn’t expected a real interview about this. I reach over and hook my pinky finger around his, just to remind him that I’m here. He clears his throat. “I kind of need to tell you some of the background so the story makes sense. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Cheryl obliges.

“Alright.” Garen takes a deep, shaky breath. “I used to experiment with drugs a lot when I was at boarding school in New York. When I moved to Lakewood in October, I decided to stop, and I was fine until about two months ago. See, um... my dad – this is my dad— kicked me out of the house in January, because he found out that I was dating Travis—this is Travis. And um, my dad was engaged to Travis’ mom, we were all living together. Dad had some problems with the idea of me being with the guy who was supposed to be my stepbrother, so he told me to get out. I went to stay in New York, with my best friend. After Dad married Ev – that’s Travis’ mom—I came back, because I found out Travis had started dating my friend, Ben. We had a party, and one of my old friends from boarding school brought me some coke.”

“This was in April?” Cheryl confirms.

Garen nods. “Yeah, April seventeenth. So, I started using casually after that, and at the end of that same week, I started dating this guy, uh... this guy, Dave. We had dated when I was in boarding school, but we stopped because—well, see, our relationship was really messed up. Like, he used to beat

the shit out of me, or whatever. A lot. He put me in the hospital once, but we kept dating. And, I dunno, whatever. But we started dating again in April, and I kept... I don't know how to phrase it." He laughs a little.

"You started provoking him," I supply.

Cheryl frowns. "Travis, it's important to know that abuse is—"

"—never the victim's fault, yeah, we all know," Garen interrupts. "But, see, it was. At least, it was for me. I wanted him to hit me. I kept pushing all of his buttons, doing everything I could to get him to just *fight* me, because it's easier to handle someone punching you in the face than it is to handle someone breaking your heart."

A lump is forming in my throat, but I just keep staring at the floor, trying to ignore it.

"Anyway, one night, Dave and I got into a big fight. And I start shoving him, smacking him, nothing that'd really hurt, just enough to get him to hit me. So, he did. I ended up in the hospital, with a couple fractured ribs, a couple broken fingers."

"A broken leg," Cheryl supplies, gesturing to the cast on Garen's leg.

He smiles ruefully. "Yeah. The doctor put me on all these painkillers, and I, of course, started abusing them. And, you know, that plus the coke, plus the drinking... it was a bad combination."

"He started doing some crazy shit," I add, still trying to focus on the floor, even though I can feel everyone turn to look at me. "H-He came to pick me up at school one day, even though his leg's in a cast, even though he was high. And then when we got home that same day, he cut off half his hair and dyed it black—"

"It's mostly faded now," Garen says, dragging a self-conscious hand through his short, unruly curls. "And I, uh—"

"—the lip rings," I finish. "He did them himself, right in front of me."

"Early Saturday morning, Garen ran away," Bill interjects. "He's only back now because Travis' boyfriend, Ben—"

"Ex-boyfriend," I mutter.

"—drove to Ohio to pick Garen up at the bus station. Last night, Travis prevented Garen from shooting himself."

"I pulled the gun on Travis first," Garen murmurs. Next to him, Bill jolts, and I suddenly realize that no one but Garen and I had been in the study for that part. This is the first anyone else is hearing of it.

"It's not like that," I say quickly. "When I saw that he had it in his hand, I ran forward to take it from him. He wouldn't have shot me."

"I wouldn't have shot you," Garen agrees, "but I still held a gun to your head. You can't honestly tell me you're going to just forget about all that!"

"I feel like this is the type of thing that you'll need to work through on your own, Garen," Cheryl

says, not unkindly. "For now, I think we should get you settled in one of the rooms. LRC is a small enough establishment that you won't be required to have a roommate, but staff reserves the right to enter your room at any point, with or without your permission. None of the rooms in this building have locks, except for the doctors' offices. There are security cameras in all of the hallways, all open areas such as the cafeteria, the group therapy rooms, and the common room."

"Sounds reasonable," Garen says stiffly.

Cheryl smiles slightly. "Now, based on what you have told me and what I discussed on the phone with your father, it's been decided that you should stay with us for a minimum of sixty days. If you have an issue with this, please let me know."

Garen is silent for a long moment before he finally says, "No, sixty days is fine, I guess."

"Wonderful! You will also be required to adhere to a specific schedule, and a certain code of conduct. You will be attending group and individual therapy sessions every day. Some chores will be assigned to you, such as washing dishes, cleaning common areas, things like that. Fridays are Visitor Days; your friends and family will be permitted to come see how you're doing, what sort of progress you're making. Whoever joins you on those days will be attending group therapy with you. I feel that I should also tell you that all of your visitors will be searched upon arrival. We've had instances in the past of patients attempting drug deliveries within the building, so I'm sure you understand why we must take such precautions. Also, I feel that I should warn you that we do not permit physical contact between patients. This spans everything from fighting to sexual relations. There are also rules about physical contact with your visitors. You will be allowed to shake hands, hold hands, or kiss each other on the cheek or mouth, provided the kiss is chaste. Hugging and open-mouthed kissing are not permitted—"

"I'm totally having a middle-school flashback right now," Garen says. "Did you have my mom help you make these rules?"

Cheryl laughs. "We've had incidents of visitors attempting to pass drugs to patients while hugging them or kissing passionately. Besides, some of our patients are not emotionally stable, and seeing displays of affection like that upsets them." She stands and straightens the few sheets of paper on her desk. "Now, it's time for us to get you settled in your room. All of your belongings will be searched, including the clothes you're wearing now. If it would make you uncomfortable to have your father and boyfriend here—"

"Ex-boyfriend," Garen and I say in unison.

"Of course. If it makes you uncomfortable to have them here for this process, you can say goodbye now."

Garen shrugs and stands. "Nah, they can come along."

Once I have stood up as well, he gives my hand a quick squeeze before stuffing his hands in his pockets and following Cheryl out of the office. Bill gives me a knowing look, and I duck out of the room, blushing. *Shut up, Bill. There's nothing to know.*

We are led down the hall to room with white walls, grey carpet, one long table, and a line of five chairs against one wall. Garen's suitcase is sitting on the table, and a man in a truly disgusting Hawaiian-print shirt is standing next to it, smiling. He thrusts his hand out at each of us in turn. "Hey, guys! My name's Allen. It's nice to meet you all!"

"Allen is another one of the attendants here at LRC," Cheryl informs us. "We're going to be processing your check-in today, Garen. After you're settled in your room, your care will be turned over to Gabe, one of our counselors."

Bill and I take a seat on two of the chairs against the wall, and Garen leans against the edge of the table. "Sounds fine with me."

"Excellent!" Allen beams. Without further ceremony, he unzips Garen's suitcase and dumps the contents out on the table. The suitcase itself is searched thoroughly, every pocket checked, every compartment unzipped. When Allen comes up empty, Cheryl sets up the suitcase further down the table. Allen separates all of the jeans from the pile and digs through the pockets of each one. When he finds a lighter in one of the pockets, Garen is given a brief diatribe about why lighters aren't allowed.

"I forgot I had it," Garen protests. "I'm used to carrying them around because I used to smoke. It's just a habit. And anyway, I was never addicted to *smoking* anything, so it's not like it's going to give me all these thoughts about drugs. You wanna remove temptation, cut off my nose."

I laugh a little at that, until Bill glares at me.

"Regardless, Garen, lighters are not permitted," Cheryl says.

"Can you just give it to my dad or something, then? My best friend gave it to me for my birthday a few years ago, and it's engraved. I'd rather not have it thrown out," Garen says. Cheryl wordlessly holds out the lighter in Bill's direction, but I'm the one who takes it. Garen glances at me, and I shrug.

"I'll hold onto it until you get out. Or, if you'd rather, I can just put it in your room back at the house," I offer. He shrugs back, and I take that as a yes; I stuff the Zippo in my pocket.

The bag of toiletries poses a problem, too. While his toothbrush passes inspection, his toothpaste, mouthwash, shampoo, conditioner, and hair products are all confiscated. "Standard procedure," Allen chirps at us. "Everything will be provided to you."

Garen's flat-iron is added to the stack of things that must be sent home, as is his razor. That *really* seems to irritate him. "I'm in this place for two months! I'm going to have a fucking *beard* by the time I get out."

"On Saturdays, students from the local cosmetology school come to assist patients with personal upkeep. It gives women the chance to maintain their hair color, and men who wish to shave can get a trim from one of the students studying to be a barber," Cheryl says. "We can't allow patients to keep their own razors, because it's possible to use one as a weapon."

"Yeah, I know," Garen says. This is followed by a too-long silence. I glance up at him, but he is watching Cheryl, who is eyeing his combat boots with a frown. Garen clears his throat. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, actually," Allen supplies. "We're going to need to remove the laces on your boots for now, which might make them difficult to walk in. Do you have any other shoes you could wear?"

"The hell do you need to remove the laces for?" Garen frowns. "I mean, okay, I know I said I'd snort *anything*, but like, I meant *drugs*. Not footwear."

"Because of the incident you and Travis described involving the gun, we're going to have to place you on

twenty-four hour suicide watch. Not for the entire time you're a patient here, but for at least another week. Part of this involves keep all items such as shoelaces, belts, and ties away from you."

"Do you really think I'm going to try to hang myself with a shoelace?" Garen asks doubtfully.

"Yes," is the simple reply.

A few beats of silence pass, then Garen shrugs and removes his belt. "Guess you'll need this, too, then."

"You'll also need to hand over both lip rings, as I assume they have sharpened points for piercing. Any other jewelry you're wearing, too."

It's a little painful to watch Garen remove the snakebites – he winces a little, so I assume he hadn't thought through the removal when he shoved them through his lip a few weeks ago. He tosses them onto the table, then reaches under his shirt to remove a long gold chain. I expect him to toss it on the table, too, but he crosses the room and dangles it in front of me. I blink at the pendant, a small Star of David. "You mind holding onto this? Kind of a family heirloom thing. My mom would kill me if I lost it."

I glance sideways at Bill, but he doesn't seem to intend to accept it on my behalf. I've got no choice but to take it. There's a flash of surprise across Garen's face when I slip the chain over my head and tuck it under the front of my t-shirt, rather than stuff it into my pocket with the lighter, but he takes it in stride.

"We all set now?"

"Not quite." Allen pushes a pair of the already-searched jeans and a t-shirt down the table. "You'll need to change into that so that we can examine the clothes you're wearing now."

Garen snorts. "And I assume I'll need to do that here?"

