

I Don't Have A Choice (But I Still Choose You) Part One

Most people say the mark appears the first time you look into your soulmate's eyes, but that's not entirely true. It happens that way for most people, sure, but some people are born with a mark, and some never have one at all. Ask Declan, and he'll tell you the whole thing is bullshit. He's had his mark for as long as he can remember—maybe since he was born, he doesn't know. His mom never mentioned it, and it's not like she's around now for him to ask. Even if she was, he *wouldn't* ask. She probably wouldn't want to talk about it—hell, maybe it's part of why she didn't want him around—and god knows Declan doesn't want to hear about it.

The whole thing is a cosmic joke anyway, one he doesn't figure out until he's maybe eleven years old and first bothers to type the name into Google. Because what he really wants to know is, what the hell kind of parents name their daughter Garen, anyway? It's an ugly name. Strange, like they wanted to name her Karen but in a quirky sort of way, and ended up with this stupid fucking mess instead. He says it out loud a couple times as he types it. Garen. Garen Anderson. Maybe, someday, Garen Campbell. (But then he feels stupid for thinking that and banishes the idea) He says it again, tries to imagine saying it *to* someone. (Hey, Garen, what's up? You look really pretty today, Garen. I love you, Garen.) Or *about* someone (No, I can't hang out tonight, I've got a date with Garen. Oh, this is Garen, my girlfriend. The fuck do you mean, you're going to ask Garen to prom? She's going with me, you shit-suck, don't make me punch you.) Or *with* someone. (Fuck, Garen, you feel so good. Do you like that, Garen? Is it good for you, Garen? Garen, Garen, Garen.) Maybe he was wrong after all. He could fall for a girl named Garen, sure.

Except then he presses enter, and the results page loads. And it turns out, Garen is French, and it means "guardian," and it's a boy's name. It's for boys. There's a boy's name etched into the pale skin of his hip.

Declan stops saying the name after that.



He's thirteen years old the first time he hears someone else say the name. He's been at Patton Military Academy for three months now, and he loves it. He feels more at home here than he ever did in Colorado or Kansas or Nebraska, and he's still a little bitter about having been forced to leave campus for Thanksgiving break last week.

Apparently, so is his friend, Charlie, considering he's done nothing but bitch about it since they got to PT this morning.

"It was so gross. I'm pretty sure they just boned for two days straight, because they barely left David's room," he complains. He has to pretty much yell to be heard over the ear protection and accompanying gunfire. "The car ride back sucked, too. They kept saying they loved each other and making out at stoplights."

"Mm," is all Declan says. He thinks it would probably be rude to ignore Charlie entirely, but he doesn't really care about Dave Walczyk's sex life. Besides, he's trying to focus. He reloads his rifle, takes aim, and fires. The bullet pierces the ten ring.

"Nice," his roommate, Javi says appreciatively.

"Mm," Declan repeats. He would have preferred to hit the center X.

Two stations down, Charlie is still whining, and Declan finds himself wishing (not for the first time) that their ear coverage would block out the sound of the other cadets as well as it blocks out the sound of the rifles. “I thought it might be better now that we’re back at school, but Sam and I live literally right below G and his roommate, and I can hear every time one of them has sex, which is pretty much nightly. I just hope it’s James and somebody, because I’ll probably kill myself if I find out it’s Dave and Garen.”

Declan’s next shot goes so wide, it hits Taylor Lewis’ target instead of his own. Taylor gives him a bewildered look, but Declan doesn’t care. He feels like he might be about to puke. “Who the hell is Garen?”

(Hey, Garen, what’s up? No, I can’t hang out tonight, I’ve got a date with Garen. Fuck, Garen, you feel so good. Garen, Garen, Garen.)

Charlie rolls his eyes so hard, his entire head goes with the gesture. “Have you been listening at all?”

“No,” Declan says bluntly, and Javi snickers. “Who the hell is Garen?”

