

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

Declan squeezes his eyes shut, but he knows it's too late. He already feels different, like his whole body is *new*, somehow. There's a pulsing heat just under his skin where he knows the mark is, and it's spreading out like an oil spill into his veins. Of course the first place it reaches is his groin, and he almost tips over—feels like he's hard, (he's not) like he's about to come. (Christ, he *hopes* he's not.) His heartbeat is wrong, faster than usual, stuttering like it's trying to sync up with a new rhythm, and his breathing is—not. He forces himself to suck in some air and open his eyes.

Garen is still staring, mouth partway open (don't look at his mouth) and eyes wide. (And green, so unbelievably, brilliantly green. It's the first time Declan has ever dared to look right at them.) He's blinking in the same way people do after leaving a darkened movie theater and finding themselves blinded by sunlight—stunned, more than a little uncomfortable. He reaches up to touch his own hip through his clothes. Declan turns away.



It takes almost a month for Garen to break what Declan had assumed was an unspoken agreement to never discuss the mark—marks, rather. Declan hasn't seen one on Garen, but he hasn't exactly had occasion to, so he just assumes it's there. (Every morning when he wakes up, he has to remind himself that he doesn't *want* to see it, either. Somehow, it's harder to remember that now than it was a few weeks ago.) Between PT, meals, classes, and MLEP, they spend exactly four hundred and eighty minutes together, five days a week. (Not that Declan is counting.) And still, they've managed to completely avoid any conversation beyond, "*Can someone pass the bread, please?*" and "*If everyone gives me their data at the end of class, I can type up the lab report tonight.*"

Until Garen slides into the seat next to Declan at the start of MLEP and leans in to say quietly, "I need to know how you do it."

Declan thinks about how this is the first time they've spoken since last spring, when he sent Garen back to Connecticut to reconcile with his stepboyfriend. Three years of practice have left him unwilling to look directly at Garen as he asks, "How I do what?"

"Sleep with people without letting them see the mark," Garen says. "Sam tells me you've fucked half the Ward student body, but no one seems to know that you're marked. I doubt you've managed a school-wide secrecy pact, so I guess that means you've found a way to cover it. I need to know how."

"Fuck in the dark," Declan says shortly.

"Are you kidding me?" Garen hisses. "*Fuck in the dark?* That's it? I can't just—my room's a single, and I haven't gotten laid in almost a month, and in about two hours, my boyfriend is going to be showing up here to spend the weekend with me. Do really think I can get away with pretending I'm not in the mood until I can fuck him in total darkness?"

"You're listing many things that are not my problem," Declan says, but then the full weight of Garen's words hits him. His throat tightens, but he doesn't dare get his hopes up, not until he confirms, "Wait, you have a boyfriend?"

Garen swallows. "Yeah. I do. And I'm not—don't think for even a second that I'm going to break up with him for you, because I'm not. I don't even know you, okay? And I love Travis, he's my—why are you *laughing* at me?"

“Because I’m *relieved*, and you’re *delusional*,” Declan says. It’s another minute before he can continue speaking, because he’s laughing so hard, he’s tearing up. Finally, he wipes his eyes and says, “You think I want you to leave your boyfriend? Anderson, if you want to marry the guy and adopt a dozen disgusting babies with him, feel free to. I don’t want you. I don’t want *any* guy. I’m fucking *straight*.”

Garen’s eyebrows dart upward. “How does *that* work?”

“God, you really are gay, huh?” Declan mutters. “It works by me putting my dick in women. I don’t—”

“I meant,” Garen interrupts, looking very much like he’d punch Declan in the throat if he thought he could get away with it, “I don’t get how you can be straight, if you’ve got the mark of another guy. That’s not how it works.”

Declan wishes he could find the right words to explain this to someone else, but he can’t. He isn’t even sure he could explain it to himself—not in coherent words, anyway. All he knows is that he has had this mark for sixteen years, and it has never meant anything to him. It has never made him pine for Garen, not even after they met. It hasn’t stopped him from enjoying a number of (at this point, he thinks he might be somewhere in the range of three hundred) girls in his bed and (their beds, and his truck, and the library, and a few classrooms that are easy to break into, and the restrooms in most of the bars in town, and...) elsewhere. He doesn’t know *why* it doesn’t matter to him the way it matters to everyone else.