A brief nod from both of the counselors. "Yes. You can keep your undergarments on, but once you have removed your jacket, shirt, and pants, Allen will need to give you a quick pat-down."

"Good thing I'm not the kind of person who'll make a man buy me dinner before he gets to cop a feel." Garen shrugs out of his black leather jacket and holds it out. Allen pats it down, examines the pockets – nothing but a pen and a pack of gum, both of which are examined, then replaced. When he shucks off his t-shirt and exposes the pale, slightly-bruised skin of his too-thin chest, I close my eyes and let my head drop a little. It doesn't feel right to see him like this. I hear him pop open the button on his jeans, hear the scratch of the zipper, then the shifting of fabric on skin. There's a brief pause, during which I assume Allen is giving him the aforementioned pat-down. Suddenly, Garen laughs. "Travis, you do realize you've seen me naked like, a dozen times before, right? I *really* don't think you're fooling anyone with the 'blushing virgin' routine."

"Yeah, yeah," I say, my face burning and my eyes still determinedly shut. "Just finish getting felt up, and put your clothes back on."

A few moments later, a hand ruffles my hair, and Garen says quietly, "I'm dressed now."

"Excellent," Cheryl says. "Well, I think it's about time we got you set up in one of the rooms, yes? You can say goodbye to your family here."

Bill stands wordlessly and embraces his son. I can tell that he's trying to put everything he has into that hug, just like how I can tell that both of the attendants are watching their hands to make sure there's no

exchange of drugs right here. Finally, after too long, Bill releases him and steps backward. "I'll visit you as soon as allowed. Is there anyone you'd like me to—"

"Can you ask Mom if she'll come? I-I know she's busy, I know she works a lot. But it'd be nice if she could visit. And maybe just extend the invitation to Jamie, too. He's moving back South soon, but I don't know. If he happens to be around sometime over the next couple months..."

"Of course," Bill says. He glances around, then adds, somewhat awkwardly, "Would you like me to ask any of your friends from around here? Perhaps Ben or Alex might—"

"If anyone wants to come see me, they can come see me," Garen says evenly, "with the exception of your wife."

Bill sighs. "Garen, I—"

"I'm serious, Dad. I don't want her to come here," he says, and suddenly, he turns to face Cheryl. "I'm eighteen years old, and I signed myself in. I'm the only thing keeping me here, right?"

"Right," Cheryl says, frowning.

Garen looks back at Bill. "If Evelyn walks into this building, I walk out of it. I'm not going to be around her anymore. I can't."

The vehemance of this statement is surprising. Even knowing how much Garen hates my mom, the fact that he would drop out of rehab just to get away from her is... insane. Insane even taking into account that fact that he recently held a gun to my head. But Bill is nodding now, stiffly, and heading for the door. I take a step to follow him, but Garen snags my elbow. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

"No can do, kiddo," Alan says quickly. "We can allow you two to be alone together, seeing as how you've already gone through your search. But if you'd like, your dad and Cheryl can both step outside so it's just the three of us." He pantomimes zipping his lip.

Garen is barely capable of stopping himself from scowling, but he settles for a shrug, then a nod. Once Bill has been ushered out into the hall and the door has clicked shut behind Cheryl, Garen turns to face me.

For a moment, I wonder if he's going to kiss me. I wonder if I should let him. It would be so easy now, with Ben off pretending I never existed, with no one in the world who would know about it, except the two of us and awkward, staring Alan. Kissing Garen right now could be like a goodbye. But just when I've convinced myself that yes, I will kiss him back, he says abruptly, "I don't want you to come visit me, either."

"Excuse me?" I say blankly.

"In fact, it's pretty much the same deal as it is with your mom. If you walk into this building again after today, I'm gone. I'm done."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," he echoes. "I don't want to have to put up with you anymore. The next two months are going to be hard enough without having you in my face all the goddamn time. Like, what, you think I want you to come around just to remind me how much of a fuck-up I am?"

That's bullshit, I think. I would never say that to you, and you know it. But I stay silent.

"Everything in my life is harder when you're around. So, really, I'm just... I'm over it. I'm over trying to make things seem even remotely normal. I'm over acting like I can deal with having you be my friend. I'm fucking done with everything that reminds me of you, alright? So please, don't visit me. Don't call me. Don't do anything to me. We clear?"

Rage is bubbling up inside of me like a pan of boiling water. After all these months, after all these horrible days and nights, of course he would find a way to make it all my fault. Of course even now, when he's entering rehab because he has a drug problem and he threatened to kill himself, of course it's still all about me.

I don't wait for him to say anything that will feel like even more of a punch to the gut. I turn on my heel and storm out of the room, nearly crashing into Bill, who frowns. "Is everything alright?"

"It's great," I force out. "Can we just go home already?"

Bill lets me drive back to the house. I should probably decline the offer, since the first thing my droning driver's education instructor taught me is that I shouldn't drive if I'm emotional. But "emotional" and "so angry I'm surprised I haven't burst into flames" don't really feel like the same thing, so I assume it's alright. Once I have pulled into the driveway, cut the engine, and tossed Bill his keys, I stomp inside and head straight for the living room couch to bury my head under the throw pillows.

The worst part is that there's no one I can call. Half my friends are still in school. Garen's made it clear I can never contact him again. Ben... Ben would laugh in my face if I called him up to whine about Garen. And I would deserve it.

After a few minutes, I unearth myself from the pillows, glancing towards the door that Bill should've walked through a long time ago. I stand and approach the front door, peering out cautiously through the window. My stepfather is sitting on the front steps, speaking into his cell phone. I wonder who he's calling. Marian, probably. She'd want to know how everything went today. Moms are supposed to care about stuff like this, right?

As if in response to my thoughts, I hear a tinkle of laughter from the den that has been Garen's bedroom for so long. Frowning, I approach the door, hovering outside of it as I realize that my mom's inside, apparently on the phone with my aunt.

"Carolyn, all I can say is good riddance to him. I've told you about all the trouble he caused! How he damaged poor Travis? How he *traumatized* my only son into believing that he's a homosexual? It's appalling." A brief pause, then a snort of laughter. "Miss him? Are you joking? I couldn't *wait* for him to leave. The months he was gone were fantastic for me, for everyone. Everything around our house was perfect, until he showed up again after the wedding. Then he comes prancing around, drinking everything in sight, taking all different kinds of drugs, trying to seduce my son all over again. Did I tell you what happened the week before last?"

Another pause, during which I have to stuff my fist in my mouth and bite down to keep myself from screaming at her.

"Well, the morning after that horrible blow-out at the dinner table – oh, you do too know what I'm talking about. When he told me all those horrendous lies about Travis? The tattoos? Lord, I thought I'd die. Anyway, Travis of course disappeared to his little friend's house that night, and Bill left for work early in

the morning, to avoid a discussion about it, I suppose. When I came downstairs, Garen was just sitting in the living room, drinking whiskey. At eight o'clock in the morning! He tried to *apologize*, to tell me he hadn't meant to be such a bother the night before. Said he was going to try to be better. I said to him, 'Try all you want, it makes no difference to me! You're a selfish, ungrateful, disgusting little thing, and that's all you'll ever be. I don't love you, your father doesn't love you, and my son certainly doesn't love you, so whatever game you're trying to play, knock it off. He will never let you corrupt him more than you already have. He will never choose you, especially if it means going against this family. Snap out of it, you're wasting your time, and you're never going to win.' And of course, little brat that he is, he even threw *that* in my face, with those ridiculous notes he left when he ran away again last week. 'Evelyn, you win.' Of course I won! How could he expect to be anything other than a *loser*? I swear, Carolyn, everything would've been so much easier if that Walczyk boy had just beaten the little kike to death years ago—"

That's too much.

I throw open the door and Mom practically falls off the piano bench in surprise. I stalk across the room and grab the phone out of her hand, ending the call and hurling the device across the room. It smashes against one of the bookcases, and the battery pack flies off. Mom seems torn between scolding me and trying to suss out what I've heard. In case she doesn't realize, in case there's any *doubt*, I lean in as close as I dare and hiss, "You fucking disgust me."

"Travis Daniel McCall, I will not let you speak to me that way!" she shrieks at my already retreating back. It's not her protests that make me freeze halfway across the living room however; it's the fact that I have only just now realized that Bill, clearly returned from his phone call on the porch, is standing in the foyer, his face blank. Mom follows me out into the room, only to skitter to a halt. "Bill! I—"

"Don't say anything," Bill interrupts. For too long of a moment, the house is completely silent. So silent I can hear the blood pulsing in my ears. Finally, Bill continues, "You got caught up in the wrong competition, Evelyn. Maybe you're right, maybe Garen did lose when it comes to Travis. But he's not going to lose me."

"Bill," Mom says fretfully, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

Bill just shakes his head. "He is my son, Ev. I don't understand how you could ever think that I would just write him off. He's my only child, I love him more than *anything*. I would die for that boy, just as I hope you'd be willing to die for Travis or Bree. Garen's my little boy."

"I understand, Bill, really, I—"

"No, I don't think you do. So, let me be very, very clear with you," Bill says, and I know what he's going to say before he even says it. "I want a divorce."

Chapter Forty-Seven

Despite whatever claims he made about us still being friends, it's another month before I see Ben again, and even *that's* an accident. Or a set-up. Or both.

My phone chimes from the cup-holder of Bree's car. Flying in the face of every rule I had to promise to obey in order to get my driver's license – barely a week old now – I answer the call, shifting to hold the steering wheel with one hand. "Hello?"

"Hello, Freckles."

I almost swerve off the road. "James?"

"You know any other dapper Southern gentlemen?" is the reply. I can practically hear the smirk mixed in with his drawl. "Listen, I'm in Lakewood for a little while. Visiting Garen, seducing the townsfolk, that sort of thing. I'd like to see you. What are you doing right now?"

"Uh, driving?" I say. Or, at least, that's what I'm *supposed* to be doing. Whoever's in the car behind me probably can't tell that, though. "I'm headed to The Daily Grind to pick up my paycheck."

There's a brief, slightly awkward pause, then James says, "Perfect. That's where I am now. I'll see you soon."

The call cuts off before I can protest. I contemplate turning the car around, but I can already see the parking lot. Sighing, I flick my signal on and turn into the lot. There are only a few cars, so I park as close to the door as I can. Maybe this thing won't take that long. A few steps into the shop, however, I freeze.