“My brother’s boyfriend,” Charlie says. (His desire to keep an audience clearly outweighs his annoyance at having to repeat this fact.) He points across the quad. “They’ve been going out since mid-October. Garen Anderson. He’s a sophomore. The one on the rope climb.”

Declan is going to *puke*, he’s sure of it. He’s had that mark for thirteen years, had it so long that he doesn’t even think about it anymore. To him, it’s as random and meaningless as any of his freckles. No point in thinking about it, because Garen Anderson might as well not exist (turns out, he does exist) because Garen Anderson is a boy’s name (a stupid one, too) and Declan isn’t into boys.

(He tried to consider it objectively for about five minutes once last year. Shoved a hand into his boxers and tried to imagine what it might be like to be with another guy, to suck somebody’s cock, to tangle his hands in somebody’s short hair while getting head, to feel stubble against the edge of his lips while making out, to get fucked in the ass. He tried to imagine it, but it didn’t do anything for him, didn’t even get him hard, so that settled it, didn’t it? The mark was a mistake.)

Charlie is still pointing across the quad, and it doesn’t matter what Garen Anderson looks like, because Declan is straight. He’s not sure he could even recognize attractiveness in another guy, even one whose name is etched on Declan’s hip. But if it doesn’t matter, then there’s no reason to stop himself from following the line of Charlie’s finger towards where the sophomore Whitman squad is taking turns on the rope climb.

The boy—Garen Anderson—is three-quarters of the way up, hauling himself higher and higher by the second. He’s fast. He’s strong. He’s completely and unmistakably masculine—broad shoulders, square jaw, and thick cords of muscle flexing in his arms. When he reaches the top beam of the climb, he lets out a delighted whoop (his voice is rough, deeper than Declan would have guessed) and slides right back down the rope so fast that one of the sergeants yells at him for carelessness. He rolls his eyes and jogs towards the end of the line to go again.

Halfway there, he changes his mind and bolts away to the nearby seniors of the Hampton Hall squad. Dave Walczyk is there to greet him with a wide, dimpled grin and a one-armed hug. Garen must be taller than he looks from afar, because he’s almost the same height as Dave; neither of them has to lean much for their mouths to meet in a long, heated kiss. They finally catch the attention of Sergeant Smith, who barks, “Anderson! Twelfth-grade Walczyk! Do you really think no one is going to notice your flagrant violation of Patton’s PDA code? Detention, both of you!”

They break apart. Dave looks pissed (as per usual) but Garen looks like he thinks it was worth it. He grabs himself a handful of Dave's ass before he runs back to his squad, grinning.

Declan turns back around and fires his next round straight into the bull's-eye of his target.



It's maybe a month later that Charlie tells Declan and Javi that his brother has agreed to give them a ride to the party at the house some of the Ward girls rent off campus. (Declan knows they don't live there, though—as best he can tell, it's tradition, the hottest girls in twelfth grade passing the lease down at the end of every school year so the miscreants of Ward and Patton are never without a party house.) They head over to Hampton at ten o'clock, as instructed, but when Charlie knocks twice and pushes open the door to his brother's room, it's immediately apparent that they are interrupting.

Dave has got Garen face down on the bed, and he's fucking him in the ass. (Do you like that, Garen? Is it good for you, Garen?) Charlie throws up a hand to shield his eyes and cries out, "Oh, gross, dude!"

"What the fuck, Charlie, get out," Dave snaps. He at least has the decency to pull out and yank the sheets up to cover himself, something Garen couldn't seem to care less about. He's so motionless that, at first, Declan thinks he's unconscious, but after maybe ten seconds of not being laid into, he slowly rolls over onto his back and stares at the ceiling. Dave and Charlie are still sniping about what time they agreed to go to the party, but with Garen on his back and still mostly exposed, Declan can only bring himself to notice two things.