(People are always telling him there’s something not quite right about him. They say he doesn’t feel things normally, that his happiness is muted and that his ability to care about anyone is seemingly nonexistent. Sometimes, when he’s drunk enough to be feeling maudlin, he tries to explain to Charlie that it’s probably why his mother didn’t want him anymore, why his father never gave a damn, why the foster families kept sending him back. Who would ever love somebody who couldn’t love them back? But considering he’s never told anyone in the squad about how he grew up, Charlie never seems to have any idea what he’s talking about.)

“I think it’s different for different people,” Declan finally tries. “I think some people get it right, and some people get... this.” He gestures between himself and Garen. “Some people get a mistake. And that’s what we have. If you’re worried that I’m going to try to steal you away for myself, you can relax, and so can your stepboyfriend. If he sees the mark and starts losing his mind over it, just fucking bring him to my room, and I’ll tell him right to his face that it’s *nothing*. We can all pretend it doesn’t even exist. I don’t care about it. You don’t care about it. He doesn’t have to care about it.”

But the stepboyfriend *does* care about it, or so Declan discovers when a knock sounds at his dorm room door almost four hours later. He opens the door only halfway; Garen is standing there, arms crossed and jaw clenched, and standing next to him is some Captain America-looking kid with blond hair and blue eyes. (He has freckles too, Declan notices, so at least Garen has a type.) He looks like someone who always does his homework on time and never talks back to his mother and only tells people he loves them when he really means it. Declan still can’t think of a single thing he’d actually enjoy doing in bed with another guy, but he thinks he wants to sleep with this kid’s boyfriend on principle.

“Hi,” Garen says flatly. “You said you’d talk to him, if I brought him here.”

Declan looks over his shoulder at Javi, who is watching some stupid YouTube video and trying to pretend he’s not eavesdropping. “Get out.” Javi looks at him. Declan rolls his eyes. “Go to Charlie’s room. Or Taylor’s. I don’t care, just get the fuck out. I need the room.”

Javi peers around him at Garen and the stepboyfriend. “Two guys, huh? Gotta say, Dec, this is a little different from when you usually tell me you need the room.”

"You think you're funny, but you're not," Declan says. "You're an asshole, and one of these nights, I'm going to cut your throat while you're sleeping, and I won't even feel guilty about it. Now get out."

"Wow, G, you really hit the jackpot with this one," the stepboyfriend says quietly. Declan sneers at him. Garen looks ready to crawl out of his own skin.

Javi takes his time collecting his laptop, his room keys, and his shoes. Declan steps away from the door to allow room for him to leave, and for Garen and the stepboyfriend to enter. The moment the door is shut again, Declan waves them towards each of the two desk chairs, then collapses back on his own bed, returning his attention to the assigned MLEP reading.

"Right, let's get this out of the way," he says. "I'm Declan. You are..."

"Travis," the stepboyfriend says quietly, and there's a note of sadness there, like he'd expected Declan to know. (Declan thinks about reassuring him that Garen has probably mentioned it before, but that Declan doesn't listen to him enough to know. But the kid is so earnest-looking, and something about that *bothers* Declan. He decides that if he has to be inconvenienced by this conversation, the stepboyfriend can fucking well deal with thinking Garen never mentions him.)

"Look, Travis," he says. "I don't fuck guys. I don't have an explanation for the mark, but I'll tell you the same thing I told your boyfriend: I don't want to get between you, or under him, or any of it. I want to be left alone. You can rest easily, because I'm not interested." (If he were, Travis wouldn't stand a chance. Declan doesn't understand why Travis is glaring at him right now. He should be *thanking* him.)

"So, in the last month—you guys have been aware of this bond. You've seen each other every day. You've had classes together, and meals together, and free time together," Travis says. He stops, and Declan sees his throat moving like he's trying to swallow down his anger. "And nothing has happened between you? Not even—there hasn't even been a *moment* where you wanted—"

"I don't know how many languages you'll need to hear this in before you understand what I'm saying to you," Declan bites out, "but I am *straight*. I am not interested in your boyfriend. I fuck *women*."

"Il baise les *femmes*," Garen echoes. (Presumably. Declan doesn't speak French to know if it's a direct reassertion.) He's got this sneaky little look on his face, like he suspects he's being cute and wants someone to tell him so.