James is sitting at one of the tables against the wall; Alex is at his side, and across the table, someone in a hooded sweatshirt is sitting with his back to me. I don't need him to turn around for me to know it's Ben, which is probably a good thing, since he doesn't seem capable of moving right now. James raises a hand and gives a short wave, like there's any possible way I could miss him. There are only three other people in the entire coffee shop, not counting the two behind the counter. I hold up a finger briefly to signal that he should hang on, then head back into the staff area. Jerry isn't in his office, but this week's paychecks are stacked neatly on his desk, under a post-it note that simply reads, "take yours." I find mine, fold it in half, and stuff it in my pocket. I leave the office to discover that James seems to be scolding Ben, who is sitting up perfectly straight, his entire body stiff. If only to buy myself a minute before I have to go back over, I set about making myself a cappuccino. Miranda, one of the full-timers I only work with on weekends, swats me with one of the hand-towels.

"You know, you're only supposed to be back here when you're *working*," she says.

"So I'll work. What can I get you?" I say over her head to the next customer in line.

"Medium latte," he says, then, glancing at the dessert case, adds, "and one of those lemon scones."

"Coming right up," I say, turning to the espresso machine.

Miranda bumps me out of the way with her hip. "It's your day off, Travis. Shoo."

"Miri, please let me stay here," I drop my voice to something barely above a whisper. "See the guy in the

sweatshirt, the one who looks like he's about to die because he's just *that* uncomfortable?"

She spares him a brief glance. "Yeah? So?"

"He's my ex-boyfriend," I say, and her eyebrows shoot up. "We broke up about six weeks ago. Haven't seen each other since. The blonde across the table is Alex, who's secretly in love with my ex, but currently also secretly sleeping with the dark-haired guy next to him. That guy's James, the best friend of Garen. As in, the Garen who used to perform here on Friday nights, the Garen who is now in rehab, the Garen whose dad is divorcing my mom right now, the Garen who I used to date. *So please just let me stand back here for a minute while I figure out what the fuck I'm going to do.*"

Miranda just sort of blinks at me for a moment. Finally, she shrugs and finishes making the latte. "You're going to go back into Jerry's office and take a big, long drink from that flask he thinks none of us know he keeps in his top drawer. And then you're going to get your ass back on the other side of this counter, because – teenage angst, or not – you're still not working today."

"You have no soul," I hiss as she shoves me back around the front of the counter. As if forgetting himself, Ben catches my eye and quirks a brow. I give a somewhat spastic shrug. "That uh... that's Miranda. She works here."

"Kinda figured that," Ben says. Am I just imagining the way his voice shakes a little when he speaks?

James gestures to the only remaining chair, the one next to Ben. "Have a seat."

I drop wordlessly onto the chair and take a too-long sip of my cappuccino, burning my mouth just so I don't have to say anything yet. James, however, seems willing enough to speak. "Garen tells me you haven't been in to see him."

I practically spit out the mouthful of cappuccino. "Did he neglect to mention that he said he'd quit rehab if I so much as stepped into the building?"

"No, he mentioned it," James says with a shrug. "I'm just surprised you listened. I figured you'd show up anyway."

"I have no reason to," I say flatly.

"He's your friend."

"He held a gun to my head. He's not my friend."

Next to me, Ben jumps, accidentally kicking the table hard enough to upend Alex's mostly empty coffee cup. He immediately begins sopping it up with paper napkins clutched in shaking hands. "Sorry. Sorry, he told me he did that. I knew. But it was weird hearing you say it, too."

Panic tears a hole in my chest. When were they together? Did Ben go to see him in LRC? Am I the only one who hasn't?

"Alright, he's not your friend. He's still your stepbrother," Alex says slowly.

"Bill filed for divorce a month ago, so, no, he's not going to be my stepbrother for much longer," I say, trying to convince myself that I'm imagining the way Ben's hands ball up into white-knuckled fists. "I have nothing to say to him, and he's got nothing to say to me."

"They took him off suicide watch after about a week, but it took until about two weeks ago for the withdrawal symptoms to subside," James says, as if I haven't even spoken. "Every day, he's in individual therapy for an hour, group therapy for two. He even has an initial diagnosis."

"What, 'dickhead' is an official diagnosis now?" I say, folding my arms over my chest.

"His doctors think he has borderline personality disorder," Ben says quietly, and I can't help but turn to him, feeling myself boiling over.

"So, you've been going to visit him, too? Best fucking friends again, is that how it is?"

"Actually, we've only gone to see him once, last Friday, you monumental douchebag," Alex says in a tone of extremely forced calm. "So, do you want to maybe shut the fuck up so we can tell you what's going on with him?"

"I don't even know what borderline person—"

"It's a personality disorder," Ben says, in that same horrible quiet voice, "and it apparently just makes him unstable as fuck. He says that they keep telling him it's why he can sometimes be so self-destructive or temperamental or manipulative, why he goes from loving someone to thinking they're shit in a matter of minutes. And why he's so, you know, reckless, I guess, with drugs and sex and stuff."

"So, is it... I don't know. 'Borderline personality' kind of sounds like 'dissociative identity.' Does this mean he's actually got like, multiple personalities?" I ask uncertainly.

Alex shakes his head. "He said it's not like that at all. He's always Garen, all the time, just sometimes he's really screwed up. Apparently, it's also the reason why his relationships tend to be—"

"Dude, I know exactly how his relationships tend to be. You really don't have to explain it to me," I say. Garen went from proposing to breaking up with me in a matter of days. He came back to Lakewood for me, then spent the whole next night telling me he had never loved me to begin with. He dated Dave *twice*. "Are they going to medicate him?"

Therapy, hospitalization, medication. These are the monsters I'm most familiar with.

"No. He's a drug addict, so I really don't think anybody's too eager to give him pills right now. If they do put him on something, it might be a low dose of antipsychotics or mood stabilizers, but right now, he's only focusing on therapy," Ben says.

Alex shrugs. "He says the LRC hosts a lot of outpatient meetings, too. His doctor says that, once he gets out, he should start going to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and stuff. It'll help him stay sober, and I guess..."

He trails off awkwardly, his eyes fixed on his own hands. After a moment, I clear my throat so he'll look at me. I prompt, "You guess what?"

"I guess it's just important that he has a support system in place," he replies in a strange monotone that sounds a lot more like Ben than usual. "After everything that's happened, nobody expects you to join that support system, but it might be nice if you were willing to give him another shot."

"I've given him enough shots, Alex," I say. "Every time I give him a shot, he finds some way to use it to

ruin my life. Or the life of somebody I love.”

Next to me, Ben makes a small noise in his throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“You’re not the only person Garen hurt, Travis,” James says, his voice softening a little. “I love that man more than anyone does, except maybe his own parents. He’s like my brother. A *real* brother, not like how everyone wanted to force you two to be brothers. Garen and I are best friends, for life, and if you don’t understand that it kills me to see him like this, you’re not as smart as I think you are. If I can forgive him for doing this to himself, anyone can forgive him for anything else.”

“Just think about it,” Ben says abruptly, standing suddenly and straightening his coat. “Look, I’ve got to get going. My dad’s probably going to want me back at the bookstore sometime this evening, and I have some shit to do before that.”

“O-Okay,” I say, actively winning the award for world’s biggest moron, “it was nice seeing you again.” Oh my god, why are these words coming out of my mouth?

Ben rotates slowly to face me, and when I peek up at him, he looks like he’s in pain. “I still have some of your stuff at my house. Your jacket. A couple books.”

Like I’d even be able to stomach taking back anything that’s been in his house for this long. Like I could survive wearing a jacket that smells like him now. “Just keep it, I don’t care.”

“I do,” he says, nudging my shoulder. “Just come home with me, alright?”

“Okay,” I say hoarsely. God, when he says it like *that*...

I stand and have followed him halfway across the coffee shop when Alex says tightly, “Ben, please don’t do this.”

“Shut up, Alex,” Ben retorts. I glance back to see Alex staring at me, looking a little shell-shocked. Once we have passed into the parking lot and the door has swung shut behind us, I can see him round on James, snapping, if not yelling at him.

“What’s Alex’s deal?” I ask, as if it hadn’t even occurred to me that he’s just getting jealous once again. The thing is, he’s getting jealous of something that doesn’t exist, that might not even happen.

Ben lets out a hard, frustrated sigh and glances at the keys in my hand. “Just AI being AI. Since you’ve got your car with you, wanna just follow me back to my house? It’ll be easier that way.”

I am endlessly grateful for the drive back to Ben’s, even if it only takes a few minutes. It’s enough to let me clear my head, get me to calm myself down. Breathe, Travis. You’re just getting your stuff back. You’re finalizing the break-up, like you should have done a month ago. This will be good for both of you. Closure.

For once, the driveway isn’t empty. Ben’s mom’s car is parked in front of the garage, and Ben pulls up behind it. I park on the other side of the driveway, taking care to leave enough room in case Ben’s dad comes home before I leave. By the time I cut the engine and have gotten out of the car, Ben is already standing in front of me, blinking down at the asphalt.

“Your stuff’s in my room.”

“Cool,” I say, like an idiot. “Do you want me to come in? O-Or I could wait right here. Or I could, you know, I could go in, but I could stay in the rec room, instead of going into your room. I don’t wanna make you uncomfortable, or make things weird. So, I can—”

Moving so suddenly that I can’t help but flinch, Ben curls a hand around the back of my neck and yanks me down to his height, whispering, “Jesus Christ, *shut up*.”

I’m not sure which one of us kisses the other first – probably me – but in half a second, I am spinning him around so that he is pinned to the side of my sister’s car, the better to devour every second of this kiss. Once he has slipped his hand up a few inches to knot it in my hair, once my hands have made their way down into his back pockets to grip his ass... everything goes to hell. It’s impossible for me to hide how much this just *hurts*, how much I need this. When his lips brush against the hollow of my throat, I can’t stop myself from whispering, “I love you. Ben, *I love you*.”

“Miss you so much,” he murmurs, and I shudder, pressing my hips against his and ducking to catch his mouth with mine once more. I make a slightly strangled noise as he slips a hand between us to pop open the button on my jeans. He shaky breath ghosts over my lips, and I can feel his hardness against my leg, but when I actually stop to look at his face, his eyes are empty. Completely, disturbingly empty. I make an attempt to shrug away from him and say, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he mutters, leaning back in. “Just kiss me, Travis.”

That’s when the warning sirens start to blare inside my skull. I slide my hands back out of his pockets and take a few steps back, leaving him slumped there against the side of the car. He reaches for my wrist, tugging on it just a little too insistently. “Trav, just come back.”