One: Garen isn't even turned on. (Declan isn't a virgin anymore, lost it over the summer to a girl he'd gone to middle school with who acted like going off to military school was as worthy of a goodbye fuck as shipping out. Even his first time, he knew enough to make sure she was turned on first; ate her out for half an hour, made her come twice just with his mouth; fucked her with his fingers first and lapped at her clit until she was soaking wet and whimpering his name and bucking up against his mouth. And when he finally got inside her, he wore a condom, which probably made him the first Campbell to ever remember that little detail, *Dad*.)

Two: the skin on Garen's hip—the place where Declan has been marked since before he can remember—is completely bare. They say most people get their mark the first time they look into their soulmate's eyes, and Garen hasn't blinked away from the ceiling. Declan is so relieved, he almost laughs. Instead of making any sound that might draw Garen's focus, he slips back out into the hall without a word.

When he finally gets to the party that night, he meets a sophomore named Julie, fucks her in the bathroom, and calls it a celebration.



A few days before winter break, Declan gets hit with a headache so sudden and agonizing, he sits down in the middle of the quad on the way back from dinner and doesn't move for twenty minutes. He eventually manages to crawl back to the dorm, but he spends the entire night dry-heaving in the second-floor bathroom, sweating and shaking like he's detoxing from heroin. Javi says it's a bug, and Sam says it's a migraine, and Steven—asshole that he is—says maybe Declan *is* detoxing from heroin, but everyone agrees that Declan should see the nurse. He drags himself off to the infirmary, but it isn't empty, like he had expected it to be.

A dark-haired, green-eyed woman is sitting in a chair next to one of the longer-term beds, and there's a bruised and bloodied body in the bed. Garen Anderson looks younger when he's asleep.

A hand comes down hard on Declan's shoulder, and he finds himself being steered off into an empty exam room. "He's your classmate, not a zoo animal," Nurse Douglass snaps.

"What happened to him?" Declan asks, choosing to ignore her tut of disapproval.

"That is absolutely none of your business," she says. "Now, are you here for treatment, or are you here for Schadenfreude?"

He doesn't really *need* to know what happened. It doesn't matter to him. The mark is stupid, and Garen doesn't mean anything to him. He's curious though, and maybe that's what gives him the idea to fold down the waistband of his pajama pants to expose Garen Anderson's name on his hip. He repeats, "What happened to him?"

Nurse Douglass gapes at him. "I'm sorry—we didn't have any record of him being marked. It wasn't anywhere in his file—"

"He's not marked. We don't even know each other. I've always had it, I've never even spoken to him. I only know who he is because he goes out with my friend's brother," Declan says. The nurse's face falls to something much too close to pity for his taste. "It doesn't matter. I'm not even gay." The pity stays. He crosses his arms over his chest and flatly finishes, "I have a migraine. Can you give me something for it so I can go back to bed?"

Nurse Douglass purses her lips and goes to the medicine cabinet, unlocks it, starts sorting through the bottles. "He's resting now, but he's been in and out all night. Concussion. Two broken ribs and a broken nose. He says he was attacked by someone he didn't recognize on the way across campus this evening."

"I don't care," Declan insists.

"Of course you don't," Nurse Douglass sighs. "It'll be about two months before he's fully healed, assuming he doesn't do something stupid to worsen his injuries, which I suspect is a lot to ask of him personally. He should be back to classes along with everyone else after winter break."

"I don't—"

"—care, yes, you mentioned that," she says. She finally locates the bottle she has been searching for and tips a pill out onto Declan's upturned palm. "That should help with your... *migraine*. I expect I'll be seeing you again before too long, anyway."

Declan dry-swallows the pill and glares at her until she muses, "Garen Anderson. Sweet enough kid, but clumsy as all hell. I suspect that you'll find that these headaches continue, the clumsier he gets."

Declan walks out without bothering to dignify that with a response.



By lunch the next day, everyone is saying that Garen's attack really had something to do with bad cocaine or a buy gone wrong. The day after that, James Goldwyn "accidentally" blows open Seth Hayden's knee with a bullet during PT, spraying red all over the snow in the quad. Declan's headache goes away (slightly) for two months.