Travis is reluctantly charmed. Declan is not. "How you two deal with this is your own business, but I don't want any part of it. I don't buy into this soulmate bullshit, and if you do, and you let it wreck your relationship, that's not my problem." Neither of them responds immediately, so he adds, trying for as much politeness as he is capable of, "Get the fuck out of my room, please." (Nailed it.)

They do not, in fact, get out of his room. They turn in their seats and stare at each other for a very long time before anyone speaks.

"I don't want to do this again," Travis says quietly. "Last spring, I—getting you back was amazing, it was the best thing that's ever happened to me, but losing Ben to James still *hurt*. Knowing I couldn't really compete with that *hurt*. Seeing the way they looked at each other *hurt*. Letting him go was bad enough, but it would have been worse if I'd tried to get in the middle and lost anyway. I couldn't do that then, and I can't do it now. You can't ask me to."

"Tough shit, dude, I *am* asking you to," Garen snaps. His words are angry, rough, but there's a hint of fear underneath. It looks like it's only just now occurring to him that he might not get what he wants, and for a

boarding school brat like Garen Anderson, nothing is more terrifying than that. “Whatever it is that you think Declan and I have between us, I promise you, it’s not there. We don’t even talk to each other. I don’t feel anything for him, and I sure as hell don’t feel anything that could ever compare to what I feel for you.”

“You do realize that I’m sitting right here, don’t you?” Declan says, just in case they’ve forgotten that this conversation is actually occurring in his dorm room, wasting his time. He is ignored completely.

“Maybe not right now,” Travis acknowledges, “but that doesn’t mean you won’t feel it someday. And thirty years from now, I can’t wake up next to someone who’s got another man’s name on his body and wonder if he’s wishing that he had given things a shot with someone else.”

(Thirty years? Fucking Christ. Declan can barely manage to pick someone who he’d like to be with thirty *minutes* from now. Most of the time, he can only manage three-to-seven minutes of tolerance immediately after orgasm.)

Garen sinks off the edge of the chair and onto the floor, shuffling over on his knees to catch Travis’ face between his hands. It’s such an intimate gesture that Declan finds himself turning quickly to face the wall so that he won’t have to look at them anymore. Garen’s voice cracks when he says, “I won’t. Travis, babe, I *won’t*, I swear. You’re the only person I want to be with. I don’t give a fuck about Declan—” (who is still sitting right here) “—and I don’t care if I’m marked with his name. I’m in love with you. It’s only you, it’s always been you.”

(Declan wonders if they do this all the time, this “incredibly personal declaration of love in front of veritable strangers” thing. It can’t possibly make for good company. He wouldn’t be surprised if James Goldwyn and the Connecticut punk-rocker had faked their whole soulmate bond, just so they’d have an excuse to escape the discomfort of having to endure this same scene every night. God knows Declan is giving serious thought to skinning Garen’s name off his hip and getting a hasty tattoo of Taylor Lewis’ name just so that he can lay claim to someone who doesn’t live his life like it’s something out of *The Notebook*.)

“No,” Travis says, slowly shaking his head. “It’s not me. And it never has been, not really. It just took us both this long to find out about it.” He stands, nods stiffly at Declan, and lets himself out of the room, trailed by a panicking Garen.

Later, when Declan finds a somewhat casual way to ask, Sam says that he could hear Garen playing sad indie songs on his guitar all weekend, and that there was only one set of footsteps pacing the dorm room after Friday night.



Garen spends nearly every second of the next month getting so drunk, he can barely stay upright in class. The rest of the boys in the Whitman squad are terribly upset by this, and for some reason, Javi thinks that this is Declan’s problem.

“You have to help him. He’s about two drinks away from full-blown alcoholism, and it’s all over a breakup with some guy he wasn’t even meant to be with. You need to do something about this.”

“I really don’t,” Declan says, tightening the laces on his boots. He doesn’t have time for this argument; he’s supposed to be meeting Angela Mulligan in ten minutes, and he just popped a few Percocet, so he’s going to have to walk over to Ward, instead of taking the truck. He’s going to be late, and she’s going to be a fucking bitch about it; he’s not in the mood to have Javi be a bitch to him, too. “I’m not even friends with Garen, alright? You are. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how fuckin’ buddy-buddy you two are. If you care so much, you go help him.”