“Stop,” I order. “Just let go of me for a minute. I-I need a few seconds to just think, okay?”

When Ben speaks again, his voice is rougher. “Think about what? I’m really not understanding the problem here. We both want this to happen again, we’re both consenting adults. There’s no issue here.”

The issue is that this is not him. This is not the Ben McCutcheon I fell so hard for. This is the drawling, bitter guy I met in January, the one who stuck his hand down my pants while telling me that my boyfriend used to fuck him. This is all wrong.

Shifting slowly so that I’m leaning next to him, rather than standing in front of him, and flinching away from his hand when he reaches for me again, I say “You broke up with me.”

“I’m aware,” Ben says, almost coldly. “I was sort of there when it happened.”

“I know, but... what I mean is that nothing has changed. You really, *really* broke up with me. I used to think that the only thing that mattered in a relationship was whether or not people loved each other, but that... that’s not true, is it? Because you love me, I can feel it when you kiss me. You’re still as in love with me as I am with you. But it doesn’t matter, because you don’t want to be with me anymore. Just like how it doesn’t matter that Garen still loves me and I still love him – and I tried not to, Ben, I swear I did. But that’s just, that’s all completely irrelevant, isn’t it? Because I don’t want to be with him, and he isn’t *capable* of being with me. See, when it comes down to it, love doesn’t mean anything unless you want to be with someone in the shitty, boring, pathetic day-to-day. And obviously we love each other enough to do this, whatever it is you want me to come to your room and do with you. I love you enough to make love to you, right inside that house, and you love me enough to want me to. But when it’s over, I’ll go home and we’ll both just be alone again. You know that. You’re not stupid. So tell me why you really want me here. Tell me what I’m doing here, when we both know I won’t be here in the morning.”

"You could be," Ben whispers, slipping an arm around my neck, "I wouldn't stop you from—"

"Cut the shit, Ben. Why do you suddenly want to have sex with me again?" I demand.

He lets out a frustrated sigh that ends up sounding more like a growl than anything else. "Because it's the only way I can convince you to go see Garen!"

Of all the excuses I was expecting, that's at the bottom of the list. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, whether you want to believe it or not, Garen's getting better. He really is. He seems to be figuring his shit out, and I think he honestly wants to stay clean, but if he gets out of the LRC and has to face you, he's just going to freak out and relapse. He can't handle it. S-So, if you went to see him while he was still there, if you visited him so he could get his setback out of his system now, he might be okay again."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," I say flatly.

"It's true," Ben argues. "But you're stubborn as fuck, and I knew you wouldn't agree to see him if I asked you when your guard was up. I was hoping that if we had sex, you'd be... I don't know."

"No, tell me," I say sharply. "If we had sex, I'd be *what*?"

"You're not like the rest of us, okay, Travis?" Ben says finally. "I mean that in the best way possible, but the rest of us can fuck somebody and not have it mean anything. I did that with Ethan and Garen. Garen and James have done that with practically everyone. But you... were actually in love with Garen when you slept with him. You stopped Alex from blowing you because you didn't have feelings for him. And—"

"—and I was in love with you when I slept with you," I finish. "I still am."

Ben flinches. "Don't say that."

"It's true," I say. "I'm done with all this 'hide what's really going on' bullshit. I'm still in love with you, and you know it, which is probably why you've been avoiding me for weeks now. I'm still in love with you, which is why I'm going to agree to visit Garen in rehab. Even though this was a shitty, stupid fucking trick, and even though I kind of hate you for doing this to me, for trying to manipulate me, I'm going to do it."

"Thank you," Ben says quietly. I just sort of shrug. After a moment, he reaches for me again. I'm not sure if he's trying to say 'thank you' without actually having to get the words out, or if he just assumes he should attempt to follow through with his offer of sex in exchange for a promise to visit Garen, but either way, he kisses me again, and I am, of course, too stupid and weak to resist it.

From about a dozen feet away, someone clears their throat, and Ben and I spring apart. When I glance up, his mom is standing at the edge of the driveway, her dark brown hair knotted at the nape of her neck and her jeans covered in dirt. Her gardening glove-adorned hands are planted on her hips, and she is staring at us with a slightly accusatory expression. It's not like this is the first time she's caught us making out, so I can only assume that the look on her face is because she knows that we're supposed to be broken up. I cough. "Hi, Mrs. McCutcheon."

"Hello, Travis. I've told you a hundred times, call me Hillary. Though, I didn't realize you were coming over."

Ben shrugs. "I told him he should swing by to pick up some of his stuff. He—"

"It's so hot out," his mom interrupts. "Why don't we all go inside for some iced tea?"

"Mom, no, that's so awkward," Ben protests, but Hillary silence him with a look, and the three of us make our way up to the front door. I know enough to toe off my shoes just inside the front hall, and I try not to notice the slightly pained look on Ben's face as he watches me follow his mom to the kitchen.

Hillary retrieves a pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator, fills three glasses, and says, "Benji, didn't you say you were going to get Travis' things out of your room?"

Ben just blinks very hard for a few minutes, like he's trying to have a conversation with her through use of his eyelids. She simply raises her eyebrows in response. Ben widens his eyes a little, but when there no response, he scowls and heads for the staircase that leads down to the rec room. I accept the glass that Hillary pushes towards me, but before I can thank her, she begins speaking again.

"I like you, Travis. Please don't assume that what I'm about to say is any indication that I don't. You've made my son so happy, and I was thrilled that he finally found someone who could do that for him, but... it's very rarely a good idea to get back together with someone who you've broken up with once. I don't want Ben to get hurt, and if—"

"We're not getting back together," I say softly. "He was just... I think it was more of a kiss goodbye than anything else."

"I'd be more inclined to believe you, if he hadn't given up Juilliard for you."

I freeze, absolutely certain that I've heard her wrong. The tension in her jaw, though, the slightly critical glint in her eyes leads me to believe that no, I've heard her exactly right. "What do you mean?"

Hillary's eyebrows shoot up towards her hairline. "He didn't tell you?"

"He turned down Juilliard? But he, that was his first choice!"

"They sent his acceptance letter in March, and he wrote to them in early May to let them know he wouldn't be attending. Eight percent of all applicants get accepted, and he turned them down," she says, shaking her head slightly, as if she still can't convince herself that this makes sense even after almost three months.

"Where's he—"

"Yale," Ben says, reappearing at the top of the basement stairs and making Hillary and I both jump. "And, you know, most moms would be pissing themselves if their kid decided to go to Yale."

"I'm proud of you, Ben, you know that. I would be proud of you if you went to Yale, I'd be proud of you if you went to community college, I'd be proud of you even if you never went to *any* college. It's not about that. I'm just worried that you're giving up your dreams so that you can stay closer to your boyfriend. Well, ex-boyfriend now, I suppose."

My face bursts into flame, and Ben rolls his eyes. "I'm not staying in Connecticut because it'll keep me close to Travis. I'm staying because music *isn't* my dream, it's just something I'm good at. And the fact that I *could* go to Juilliard doesn't mean I *should*."

"I just think the timing's a little suspicious!" Hillary says sharply. "Do you think I didn't notice that this

decision came right after Garen returned to town? I don't want you to give up goddamn *Juilliard* just because you're afraid you might lose Travis to another boy."

"It wasn't because Garen came back!" Ben explodes. "It was because he ended up in the hospital."

And suddenly, I'm more lost than ever. Thankfully, this seems to be news to Hillary as well, because she plants her hands on her hips once more and demands, "What does that mean?"

"Mom, you have no idea how heartbroken he looked when he couldn't play guitar because his fingers were broken. Not being able to keep up with his music was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. Worse than getting kicked out, or finding out that his ex-boyfriend was dating his best Lakewood friend. It was killing him not to be able to play guitar, and *I don't feel like that*. If I broke my fingers, I wouldn't be practically killing myself if I couldn't play piano for a few weeks. I mean, I love piano. And I love guitar, and the drums, and—okay, so, I don't really give a shit about the clarinet, but the point is, I love music, and I know I'm talented, but I won't die without it. And I don't think I should go to Juilliard just for the sake of going to Juilliard, especially when there has to be someone out there who cares about music the way Garen cares about music. It would be wrong for me to go to that school if I don't have a passion for music."

I clear my throat. "Look, obviously I don't really have a say in this whole thing, but I just..." God, this is so awkward. Why can't his mom just leave the room? I take a few small steps towards Ben and drop my voice a little. His mom can definitely still hear, but at least this gives me some semblance of privacy. "I'm going to care about you whether you go to school in New Haven, or New York, or fucking New South Wales, Australia. If my drug-addicted ex-boyfriend, my homophobic mom, and my own crippling insecurities and psychological issues can't stop me from loving you, I really doubt that a two hour train ride will."

Ben can't help but crack a small smile at that; he reaches out and brushes his palm over my cheek, murmuring, "That's sweet of you to say, Travis, but it's not about that. I really did make this decision for me, for what I think will make me happiest."

"That's all your father and I want for you, Ben," Hillary says. "We want you to be happy."

As much as I wish I didn't feel this way, the idea of Ben being happy elsewhere, with someone other than me, conjures a dull ache under my ribs. I clear my throat again, if only to cover the sound I'm sure my heart is making as it cracks a little more, and take the stack of items from Ben's other hand. "I should go."

"You don't have to," Ben says quickly.

"No, I probably do," I say. It's obvious now that his excuse of needing to work at his dad's shop later was a lie, but I feel like I'm going to suffocate if I don't get out of here soon. "Listen, I'll do what you asked me to do. And if you want, I can call you sometime this weekend and—"

"Tomorrow. Go tomorrow—you just have to be there by nine in the morning to sign in, and then they'll walk you through everything—and then call me when you get home tomorrow night. I want to know how it goes," Ben says.

I nod, say goodbye to Hillary, and head for the front door. I don't realize Ben is following me until I'm actually opening the door to Bree's car and dumping the stack of returned possessions into the passenger's seat.

"Travis, wait," he says.

“What?” I groan. “Please, Ben, just let me go back to me house to wallow in my misery and try to prepare myself for the unabashed horrors I will be experiencing tomorrow.”

“I know, I know, you can leave in a minute. I just wanted... I want to thank you for agreeing to see Garen. You’re a better man than you give yourself credit for,” he says.

I sit down heavily in the driver’s seat and start up the engine, shutting the door but rolling down the window to say, “Yeah, I’m just fucking fantastic.”