The day before Valentine's Day, he's got two fingers in Tamara Baylour, and he's leaning over to grab a condom out of his nightstand drawer when a dull throbbing starts up in the back of his skull. He only has

time to think, *Christ, Anderson, again?* And then he's rolling off his bed onto the floor and squeezing his palms to his temples, like that'll make the pain stop.

Tamara hangs over the side of the bed and asks, "Declan, boo, what's wrong?"

He groans at her to get out, repeats it over and over until she flees. His head feels like it's going to explode, but even over the pain, what he's really feeling is *anger*. He doesn't want this, and he sure as hell didn't ask for it. He isn't even getting any of the hot, wet, tight benefits he's supposed to be getting out of this soulmate deal (the kind Javi's been getting on the regular ever since he met Vanessa at that party in December and found her name scrawled right over his heart) because his life is enough of a joke to stick him with someone who's not even the right gender. (He was three the first time his mom told him he was a mistake, seven the first time his dad did, but he never thought they meant it like this.)

His phone vibrates on the nightstand, a text from Javi. *come to sam & charlie's room. dave & his bf are having a huge screaming breakup right above us, it's hilarious. we made popcorn.*

Declan drops the phone because his hands are shaking with fury. Since when does a breakup count as real pain? He thought it had to be as concrete as getting beat up after dinner, as physical as one of the many black eyes he's seen Garen sporting over the past month, as present and noticeable as a mark on his hip. Unless Garen broke up with Dave and got a punch in the mouth for his trouble, this is bullshit. Emotional pain shouldn't count. (If it does, he hopes like hell that Garen enjoyed those two years Declan was in foster care, fuck you very much.)

But if this is how the game goes, that's fine. Declan can play, too.

He crawls across the room to the closet where he and Javi hang their uniforms and carefully positions his left hand against the door frame, fingers curled tight around it. He takes a deep breath, grits his teeth, and slams the door shut.

Later, when he's in the infirmary getting three of his fractured proximal phalanges splinted, he hears the door open and Garen Anderson come stumbling in, bitching about how much his head hurts. (Is it good for you, Garen?) Declan thought he'd feel better if he could make Garen hurt as much as he does. It doesn't work. Knowing that the connection goes both ways only makes it feel more real, and that's the last thing he wants.

Correction: it's the second-to-last thing he wants. The last thing he wants is for Garen, medicated and feeling well enough to pry into other people's personal lives, to skid to a halt outside Declan's exam room and say, "Oh, that's nasty. The fuck did you do?"

"Slammed it in a door," Declan says, not lying. He keeps his eyes on the floor and hopes Garen will leave.

"Sucks to suck, dude," Garen says, and Declan *hates* him for it, hates that deep voice and that stoner-boy slang. "You're in the Whitman squad, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Declan says. When the nurse slips out to get another roll of medical tape and he still isn't alone, he adds, "You're dating Dave Walczyk, aren't you?"

Garen is silent for a minute. Declan doesn't dare to look up, but he does sneak a peek at him in the reflection on the medicine cabinet door. Garen's lower lip is split open and swollen on one side, and his face is aimed at the floor, too. He eventually says, "Dumped him tonight."

"What happened to your face?" Declan asks.

Garen repeats, “Dumped him tonight,” and Declan is so startled that he looks up (forgets to close his eyes, god, is this the moment?) but Garen is already slipping back out into the hall, leaving Declan alone with the weight of those three words and the image of his bloody fat lip. (You look really pretty today, Garen.)

The next time Declan sees Dave Walczyk in a crowded hallway on the way to class, he hooks the toe of his boot around Dave’s ankle and laughs when he hits the ground. Just because.



It’s a year and a half before Declan is forced to acknowledge Garen’s existence again, and during that time, he fucks his way through half of Ward Academy. (Always with the lights off, because Garen hardly ever has reason to go to the Ward campus, but he’s still popular, and there’s no way that Declan could keep it quiet if someone found out about the mark.)