"I'm trying to," Javi snaps. "What better way to help him than to convince his soulmate to get his head out of his own ass and—"

Declan reaches out and grabs a handful of Javi's collar, hauling him up out of his chair so that they are eye-to-eye. Enunciating each syllable, he warns, "Do not ever call me that again." He lets go, and Javi drops back into his seat. "I'm not his fucking soulmate. You can forget whatever sick fantasies you've been having about me and Anderson going on lame double-dates with you and Vanessa, you hear me? It's never going to happen. He means nothing to me. I'm—he's a fucking *boy*. I can't even go there, mentally."

(He goes there mentally every single night these days, and it's fucking torture. Sometimes, he only wakes up after his sheets are wet and sticky, but worse are the nights when he wakes up in the middle and has to decide whether he wants to spend the rest of the night awake and painfully aroused, or reach into his boxers and get himself off, even though he knows he won't be able to stop himself from picturing Garen when he comes. He tells himself that his roommate sleeps through it, he tells himself no one knows, but it's getting more and more difficult to believe that, especially considering the way) Javi stares at him in silent judgment. Declan glowers back. Javi flicks his eyes up and to the left, in the general direction of Garen's room on the floor above. Declan (wants to punch him, but instead, he) snarls, "Fucking *fine*. I'll go have a conversation with the idiot."

Except it's not so much a conversation. Declan shoves open Garen's door without knocking, strides over to the bed, and gives a hard shove to the lump under the blankets that he *thinks* is Garen's head. "Get up."

"Blow me," slurs a voice from within the blanket cocoon.

Declan sneers. "In your pathetic, perverted dreams." (Declan's, too, sometimes.)

The blankets shift, and Garen peeks out over the very top to say, very solemnly, "Yeah. 's a problem." Declan rolls his eyes, but even that barest of acknowledgement is enough coax Garen upright. (Sort of. He's getting a heavy dose of support from his pillows and the wall.) His eyes are glassy, and he's obviously wasted, but he looks more alert now, like he's actually interested in talking. "'s that a soulmate thing, you think? I never—before, I didn't dream about you, but ever since the marks showed up, it's like... it's like, *all the time*. Every single night, I dream about you and me—" He wriggles one hand free of the blankets and waves it around in a vague gesture that gives no explanation for the verb he's looking for. "Do you know what I—what I'm *talking* about?"

(Yes.) "I have no fucking clue."

Garen frowns over at his nightstand—there's an open, half-empty bottle of Jack sitting next to his lamp. He squints at it and carefully reaches out, like he's seeing triple and needs to make sure he's grabbing the right one.

Declan knocks his hand out of the way and picks up the bottle. He's trying to be the voice of reason, like Javi sent him in here to be, but the oxycodone is starting to kick in, and he's only human. He steals a sip for himself before he puts the cap back on the bottle. The action doesn't escape Garen, who grins and flops back down on the bed. Declan half expects him to burrow back into the blankets, but he stays where he is, giving Declan a long, considering look. Finally, he asks, "What about you?"

"What *about* me?" Declan repeats.

Garen tips his head to the side. "Is it a soulmate thing? Do you dream 'bout me, too?"

(In every imaginable position.) “No,” Declan says too quickly.

Garen snorts. “Liar. Is dream me hot?” (Yes.) “Is he any good?” (God, yes.) “What does he do to you?” (Anything Declan wants him to.) Declan turns to the door, but Garen springs upright again and grabs his wrist. “No, sorry, don’t—wait, don’t go yet. ‘m sorry, that was... I’m an asshole. I just want to know. You’ve been having them, too, right? Ever since the mark showed up?”

“The mark didn’t show up,” Declan says, then immediately wishes he could bite his fucking tongue off.

Garen blinks at him. “What do you mean? That’s—no, you have one. You have to have one, I have one, you can’t *not have one*.”

“I meant,” Declan spits out, “I’ve always had the mark. It didn’t *show up*, because it’s been there my whole life. But it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t mean anything—”

“The fuck it doesn’t,” Garen says, and his voice is suddenly so steady, so sober, Declan knows he must have fucked up even more than he thought. Garen looks like he has just found out he’s marked with the name of a serial killer. Very slowly, he untangles himself from the blankets and gets out of bed, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. “How long have you known that we go to the same school?”