“You are,” Ben says, and he leans through the window to kiss me, a brief touch of lips and then nothing. When he pulls away, I want to lean right out the window and pull him back in, just like he did to me the first time I told him I loved him. But everything is different now – not necessarily that much worse, but sure as hell not any better. Instead, we share a sad smile, and he heads back up to the house while I shove everything off the passenger’s seat, onto the floor, and back carefully out of the driveway.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Preparing myself to visit Garen at the LRC is harder than I had expected it would be. I dress normally, in a pair of shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, but the room where I'm supposed to wait is freezing, even though there doesn't seem to be an air conditioner anywhere. By the time Cheryl, the attendant who checked Garen in weeks ago, arrives to get me, I'm shivering.

"Welcome to Lakewood Rehabilitation Center. Who are you here to see?" she asks, eyes flickering back and forth between me and her clipboard.

"Garen Anderson?" I mean for it to be a statement, but it comes out as a question.

"Alright. I'm going to see your ID so I can log you in," she says. I dig my driver's license out of my wallet and pass it to her. She copies down my name, birth date, and license number, then hands it back to me. "Excellent. Now, if you have a cell phone, you'll need to check it at the front desk."

"I left it in the car," I say.

She nods. "Great. Now, in case you don't know our rules, we like to limit physical contact as much as possible. Handshakes are okay, hugs are not. If at any point we believe you are attempting to pass an illegal substance or weapon to a patient, you will be removed from the premises. If at any point we believe your presence is detrimental to a patient's well-being, you will be removed from the premises. If at any point we believe you are disrupting the group or individual therapy process, you will be removed from the premises. Do you understand these rules?" I nod. "Wonderful. Now, sign right here, please."

I jot my shaky signature on the line she indicates and follow her through one of the room's only two doors.

The room that I am led into is a perfect square, with sea foam green walls and a gray-tiled floor. There are a dozen small tables, each with two chairs on one side, one chair on the opposite side. The tables are arranged in three rows of four, and only the first two rows seem to be in use so far. At the opposite end of the room, four people are lined up, each shifting restlessly in place.

"Sit right here, please," Cheryl says, ushering me towards the nearest empty table. She then raises a hand over her head and calls, "Garen, your visitor is here."

I glance over in time to see Garen step hesitantly out of the line and head towards me, his eyes on the floor. He doesn't seem as thin as he used to, nor does he have the same bags under his eyes. His leg cast must've come off a while ago, because he's walking perfectly fine. His hair has returned to its normal brown color and is longer now, but still shorter than when I first met him. Both of the holes in his lower lip seem to have closed up by now. Only once he has taken the seat across from me does he actually look up, going completely still when our eyes meet.

"Hi," I say. He just stares at me, as though he can't quite work out if I'm really there or not. After nearly a minute of awkward, unnecessary silence, he extends his hand to me. It takes me a moment to remember the rules that must be second nature to him now, and we shake hands. "I know you said you'd check yourself out of here if I came to visit, but I'm hoping to call your bluff."

He lets out a soft ghost of a laugh and shakes his head. "Nah, I'm staying. I stopped threatening to leave after the first couple of weeks. When the withdrawal stopped, I guess."

"So, you're sober now?" I say.

He bobs his head, eyes on the table again. "Forty-five days, yeah. It doesn't seem like much, but it... it *feels* like a lot."

I can't help but smile a little bit. "What, you feel free or something?"

"Suffocated, actually," he says, scratching the back of his neck. "I hate the idea that I'm only eighteen years old, and I've already put myself in a situation where I need to have more boundaries than anyone else I know. I mean, what if I go to college someday? I can't drink. I can't do drugs. I can't party like other people my age party. When James and I hang out with the rest of the Patton boys, and everybody else wants to get fucked up, I won't be able to. When I'm forty-seven years old and everyone in my family is drinking wine on a holiday, I won't be able to. It's so fucking suffocating, you have no idea."

"I have some idea," I say quietly. "After I tried to kill myself, it was like everyone expected me to suddenly start being all sunshine and rainbows, as if this weight was coming off my shoulders just because I was finally being forced to open up about what I was going through. When you admit that you have problems, you forfeit your right to be unhappy."

"Yeah, I guess you do," Garen says. "I just thought that things would get better. I mean, they have, obviously. *I'm* getting better. I don't, you know, want to kill myself anymore. They still won't let me have my shoelaces back, but I think everyone's very clear on the fact that I'm not planning to blow my brains out anytime soon. And I'm pretty much over withdrawal, I guess."

"You don't crave the drugs anymore?" I say.

"Of course I do. I'm always going to *want* to do drugs, Travis. I don't think that's even the point. I think I'm just here so that I can learn how to want them without actually giving in."

We sit in silence for a long time after that, both of us staring at the table, the floor, his stupid unlaced boots, anywhere but at each other. Eventually, Cheryl walks out into the center of the room and announces that it's time for group therapy. I stand uncertainly and follow Garen, who is following everyone else. The next room that we're led to is pretty much the same as the last; both are perfect squares with sea foam-green walls, but there's a plush carpet here, and a large circle of metal folding chairs. Garen drops down into one of the seats, catches my eye, and nods to the seat on his left. I sit obediently.

Once everyone has settled, Cheryl leaves the room, and a skinny thirty-something-year-old with dark hair and a closely-trimmed beard joins the circle. "Morning, guys. How is everyone today?" I notice that the rest of the visitors are silent, though the patients seem to mumble a general greeting. "Enthusiastic as ever. Well, for all our new visitors today, my name's Ryan. I'm the group's counselor. We're gonna start like we always do, by going around in a circle, and I want each patient to say his or her name, why they're here, and a little introduction for their visitors, okay? Let's start here."

The frail-looking woman on his left introduces herself as Shelby and says that she's in for cocaine addiction; the younger woman on her other side is her daughter, Jess. The next woman seems to be about forty years old, calls herself Linda, and admits to being an alcoholic; her husband, Michael, squeezes her hand. Jason, who looks to be somewhere in his twenties, says that he is here for heroin addiction, and that the two guys sitting next to him are his best friends, Aaron and Rick.

Finally, it's Garen's turn. He clears his throat and leans forward, as if to make sure everyone hears him properly. Right. That always-awkward introduction. But rather than stumble his way through a too-long explanation of my status as ex-boyfriend, ex-friend, ex-stepbrother, he simply says, "My name's

Garen, and I'm here for addiction to cocaine, oxycodone, and alcohol. This is my stepbrother, Travis."

I glance at him, waiting to see if he adds anything else, but he's silent. The man sitting on my other side takes over, introducing himself as Henry, a heroin addict. The next person, a beautiful but ill-looking woman named Anna Maria, is also a heroin addict, but everyone else seems to be there for alcoholism. The final exception is Sean, who mumbles that he's addicted to meth. Once all of the introductions are finished, Ryan pulls his chair a little bit closer to the rest of the circle and says, "Alright. Since it's visiting day, we're going to talk about relationships. Now, these can be family relationships, romantic relationships, friendships, whatever you want to talk about. Is there anyone who'd like to start?"

The immediate response is from Shelby and Henry, both of whom discuss their concerns about how their addictions will affect their relationships with their children. Shelby confesses that she's afraid that she has lost her daughter's respect forever, whereas Henry is concerned that he is a bad influence on his son. Their discussion continues for quite some time, and I find myself trying not to check my watch. It's too much of a pull, though, and I eventually glance down. Ten thirty-six. I was told group therapy would end at eleven, wasn't I?

"Now, we've discussed relationships with children. What about romantic relationships?" Ryan prompts. After a moment or so of silence, Jason slowly raises his hand. Ryan nods. "Yeah, Jason, go ahead."

"The longer I'm here, the more I wonder if I'll even know how to be in a relationship without drugs being part of it. I'm afraid that once I'm sober, I'll get bored of whoever I'm dating, because there won't be that, you know, drama, or whatever."

Garen nudges Jason's foot with his. "I'm actually really glad you said that, because I feel the same way. I didn't use at all from early October to mid-April, but I still feel like drug use had an impact on the relationship I was in at the time."

"How?" I don't realize I've spoken until everyone turns to look at me. My face starts to burn, and I slouch down in my seat. "Sorry. I'll be quiet."

"No, no, we encourage visitor participation in all of these discussions. That's pretty much the point of visiting days. Do you have a question for Garen?" Ryan presses.

"I-I guess I just don't see how his relationship could be affected by drugs if he wasn't on drugs at the time. If he hadn't been on drugs for ages," I say.

Garen turns slightly to face me, though his eyes seem fixed at a point about three feet to the left of my face. "It's like Jason said, I still needed that drama that addiction brings. I might not have been snorting coke or—"

"Garen, you know the rules," Ryan interrupts. "I can't allow you to reference specific acts like that."

"Sorry," Garen says quickly. "The point is, I might not have been using drugs while I was dating you, but that's just because I was addicted to *you* at the time. I still had problems, but I was focusing on something else, something besides drugs."

"Hang on," Jason says, frowning. "I thought you said this kid's your brother?"

Garen shakes his head. "He's my *stepbrother*. Well, sort of. My dad and his mom are technically married right now, but they're getting a divorce. Travis and I met when our parents decided to move in

together, and we started dating a little while before they got engaged. We were broken up long before they got married. But, yeah. He's both my stepbrother and my ex-boyfriend. I know, it's weird."

"Jesus, Gare, are you friends with any guys you *haven't* dated?" Jason demands. His smirk implies that he's trying to make fun, but the fact that he shortens Garen's name by a syllable makes me think that maybe they're friends.

"Hey, I haven't dated *you*. Yet," Garen says, and they sneer at each other.

"Back on topic, guys," Ryan warns, and I get the feeling that he probably has to say that to them often. "So, Garen, as you were saying?"

Garen frowns down at the ground, his brow furrowed. Eventually, he shrugs, and says, "I guess I'm scared that, if I really stay sober, everything will have to be a lot more caged in. Or that the whole world will feel muted, like it's a shadow of the intensity I felt from things when I was still able to use. I'm afraid love won't hurt like it's supposed to."

"You think love's supposed to hurt?" Mark, one of the alcoholics, calls from across the circle.

For the first time, Garen looks me right in the eyes and laughs. "Of course it is."

That strikes something in me, some horrible well of anger I've been trying to crush for ages. I straighten up in my seat and cross my arms. "I think it makes a lot of sense that you feel that way. The first person you ever dated used to beat you. He hospitalized you twice, almost killed you the second time. He's the reason you were prescribed all the painkillers that you ended up abusing. So, yeah, I guess it's reasonable that you'd feel like love's supposed to hurt."