It’s a Monday night, and he’s at some senior’s going away party at the Ward house. Fuck if he knows who the party is for, or why anyone would be leaving school only a month into the fall semester—he’s only here to get drunk and assuage the mild curiosity that was piqued by the note taped to his dorm room door after breakfast this morning. (*Hey, Ginger Spice—my best friend’s favorite color is red, and I don’t have time to get a real going-away present, so you’ll have to do. Farewell party at the house tonight, 11pm.*) He didn’t bother to bring any of his friends along. He’d planned to meet someone here, but he’s regretting that now, because the ratio of Patton boys to Ward girls is nowhere near what it should be.

He’s lounging on the back porch, smoking some hydro and texting both Kaylee and Larissa, trying to decide which one he wants to hook up with later tonight. Kaylee will want to smoke another bowl behind the science building, then go back to her car so she can go down on him in the backseat. Larissa will tell him she wants him to come over to her dorm so they can do up and fuck around for a few hours, but once he gets there and starts getting the syringes out, she’ll get cagey and ask if they can just do a line and screw in the stairwell again. He knows these things and wishes he didn’t. He’s so fucking bored of the same girls, same bullshit.

Kaylee’s next text tells him that she just got her wisdom teeth taken out a few days ago, so she can’t give head yet. Declan’s lip curls. (Then why is she even *texting* him? Did she think they were making small talk?) She tells him that he can have half of her Percocet script and do her in any position he wants, as long as he stops by the dining hall and steals her at least three pudding cups. He tells her he’ll get four and see her in twenty minutes, tells Larissa he’s going to go back to the dorm and get a jump on his British lit essay.

He is two feet away from the door to the house when it swings open and Garen Anderson stumbles backwards out of it, drunk off his ass and too busy chattering (*and what’s even in Lakewood, anyway? Dad says there are like, five thousand people in the whole fucking town, and I don’t think they even have fags in Connecticut, unless you count Walczyk, and no fuckin’ thank you to that one. I swear to god, if I have to start commuting just to get my dick sucked by a guy who doesn’t look inbred, I’m gonna eat the muzzle of a shotgun*) to Andrew Donahue to even face the direction he’s walking. He trips over the bottom of the door frame and pitches backward, would probably fall on his ass, if not for the fact that he crashes into Declan instead.

“Shit, sorry, dude, I didn’t see—” Garen stops speaking abruptly, grinds his shoulderblades back against Declan’s chest, and groans, “Oh, fuck, *not* sorry, not sorry at all. *Hey*, welcome to my party, can I suck your dick?”

Declan doesn't even care that Garen is reaching back to shamelessly grope at his waist. (Fuck, Garen, you feel so good.) All he cares about is keeping his eyes half-closed and aimed at the porch, because even stoned as fuck, he has enough clarity to remember that he cannot ever, under any circumstances, let Garen Anderson look him in the eye.

"G, quit molesting him, he looks like he's a fucking sophomore," Andrew chuckles.

"Mm, he's got pecs like a gladiator, though," Garen murmurs. "And he smokes better shit than you do. Christ, you smell that?"

He starts to turn in place, and for probably the first time in his life, Declan panics. The only thing he can think to do is bring one arm up on either side of Garen's body, offering up the bowl in his left hand and the Bic in his right. (If everything he's heard about Garen Anderson is true, the only surefire way to distract him from a quest for cock is to set him on a quest for drugs.) It works. Garen makes a delighted noise and sinks against him once more, (facing away, that's all that matters) letting Declan raise the pipe to his lips, plug the carb, and light the hydro so he can suck in a long, deep hit. Lungs full, Garen can't speak, so he demonstrates his approval by letting his head loll back onto Declan's shoulder and squeezing at his hips. (His right palm is only inches away from the mark.) When he finally exhales, he says, "Built like a brick shithouse, and he feeds me drugs before even introducing himself. Andrew, I think I found my soulmate. 'm gonna strip him down and check for a mark."

Declan's stomach lurches. He shoves Garen away, dumps him on Andrew, and books it back into the house, like he should have done the moment the door opened. "Rude!" he hears Andrew call after him. (*Stupid*, he thinks to himself.)

He fakes sick and doesn't leave the second floor of Whitman for the next two days, until Sam mentions how nice it is to be able to spend an entire evening in his own room without the sound of an electric guitar wailing above him. And that's it. Garen is gone. Declan will never have to see him again, never have to worry about keeping his eyes on the ground every time he walks down the hall and catches a burst of that obnoxious, constant singing Garen likes to narrate his own existence with. He's gone, and it's for good. Declan breathes a sigh of relief he feels like he's been holding in for two years.



The mark is easier to ignore with Garen gone, until the dreams start. Declan has no idea what causes the first one—it's not like he's backed up. He's still heading over to Ward to get off at least half a dozen times every week, sometimes more. He's fucking the same girls. He's fucking *new* girls. (He is most definitely not fucking any boys.) He hasn't even heard Garen's name in almost two months, hasn't seen it anywhere but on his own body when he makes the mistake of glancing at it in the shower sometimes.

But one night towards the end of November, it's *that name* he's slurring when he wakes up right in the middle of getting off. His eyes snap open in the darkness, but he's still so out of it that he can't tell what time it is, or where he is, only that he's starting to come, and it's out of pure instinct that he reaches down to grip his cock through his pajama pants. He strokes himself through the rest of his orgasm, twisting to bury his face in his blankets and biting down hard on the corner of his comforter to silence himself. He manages to muffle his moan, but it's not enough to stop himself from realizing exactly what he would've said, if he'd let himself. (Garen, Garen, Garen.)

Hands trembling, (*not* because he's terrified, *not* from how hard he just came, just *because*, a man can tremble if he wants to) he strips down under the blankets so that he can shove his wet, sticky boxers into the laundry basket under his bed. It doesn't matter. He doesn't even remember the dream—only the

impression of skin on skin, a hand slipping under his shirt, a whisper against the shell of his ear. It could have been about anyone. It could have been about no one. He can handle this, he just needs to get laid.

(The mark on his hip feels hotter than the rest of him.)



Another month passes, and then Declan has a fucking problem, and his problem is this: Garen doesn't stay gone. After only three months of solace, he walks into the Whitman common room to find Garen curled up on one of the couches with his head pillowed on James' thigh. Declan turns around and walks right back out.

It takes him a few weeks to collect all of the details of the story, in large part because he spends a few days hiding in his and Javi's room before he realizes that Garen's return to Patton seems to mostly consist of moping around in James' dorm room during the day, then getting blackout drunk and playing sad indie songs on his guitar during the evening. The way Declan understands it, Garen is only back in New York because his dad kicked him out of his house for fucking his own stepbrother.

"He's in pain, I know that, and I'm trying my best to be sympathetic, but how the fuck did he expect this to turn out?" Declan hears James saying to Andrew in the dining hall one night, before the room has filled up enough to make eavesdropping difficult. Privately, Declan thinks James should be worrying about his own relationship, not Garen's—Goldwyn has been popping aspirin like tic-tacs for years now, always sporting a tight smile that does nothing to hide the dull throbbing in his head. Either he's marked with the name of someone who gets injured on a daily basis, or he has a brain tumor.

It isn't the "fucking his stepbrother" part that throws Declan, either. He's not *new*—of course Garen Anderson would appreciate the doorstep convenience of having a willing orifice right in his home. (Declan thinks that might be how things started between Garen and James back in the day, but they were already choking on each other by the time he got to Patton, so he can't be sure.) No, the thing that Declan finds really strange is how broken up Garen seems about... well, breaking up.