"I didn't mean physically, I meant... I don't know. If the other person doesn't have the power to break your heart, to completely destroy every part of you, then you're not in love," Garen says, all in a rush, like he wants to get this out before someone can contradict him. "And I think that's part of why I reacted to the breakup by doing drugs. You know, because drugs were something that I could just let engulf me completely, they were something I could drown in. I guess... after I knew how it felt to be so close to someone that it felt like he was in my veins, I was empty without that feeling. I needed something to replace it, and my heart wouldn't let me get close to another person, so I had to find something that could *literally* be inside me, in my blood, in my heart, my head. The way it always felt like he was. So, maybe I won't know how to be in love once I'm sober, because to me, people are just other drugs I get addicted to."

Sean, the meth addict, shrugs. "Yeah, you might have to figure it out again. But what if the new, sober version is better than the faded, drugged-out version? I think you're just looking at it from the wrong perspective."

The conversation continues, but I tune out. I *have* to tune out. Hearing them all talk like this, as though drugs really might be the only thing worth living for—it's too much for me to handle. It's too similar to all those stupid meetings I had to sit through when I was institutionalized, where everyone talked about mental illness as though it was this fantastic thing they should hang onto. The other patients had made me feel like I should want to be depressed forever; the doctors made me feel like I should be happy every second of every day. There was no breathing room. Here, now, in this room, there is still no breathing room.

I only snap out of it when Garen nudges my arm, and I glance back at him again. "What's up?"

"Time for individual therapy. Or, not really individual, I guess, since you're here. But the rest of the junkies won't be, so come on," he replies. I follow him back out of the room and through a set of double doors that lead into a long, sterile-looking hallway. Halfway down the hallway, he veers left through an open door. I move to follow him through, then freeze; the room is a bedroom, or at least, some rehab imitation of one. There's really only a bed, a chair, and a plain dresser, which makes it feel a lot less like a hospital room than my room assignment at the institution was.

Garen yanks open one of the dresser drawers and rummages through it for a moment before finally resurfacing with a small black notebook. Catching my eye, he gives me a sheepish smile. "My doctor makes me write about how I'm feeling every day, just to make sure I'm not getting crazier or whatever."

"Yeah. Alex's uncle used to have me do that sometimes," I say.

Garen blinks. "What?"

"Alex's uncle, Dr. Baker. My therapist. Or, ex-therapist, I guess. I haven't gone in months," I say. *Something my once-every-other-week psychiatrist hasn't exactly been psyched about, considering it means he's not positive I still need the anti-depressants he's still prescribing me.* Garen just shakes his head and leads me out down the hallway. Once we're back in the main waiting room, we catch the attention of Ryan, who's leaning against the front counter and frowning at us.

"Garen, is there a reason you're just wandering around?"

"I'm not wandering around, dude. I needed to go back to my room to get my recovery journal. Sue me," Garen retorts, though he accompanies it with his most winning smile.

Ryan's frown deepens. "Do I need to accompany you to Dr. Howard's office?"

"Considering I've been going there every day for over a month now? Pretty sure I can find it. But I'm like, about to be late. Can I go now?" Garen asks. After a short nod from Ryan, we proceed through another set of doors and through a moderately populated common room. Glancing back at me, Garen adds, "Ryan's cool most of the time, but sometimes he's kind of a douchebag. Every time he sees me outside of my room or the group therapy room, he's like, 'Don't you have somewhere to be?' I hate it."

I'm not really sure what to say, so I just stay silent as we make our way through the rest of the labyrinth to wherever this individual therapy session is supposed to take place. Up one flight of stairs, Garen stops in front of a door marked "Dr. Emilie Howard" and knocks once before opening it. "Morning, Doc. I've got yet another one of my previous sexual partners for you to meet!"

"We've been over this, Garen. Call them 'ex-boyfriends,' not 'previous sexual partners.' Have a seat." I slip into the room after him. Dr. Howard, a gray-streaked brunette in her late forties, smiles at me and extends a hand. "Hello, there. My name's Doctor Emilie Howard, and I'm Garen's psychiatrist for the time being. Seeing as how he has taken it upon himself to call me 'Doc,' you're welcome to do the same."

"Travis McCall," I say, and unable to stop myself, add, "Do all the patients here have to see psychiatrists?"

"No, though an initial interview is required. Only patients who are here under extreme circumstances are required to have regular meetings with me," Doc replies. She gestures to the chair next to the one Garen has sprawled out in. "Please, sit."

I take a seat, though I'd definitely rather not. God, I've had enough of therapists' offices to last me a lifetime.

"I'd be interested to hear why you decided to visit Garen today. From what I understand, a very small percentage of Garen's ex-boyfriends have taken the time to come see him while he's been here," Doc says.

Garen scowls at her. "Look, I don't get why you keep trying to win this fight. There's a difference between 'boyfriends' and 'sexual partners,' and the fact that you call them 'boyfriends' doesn't mean they were."

"I'm merely trying to get you into the habit of viewing interpersonal relationships in a healthier way. By refusing to acknowledge that certain men have gained the status of 'boyfriend,' you're refusing to acknowledge that sex is supposed to be an intimate act."

"Because it isn't. Not by default, anyway. Sometimes sex is just sex. Or it's part of a business arrangement, depending on how broke you are and how much cocaine you wish to acquire. Having sex with a guy doesn't make him my boyfriend," Garen says.

"A boyfriend is a boy with whom you seek regular romantic companionship."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt," I say quickly, "but if that's how you view the situation, who of his past uh... encounters do you think qualified as boyfriends?"

Garen snorts. "Stop fishing, Trav, you're on the list."

Doc shuffles through a few pages of her notes until she finds one that seems to be a long, long, *long* list. "Of the boys whom Garen has mentioned being physical with, I'd say there are about five who I would consider boyfriends."

Garen reaches out and plucks the paper from her fingertips, passing it to me. "You wanted to know a while back how many guys I'd slept with? Apparently it's a popular question. Doc made me write this up during the first week so she could keep my liaisons straight when I talk about them."

The list is written all in Garen's handwriting, in neat little columns; name, time period, number of times. It takes me a moment to realize that the whole thing is fucking *color-coded*, too – blue for handjobs, red for oral sex, and black for intercourse, though there's a lot less black than I would've expected. Without really wanting to know, I pause to tally up the names. "Twenty-six? Seriously?"

"Yeah, yeah," Garen says tiredly, "I'm a slut, I know."

"Actually, I'm surprised it's that few. Guess you over-estimated when you were yelling in my face that day at dinner," I say. I glance down again and notice that five of the names are high-lighted. Andrew Donahue. James Goldwyn. Dave Walczyk. Ben McCutcheon. Travis McCall. "So, I guess the boyfriends are the ones you high-lighted?"

"Yes," Doc says. "I'm curious about your relationship, though."

I laugh. "Everyone is."

Garen, however, scowls. "I've already told you everything there is to know."

"I understand that, Garen," Doc says patiently, "but I have a few questions for Travis. Once everything there is cleared up, I'd like to move on to a new topic. Is that alright?" Garen makes a circle with his index finger and thumb to signal that it's fine by him, and Doc continues, "Now, Travis. When did you first learn about Garen's issues with drugs?"

"Um," I say, completely blanking. I'm so used to people wanting to know things about our *relationship* that I hadn't prepared myself for this. "I don't think I really heard anything about it until the day Bill kicked him out. Garen always implied that he got into trouble in school, but I didn't realize it involved drugs until Bill started saying all this stuff about booze and cocaine."

"Interesting. Garen, why didn't you feel compelled to tell Travis about your history?" Doc asks. Garen just shakes his head. A moment goes by, then Doc adds, "I'd really like to know the answer."

"Look, what would you have done in my place?" Garen demands, almost desperately. "Before he knew about all of this shit, Travis actually thought I was a good guy. He thought I was funny, and charming, and sexy, and *okay*. He was the first guy who thought I was boyfriend material—well, I mean, I guess Dave did, but Dave was like, beating me, so I'm not sure he really counts as someone who had a very high opinion of my worth. But Travis... Travis thought I was fucking *great*. Why would I tell him everything that I knew would scare him away? Why would I wreck that image he had of me as the perfect guy?"

"I never thought you were perfect," I say, and he turns his head sharply towards me. I shrug. "I didn't. You're right when you say I thought you were funny, charming, and sexy, but I also thought you were reckless and spoiled and completely insane. I liked you anyway. Hell, I liked you *because* of those things. You wouldn't have scared me away. And maybe if I'd known that you had a predilection for drugs, I would've... handled things differently when you came back. Maybe I would've been more prepared for everything, or I could've helped, or something."

Doc leans back in her chair. "It's very possible, but you did know about his tendencies after he returned. When did you realize that his drug use had escalated? When did you realize that no one was controlling this situation?"

When he almost shot himself. When he told me he had traded sex for cocaine. When he ran away to Ohio. When he cut off all his hair and shoved a metal bar through his lip in front of me. When he sought out a relationship with a guy who he knew would almost beat him to death. No, no, no. Who the fuck am I trying to fool? I knew before any of that. It would be easier if I had only realized it recently, at the last possible second, but I knew before that. I always knew.

"The day after he came back to Lakewood, we had a party. He snorted a line of cocaine off of our kitchen table, told my ex-boyfriend I'd cheated on him, and outed our friend Alex to all the rest of our friends. It was... just so screwed up, you know? And that's when I knew it was a problem."

Garen shakes his head again. "That's such bullshit. That was the first time I'd used cocaine in like, seven months."

"That doesn't mean it wasn't a problem," I say, and he falls completely silent.

Doc goes on for quite some time after that, mostly just explaining to Garen why that first time was the start of the spiral. She informs him that he uses drugs as a coping mechanism, that he always has, and that it's unhealthy by very nature of the act it entails. He nods along, and to my surprise, he seems like he's actually paying attention. He participates enough, anyway, when Doc eventually asks him to read from his recovery journal entry from the previous night.

"Today, I'm nervous. I found it difficult to focus in group or individual therapy, and I know I half-assed my chores this afternoon. I'm too busy freaking out over visiting day tomorrow. Last week, Jamie, Ben, and Alex came to see me, and it was so hard to see them again, knowing how badly I'd screwed up. Jamie forgave me, because he always does. Alex forgave me, because he's incapable of holding a grudge. Ben forgave me, even though he shouldn't have. Last time I saw him before then was when he was dragging me out of Ohio. He got into a fistfight for me that day. He spent six hours in a car with me, listening to me scream all kinds of horrible shit at him. I told him that he should have considered himself lucky that I left, because it was only a matter of time before I convinced Travis to leave him. I said Travis had never really wanted him, that he'd only ever been a substitute for me, that no one would ever want him. I was kind of projecting my own issues onto him, but I still don't understand how he could forgive me so quickly for saying all the disgusting things I said. Sometimes I think that Ben's too selfless for his own good. And then he does something stupid, like tell me he's going to try to convince Travis to come visit me, and then I *know* he's too selfless for his own good."