A month passes, and it's Valentine's Day, and Garen is inconsolable. Declan and Sam smoke up in Sam's room, order pizza, and listen—snickering—through the ceiling as Garen gets a handjob from James, then cries about it for an hour. It's pretty close to being the highlight of Declan's week, because Garen's drunk ass tripped down the stairs on Saturday, and Declan had a headache for an hour, and he's maybe still bitter about it.

Another month passes, and it's Garen's eighteenth birthday, and he celebrates it by getting stoned, setting himself up in the common room, and talking to anyone who wants to listen (and an even greater number of people who don't) about his ex-stepboyfriend's beautiful blond eyelashes or whatever. He spends a solid twenty minutes on Wikipedia, trying to decide the exact shade of blue to describe his ex's eyes. (Catalina blue, he eventually decides)

However painful this breakup is, it's more painful for everyone who's being forced to put up with him. Unfortunately, the silent sulking is even worse than the babbling. He's lounging around, sober in every sense of the word, one night a few weeks later, when most of the boys are waiting in the common room until their cabs come to bring them home for spring break. (Except for Declan. His grandparents told him, in a roundabout way, that it wasn't worth the cost of a plane ticket to fly him all the way back to Nebraska for a week. The only other people who are staying in the dorm are Garen and James. More than once, Declan has considered hanging himself.) Abruptly, Garen asks the room at large, "Are... are any of you guys marked?"

Declan looks over at Javi. (At the collar of his t-shirt, the curling V of Vanessa's name is just barely visible, so much prettier than the blunt, boyish capslock of the name on Declan's hip.) Javi looks right back.

Right after the dreams started in November, Declan drank a fifth of Svedka, hid under his bed, and made the mistake of confessing that he'd been marked from birth. It had taken another four shots for him to admit that he was marked with a boy's name, a boy he knew. Eventually, he'd just puked out Garen's name and avoided any conversation on the issue since.

"I am," Javi says presently, when no one speaks up.

Garen pitches himself out of his armchair, slinks across the floor, and crawls up onto the couch next to Javi. He lands halfway on Declan's leg, but doesn't even notice getting shoved off. "Were you born with it, or did it show up when you saw her?"

"When I saw her," Javi answers.

"And did you—what'd it *feel* like?" Garen blurts out. "If it hadn't been for the mark, do you think you would have known anyway?"

(If Javi doesn't stop fucking staring at Declan, he's going to get himself shot during the next marksmanship session of PT.)

"I think I would have known, yeah," Javi says slowly. "When you first see her—or him, I guess—and your mark forms, it burns, but that's not the only place you feel it. Your whole body feels like it's buzzing, like parts of your heart are shifting around to make space for how much love you're going to have for her someday. It's like you've been looking at everyone through jacked-up, scratched sunglasses, and you're only just now taking them off and seeing another person clearly for the first time."

What a bunch of sentimental, soap-opera bullshit. Declan has *never* felt that about Garen. But maybe the connection is different when it's the right people involved. Maybe it feels good, when there's any possibility of the people being together. (No, I can't hang out tonight, I've got a date with Garen.) Maybe some people really do have soulmates, not just names of mistakes they never want to make.

"See, that's the thing, though," Garen says, a little desperate now. "I felt all of that with Travis, I think." (He thinks?) "Right from the start, the first time I saw him, I swear. Except, neither of us has a mark. Trust me, I've checked every inch of that boy, trying to find one, but it's not there. We both feel it, but I don't—do you think that's possible?" (It's possible he's oversharing, considering he's never even spoken to Javi before tonight.) "Only like, one in five people has a mark, but a ton more people fall in love and get married. Do you think it's possible for two people to be soulmates even if they don't have the mark?"

Javi is looking at Declan again (shot in the fucking face, he swears to fucking Christ) but this might be the only opportunity to get Garen to follow the scent of a different man's blood. Declan kicks his feet up onto the coffee table and lets his head fall back against the cushions, closing his eyes and doing his best to appear as if he's relaxing, rather than just keeping Garen's eyes from locking onto his. "I do."

He hears Garen turn quickly in place to face him. His tone is embarrassingly hopeful when he says, "Yeah?"

"Definitely," Declan says. "People put too much stock in the whole—" He waves his hand as dismissively as he can without actually scoffing. "—mark thing. You said it yourself, didn't you? Only one in five people has a mark, but it's not like the other four end up dying alone, surrounded by cats. Plenty of people find the person they're supposed to be with, without ever having a mark as a roadmap; plenty of people who

are marked never meet the person whose name they've got, or they don't get along, or they're just *wrong* for each other. If you think that your stepboyfriend—

“Oh, fuck off, don't call him that.”

“Whatever the fuck he is,” Declan sighs. “If you believe he's your soulmate, he must be. *I'm* just having a bit of trouble understanding why you're still here, instead of going back to Rhode Island, or wherever the fuck you've been—”

“Connecticut.”

“Christ, shut up, they're practically the same thing. If you actually give a shit about him, you should go get back together with him.” A minute passes in silence. He goes for broke. “At the very least, you might want to consider sending Goldwyn back as some sort of emissary, just to see how things are going. Make sure he hasn't found a new boyfriend.”

The couch creaks, like Garen might have reeled back as if he'd been slapped. “Travis wouldn't do that.”

Declan cocks an eyebrow, still doesn't open his eyes. “Haven't you told us all that you broke up with him before you left? It's been three months. How long do you expect him to wait?” He can feel Garen staring at him. He tries not to move. After a long minute, the couch shifts again, and Garen's footsteps shuffle out of the common room. Declan swallows a smile.

The next morning, James Goldwyn is gone; two days later, so is Garen. The dorm is dead silent, and Declan has never been more grateful.



Spring break ends. James comes back from Connecticut with the name “Benjamin McCutcheon” on his left forearm and a ridiculous story about how the stepboyfriend *had* found a new boyfriend, but hadn't stood much of a chance of keeping him once the boyfriend and James met and found themselves marked for each other. James comes back with a soulmate, and Garen doesn't come back at all.

Declan spends the rest of the year picking up scraps of the story from a number of different people. Apparently, the boyfriend was the only thing stopping Garen and the stepboyfriend from getting back together, and with him out of the way, (and safely tucked away in James' bed) Garen was free to return home to the welcoming arms of his family, friends, and lover. (In this case, Declan thinks they might all be the same person.) Garen and the stepboyfriend swear they won't break up again, and the stepboyfriend's mother (the stepmotherinlaw?) swears they won't be allowed to stay together, and Garen's dad swears he won't kick him out again, and it's all very daytime television. Ironically, it sounds like the only ones who aren't pissed at each other are the only ones who have a reason to be, the stepboyfriend and his former boyfriend.

(The boyfriend starts coming to visit Patton on the weekends after spring break, and he's nothing at all like Declan pictured. He wears skinny jeans and eyeliner, and goes to public school, and is a full foot shorter than James. He's headed to Juilliard in the fall, and he can only sit through five minutes of one of James' lacrosse games before he gets bored and pulls out a paperback. Every time he comes to visit, he and James spend all day arguing about pretentious, abstract bullshit, and then spend all night fucking so loudly that Sam and Charlie have to pound on their ceiling with a baseball bat to get them to shut up.)

James Goldwyn gets a soulmate, and Garen Anderson doesn't come back. James Goldwyn graduates, and Garen Anderson has no reason to ever set foot on Patton property again, and Declan tells himself that he is too busy screwing every girl at Ward to care.



And then it's fall, and Declan is a senior, and he walks to his first PT session of the schoolyear, gets there right as Sergeant Smith announces that they've got a new addition to the squad this year. Smith gestures towards the back of the group, and without thinking, Declan turns to look.

Garen Anderson stares right back at him and goes completely

and totally

still.