Garen pauses to clear his throat, and his eyes flicker towards me for a brief second before focusing on the journal page once more.

"I'm freaking out now, because I don't know what I'll do if Travis really does show up tomorrow. I'm starting to wonder if I was ever really in love with him. Not because I didn't feel it – God knows I've never felt anything more intense than the love I felt for that kid – but because I'm afraid it doesn't count. Travis deserved better than me, and I don't know how I'll face him, now that I know that. I was a shitty boyfriend; I got mad at him for not being out of the closet to his friends. I made out with Ben once behind his back. I never told him anything about who I was at Patton – the drugs, the way I treated the guys I hooked up with, everything I let Dave do. And none of that is how I should treat someone I'm supposed to be in love with, so yeah, maybe I never really was. Maybe, now that I'm in rehab and therapy, I have to learn how to love people the right way. More than anything, I want a chance to fall in love with Travis for real. I'm afraid I won't get that chance, because I know I don't deserve it."

I watch as he closes the journal with shaking hands and tosses it onto the desk. Doc leans forward and places her hand on top of the journal. "Thank you, Garen. Most of that entry was quite self-aware. However, we're yet again encountering the problem of you thinking in black and white."

Garen groans and drags a hand through his curls. "That's just how I *think*, Doc! Why do you have to get pissed at me every time I try to use my own perspective?"

"I'm not getting pissed at you, and it's not *just* how you think. It's one of the aspects of borderline personality disorder that you do have some degree of control over, and you—"

"You said I might not even have it. You said it's impossible to diagnose something in a couple of weeks," Garen says in a small voice.

"That's true. However, I've met with you for at least an hour every day for the past forty-five days, and it's my professional opinion that you suffer from a pretty textbook case of the disorder. And I think that, rather than try to deny it and pretend it's not an issue, you should focus on dealing with the factors that cause the most trouble for you. For instance, your completely binary way of thinking. Has it occurred to you that your friends can still forgive you, even though they may be angry about how you treated them? Or that perhaps you were neither a good nor bad boyfriend to Travis? You seem rather inclined to believe that everything is either perfect and ideal, or the worst thing that could ever happen. The world is not a black or white place, Garen."

"There's nothing good about being a drug addict," Garen retorts.

"There's also nothing good about letting the fact that you are a *recovering* drug addict define everything else about who you are as a man," Doc says simply. "We're out of time for today, but for your next journal entry, I'd like you to focus on your binary thinking. Why you think you do that, what you think is good about it, what you think is bad about it. Make sure you include both sides – don't just decide that it's good or bad inherently, or else you'll be missing the point of the exercise. Travis, it was a pleasure meeting you."

"Nice meeting you, too," I say before following Garen back out into the maze of hallways. He leads me back out to the front lobby, where Ryan is still chatting with the desk attendant. We are not interrogated this time, though, because it seems like most of the other visitors are on their way out, too. Garen and I pause near the door, staring awkwardly at each other for a minute or two.

"Well," Garen says finally, "thank you for visiting me."

"Thanks for not dropping out of rehab when you sat down at the table and realized I was the one who'd come to visit you. And for the record, you weren't a bad boyfriend. You're just a really shitty ex-boyfriend," I say, and he laughs a little.

"I guess I can live with that. Listen, I was thinking, and... well, you heard Doc. I'm supposed to stop thinking in black-or-white terms, which I guess is, you know, a good idea. And I assume she means I should apply that to like, all areas of my life, or whatever. All events. All topics. All... people." God, could he be more awkward? "So, maybe it'd be good if I didn't think of *you* in a black-or-white way. Everyone used to think you were my stepbrother or my boyfriend, but now you're neither, so that right there is proof that not everything is an either-or situation. I'd actually like it if we could be... friends, I guess. Something in the middle. Because you're a really, really good guy, Travis, and I like you a lot. And you don't have to love me, but I'd also like it if you didn't hate me, because—"

Without giving myself time to really think it through, I curl a hand around the back of Garen's neck and drag him forward so that our mouths collide. He lets out a small noise of *something* – surprise, gratification, whatever – against my lips, and I tangle my other hand in his hair, even though Ryan is banging his hand on the counter and saying loudly, "Hey! Guys, remember the rules!" Before he can move towards us, however, I take a step back from Garen, who is staring at me with round, shocked eyes.

"Of course I love you. And of course I hate you. And you're really goddamn messed up, but so am I, and I still like you as a person. I don't get why you think I should have to choose one way to feel about you," I say. I don't give him time to respond before I turn on my heel and walk out of the LRC, but when I glance back over my shoulder from halfway across the parking lot, I swear he's laughing.

Chapter Forty-Nine

"Alright, I feel like we should be very clear about the fact that you are my least favorite friend." Everything I'm saying comes out all at once, in one big, breathless rush, because this goddamn *couch* must weigh at least a ton, and I'm the one who's really supporting most of the weight.

Alex rolls his eyes at me and kicks the apartment door back open. "You don't have many friends anyway, so it's not like I'm that far down the list. And hey, we made it up the stairs, so we're already past the hardest part. Can you just shift like, six inches back? I'm having trouble bringing the front end around."

"How wide do you think this hallway is?" I demand as I somehow wind up wedged between the end of the couch and the wall. For that, Alex jams the couch a little harder into my ribs, and we eventually manage to force our way through the front door. Getting through the foyer is just as difficult, but once we've cleared that, getting into the living room is easy. Once everything is properly positioned against the wall, I collapse on the couch, spreading out and burying my face in the cushions. "Couldn't you have asked someone else to help you move in?"

"Like who?" Alex snorts. "Ben?"

"Uh, *yeah*, considering he's the one who's actually going to be living here with you," I say. As soon as the words have left my mouth, I wish I hadn't said anything. Now all I can picture is Ben and Alex hanging out in their new apartment, Ben and Alex curling up in front of their incredibly cool fireplace to do their homework together, Ben and Alex eating dinner every night like an old married couple, Ben and Alex realizing they're meant to be together, getting married with me as Ben's best man, and eventually adopting some too-cute baby from a third-world country.

Alex sprawls out on the armchair across from me. "No offense to him, but he wouldn't exactly have been much help. I doubt he could even lift half the boxes that needed to be brought up. It was a lot easier to just put him on grocery and school supply detail."

"Ugh, please don't remind me that the new school-year starts soon. I've got what, three weeks left of break?" I grumble.

"Something like that, yeah. But at least you're a senior now. Finally," he replies. After a moment in which I can feel him watching at me, trying to preemptively gauge my reaction, he adds, "You know what Garen's plans are for the year? He was technically expelled from Lakewood High, so—"

"No idea," I interrupt. "I haven't talked to him since you guys pretty much blackmailed me into visiting him last week, and obviously Bill's not living with us anymore, so... I'm not sure. I think he might just repeat his senior year at LHS, because going back to Patton would probably be a disaster. It's not like it would be difficult for him to get drugs there."

"I guess," Alex sighs, standing up. "Ready to help me actually unpack everything we've been carting up here all day?"

I groan in protest but roll off the couch anyway and follow him out to the kitchen. There are at least half a dozen boxes, each one full of dishes, cutlery, pots, or pans. Alex shrugs and nudges one of the boxes with the toe of his sneaker. "I guess you can just start putting these in the cabinets under the counters. I still need to set up the television and everything, so if you need me for anything, just yell."

Putting the dishes away winds up being more of a process than I'd anticipated. The apartment has

been vacant for so long that a thin layer of grime has coated the inside of the cabinets. I may not be thrilled with the idea of Ben and Alex shacking up together just because they happen to have chosen colleges in the same city, but that doesn't mean I want to make them eat off of dirty dishes; I sit down on the floor with a sponge and a bottle of spray cleaner, then set to work on scrubbing down all of the shelves.

By the time I'm even halfway done, my arm is cramping up, and I'm feeling a little light-headed from the fumes. Maybe that's why, brushing the sweaty hair off my forehead, I call, "Hey, Alex?"

There's a sudden blaring of static from the half-assembled television system, followed by a muttered stream of curses, then, "What's up, man?"

"You think it's going to be weird for you, living with Ben like this?" I ask. There's a brief pause, then Alex appears in the doorway.

"Why?" he asks. "Because I'm in love with him?"

I nod. "Yeah. And because he's... not yours."

Alex shrugs. "I'm pretty used to it by now. The kid's been the man of my dreams since before I was even okay with the idea of *having* a 'man of my dreams.' But it's never been like that for him, and I know it. Between catching glimpses of hickies and claw marks down his back, courtesy of that asshole, Ethan, and washing the sex-sheets in my own guest room after he and Garen first slept together last year, and, you know, pretty much four months of watching you two just fall harder and harder for each other..."

I feel a twist of guilt in my gut. I *knew*. Since April, since the day he started sulking in the tuxedo shop, I knew something was going on. And I shouldn't have thrown it in his face. "I'm sorry."

Alex, however, simply shrugs. "I'm used to it. And honestly, I stopped lying to myself ages ago. Ben and I will never happen. It sucks, and I wish things were different, but whatever. I'm in the friend zone."

He's saying it's okay, but it's so clearly not. In what might be the worst attempt at cheering someone up ever, I say quickly, "On the bright side, not having a shot with Ben means you have the chance to date James Goldwyn, who is... probably the closest a man can get to being a god without being crucified."

Alex laughs a little at that, rubbing the back of his neck and staring at the floor, like that'll make him stop blushing. "Yeah, Jamie's cool."

"Jamie?"

Another shrug. "It's what he asked me to call him. He said that's the name all his friends use for him."

I don't point out that I went to Patton to get James, that I met his friends, and not a single one called him anything but James. I don't point out that only Garen calls him Jamie. "How serious are you guys? Like, has he met your family?"

"No, we're not... I mean, he's not my boyfriend, or whatever. We've hung out, we've hooked up, but we're not together. I told you that. And he's sure as hell not meeting my family. My dad would kill me if

he knew I'd even kissed another boy, let alone fucked one, and my mom..." He falters and takes a short step backward, as if to flee to the comfort and solitude of the living room.

"I know," I say softly. "I heard she uh, passed away a few years ago."

Alex freezes. "Who told you that? Ben? No, I—he wouldn't, he knows enough to keep his fucking mouth shut about her, so come on, tell me—"

"Jeremy told me at prom. I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"My mom's not dead. Not that I know of, anyway," Alex says shortly. "Look, we're going to have this conversation once, and then we're never going to talk about it again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I say immediately.

He crosses his arms and leans against the doorframe. "My parents are disasters. My father is a drunk, my mother was a heroin junkie. They had a violent and volatile marriage—always screaming that the other had to get clean or sober up, while simultaneously denying their own problems. Then, when I was about ten, maybe nine, my mom bailed. I haven't seen her since. I don't even... I mean, my mom could be *dead*, and I don't even know. I don't think I'll ever know."

I'm not sure what to say, so I stand up, cross the kitchen, and loop an arm around his neck, dragging him forward into an incredibly awkward hug. He must need it, though, because he reaches around to clutch the back of my t-shirt with both hands. "I-I'm sorry, god, I'm such a little bitch. I just, I don't talk about her, ever. Ben and Jer and Mason all knew me back when it happened, so I never had to really tell them everything, because they saw it in action, but my dad won't talk about her, / don't talk about her."

The ache of his semi-permanent silence hits me harder than I expect, because I know what it feels like. I know how it must have been killing him not to talk about it, even if actually saying the words might have killed him faster, because that's the story of my *life*, the story of my self-injury, the story of my overdose, the story of my time in the institution. I can't talk about it, but I can't *not* talk about it. "I get it, Alex. Really."

"It's too big, it's too much to go into for someone who I barely know. So I'm sure as hell not going to tell James. By the time I'm even willing to mention her, he'll probably have found someone else to screw around with. That's how he is, you know?"

I can't help but laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Out in the foyer, the front door clicks open and Ben's voice drifts in. "Hey, Al. I think we're going to have to become vegans. The closest grocery store is a healthy, organic, hippie-infested—" He stops talking as he rounds the corner and catches sight of me.

Alex extracts himself from my arms and edges around Ben, muttering, "I can go get the rest of the stuff out of your car."

"You didn't tell me you were inviting him over," Ben says, setting the two bags he's carrying down on the counter.

From the foyer, Alex clears his throat. "I could say the same to you, dude." He drops his voice to a low murmur, and for a moment, I wonder who he's talking to. Then, Ben steps forward and wraps his

hand around my wrist.

"I didn't realize you were going to be coming over to help us set stuff up, or else I wouldn't have—"

"Shit's about to get awkward," Alex breathes, returning to the kitchen with another two bags of groceries. I stare at the doorway, waiting, waiting, waiting...

When Garen rounds the corner with the last few bags of groceries, I'm not even that surprised. I knew his sixty-day rehab adventure would be ending any day now, but it's still a little strange to find myself staring at him in the middle of the new apartment, especially since he looks... different. Healthier, bigger, like he looked when I first met him. His hair is flat-ironed and spiked – as I've always thought it *should* be – and he is dressed in typical Garen apparel; plain green t-shirt, dark denim jeans, and his combat boots, still missing their laces. I'm a little surprised to see that his lip is still pierced on the right side, as if he left rehab and went right out to get it re-pierced. Just like the day I visited him in rehab, he doesn't meet my eyes for a while, choosing instead to head directly to the counter to set down the bags. After one, two, three minutes of awkward silence, he finally spins to face me and smiles, almost too brightly. "Hey, man. What's up?"

"Uh, not too much. How 'bout you? When'd you leave the LRC?" I ask.

"I was released a couple of hours ago. My dad picked me up and brought me home to the new house, up on Longman Road. Then Ben called and asked if I wanted to come, you know, hang out, help them move, all that stuff. I didn't realize you'd be here, or I would've said no." I make a face, and he laughs a little. "Not because I don't want to see you. I just don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"If I'd known Alex had brought you over, I..." Ben trails off, looking vaguely upset. "I guess he and I should've talked about—"

"Stop being idiots, all three of you!" Alex bursts out. "Look, Ben, you and I live together. You don't have to ask my permission to invite somebody over, and I don't have to ask yours before I do the same. Garen, everybody knows you fucked up, okay? It's not like we're all *surprised* that you just got out of rehab. But that doesn't mean you need to act all apologetic every time you come around, because seriously, we're over it. And if any of us *aren't* over it, we don't have to interact with you. Travis, if you're going to keep hanging out with Ben and I, you should be prepared to hang with Garen. He's been our friend for almost a year now, and I'm..." He hesitates, glancing at Garen, and I can already hear the words he won't say. *I'm with his best friend.*

I nod sharply, just once to show him that he doesn't need to say it. "Got it. Fine with me."

"Great. Now, sit your punk-ass back on that floor and finish putting my dishes away. Garen, can you help me hook up the TV? There are about sixty wires, and I'm close to hanging myself with one of them," Alex says, leading Garen back out into the hallway and down to the living room.

Ben immediately turns towards me again and steps forward, maybe closer than he should. I can't help but remember that the last time I saw him, he was kissing me goodbye. "I really am sorry. I wasn't trying to cause problems for anyone."

"Shut up," I say. "Like Alex said, it's fine. We'll all deal, everything will work itself out. Do you want help putting away the groceries?"

He shakes his head, and we both get to work on our respective tasks. Within twenty minutes, we are both finished, and Ben sinks down onto the floor next to me. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure," I say, dragging my sleeve across my forehead. They must not have bothered to put in the air conditioner yet, because the apartment is *boiling*.

Ben reaches over and pops open the fridge. "We've got water, orange juice, beer, Snapple, milk."

"I don't care, I'll take whatever's closest to the front," I say. He grabs something at random – a bottle of Corona – and stretches a little further to grab himself a bottle of Snapple. It feels incredibly strange to be sprawled on the floor of my ex-boyfriend's apartment, drinking a beer in the middle of the afternoon. "You excited to start college soon?"

Ben snorts. "More like apprehensive. I mean, have you walked around this city? We're about ten minutes away from the Yale campus, and the people walking around there are... I don't know. I can already tell that they're going to all think they're better than me, and they're probably going to be right."

I elbow him. "No, they won't be. Shut up. You're amazing."

"You glad to finally be a senior over at Lakewood?" he asks, ignoring my comment.

I shake my head. "Honesty, it feels like starting over. Corey's the only guy in my grade who I still talk to. Well, I guess Garen counts too, if he goes back. But I'm a completely different person than who I was a year ago, and I'm not sure how to process that."

Ben shifts around so that he is sitting in front of me, facing me, our knees touching. "Would you take it all back if you could?"

"No," I say, and he kisses me. Of course he does. My life is a trainwreck, and none of the guys I know can keep it in their pants, and everyone in this apartment has made out with everyone else in this apartment – except Alex and Garen, but fuck if I know what they're doing in the next room. The kiss is brief, and there isn't any heat behind it; I wonder if this is what it's like when he kisses Alex, a simple, supposedly meaningless kiss between good friends. He stands and offers me a hand up, which I accept. We enter the living room just as the television set-up is being finalized. Alex is sitting on the couch with his feet propped up on the coffee table, and Garen is half-wedged behind the television. When it flickers to life and a soap opera starts playing out on the screen, he twists his way to freedom and throws his hands up in the air, proclaiming, "Suck it, dudes."

"They have," Alex points out. I flop down on the couch next to him, and he steals my beer and takes a swig. That continues for a few minutes, the bottle passing back and forth between us, until I finally glance up at Garen. He is standing stock still, his eyes locked on the bottle in my hand, his head cocked to the side. Just as I'm about to get up and throw it out, if only to stop him from staring at it with that expression on his face, he turns and heads swiftly towards the kitchen.

"Ben, you mind if I have one of your Snapples?" he asks.

"Not at all," Ben replies, dropping down onto the couch on Alex's other side. When Garen returns, he snags the remote off the coffee table and sprawls out lengthwise across all of our laps.

"Jesus, Gare, you *trying* to crush my nuts with your skull?" I demand, shifting a little under him. He ignores me and starts flipping through the channels, finally settling on VH1's Behind the Music.

I expect us to all fall into silence, but then Garen mutes the television and says, "So, my dad wants to have some cook-out thing. I guess it's to welcome me back from LRC, but um... yeah. It's

tomorrow afternoon, around four. None of you have to come, if you don't want, but I can give you the address, just in case." His eyes are focused on the Snapple bottle cap, which he has removed and is pressing the safety seal of over and over to create a tiny clicking noise.

"I'll go, assuming Mom doesn't try to make me babysit," Ben says. "Who else is going?"

"Dunno," Garen says with a shrug. "Dad said I should invite Jeremy and Mason, but I don't really know if I want to, honestly. Neither of them bothered to visit me while I was in rehab, so I doubt they care that much now that I'm out. But Jamie flew back up from Georgia this week to move into his new place in Manhattan anyway, so he's going to take the train down for the day. And I also invited Andrew, Rob, and Drew. You guys can bring whoever you want, too."

"Would you mind if I brought my sister?" I ask slowly. "I think she'd like to see you again."

"Of course she can come. Last time she saw me, I was trying to shoot myself in the face, so I'd like to replace that last impression, if possible," Garen replies.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alex slip his phone out of his pocket, check his text message inbox, and tap out a reply to one. When he catches me staring at him, he rolls his eyes and tips it so I can see. *he's @ my new apartment right now, just invited me. can't wait 2 see u 2, jamie.* I snort, and whisper, as softly as I can, "'Not together,' yeah fucking right."

"I hate you, Travis, get off my couch," Alex orders.

"We're not on your couch. We're on Ben's couch," Garen says. "What's going on? What are you guys talking about?"

"Nothing," I say, trying to smother a grin as Alex digs his elbow back into my side. "Listen, do you want us to bring anything tomorrow?"

"A few handles of liquor and a brick of cocaine," Garen says. Ben punches him hard in the thigh, and Garen just grins at him. "What, too soon?"

"I think it will *a/ways* be too soon," Ben grumbles. But for the first time in ages, Garen looks to be actually okay.

I brush his hair off his forehead, steal a sip of his Snapple, and unmute the television. "Sorry, Garen. I'm not sure you can have a post-rehab party and actually attempt to justify the presence of the substances you've supposedly stopped abusing."

Garen reaches back to tangle his fingers with mine on the arm of the couch and hums. "Eh, well, can't have everything."

Yeah, I think to myself, sometimes you can.