Declan wants to tell him again that it doesn’t matter, but he is suddenly very certain that saying anything like that would be a huge mistake. He swallows. “Since my freshman year. During my first PT after Thanksgiving break, Charlie mentioned you by name, told me you were dating Dave.” Garen looks like he’s just been punched. (Again.) “I couldn’t have done anything to help you, okay? I didn’t even know he was hitting you until after you’d already—”

“How the fuck do you know about that?” Garen hisses.

“You told me. The night you broke up with him, you came to the infirmary, and I was there already—I’d broken three of my fingers. You stopped outside my room and asked me what had happened—”

“I remember,” Garen says, and when Declan dares to meet his eyes again, he finds that Garen looks stunned. “You asked me about Dave, then you asked how I’d hurt my face, and I told you—I didn’t realize that was you. I didn’t recognize you. But if we talked then, why didn’t the mark—” He breaks off. So many years of habit, and all Declan can think to do is close his eyes. Garen says, “So, you did it on purpose. You knew that looking at me would make my mark show up, so you avoided eye contact.” Declan doesn’t reply, and Garen gets louder. “You avoided eye contact, just like you’re doing right now.” Nothing, and then he yells, “Look at me, you fucking coward!”

Declan’s eyes snap open, and anger swells up inside his chest. “I’m not a fucking coward,” he snarls back. “But I’m also not a fucking *faggot*, so I don’t know what you expect from me. It’s not my responsibility to change everything about myself just because I’ve got your name on me. It’s not my responsibility to find some way to change my sexual orientation just because you don’t know how to find a boyfriend who isn’t an—”

“No, it *is* your responsibility!” Garen says. “*I* am your responsibility. We’re marked, Campbell, we’re *soulmates*. And whether you want it to or not, that means something. It means we’re supposed to be there for each other, to protect each other, to fall in love with each other. It means you were supposed to *save me* from him, instead of hiding behind some technicality about direct eye contact.” He turns away and rubs both palms over his face. When he speaks again, his voice cracks. “God, you don’t get it. You have no idea what happened to me because you were too chickenshit to walk across the quad that morning in PT and tell me I was supposed to be with you, not Dave. You don’t know what he did to me.”

"I'm not gay, Garen. It wouldn't matter if my entire body was covered in full-color pictures of you; I'm never going to want to be with you," Declan says. Garen still isn't looking at him anymore. Declan sighs, rubs the heels of his hands into his eyelids, and finishes, "But I would've told you, if I'd known what he was doing before you dumped him. If I thought it would've helped somehow, and I'd known he was beating the shit out of you, I would have—"

"He didn't just beat the shit out of me," Garen says, so quietly that Declan thinks he might have misheard him. (Fuck, he wishes he had misheard him.) When he receives no reply, he finally looks up again. "The beatings didn't actually start until maybe three weeks after the first time... *that* happened."

Declan has never felt so awful in his life. He actually has to swallow the bile in his throat before he can make himself repeat, "The first time?" Garen nods slowly, tiredly. Declan shoves his hands into his pockets, because he thinks they might be shaking, and he doesn't know how to make them stop. "How many times did it happen?"

"I stopped counting," Garen says. Declan opens his mouth to reply, but Garen shakes his head, like he's snapping himself out of a daze of honesty. "It doesn't matter, though. I'm—what's done is done. You said it yourself, it doesn't mean anything. You should go."

"I didn't mean—"

"Get out of my room, Declan," Garen says more firmly. When Declan doesn't move, Garen plants a hand on his chest and walks him backwards to the door. When he opens it, however, he freezes, staring over Declan's shoulder.

Declan turns around, and Charlie Walczyk is standing there, face white and stricken. (Rule number one of the dorms at Patton Military Academy: never, ever forget how easy it is to hear what's being said in the rooms above or below your own.) Garen just shakes his head again and gives Declan another hard shove over the threshold. "No. I'm not talking about this anymore. Not tonight, not ever." And he slams the door.



The next morning, instead of going down to PT in the quad with everyone else, Declan goes out to the senior parking lot, gets into his truck, and drives to New Haven, Connecticut. It takes him a while to find the right building; he's only been there maybe four times over the course of the last few summers, when he has been here visiting Charlie and they've decided they needed someone to bother. In the end, he actually ends up driving to Charlie's parents' house and retracing the route from there. He parks on the street and feeds a single quarter into the meter, only buying himself twelve minutes. He can't imagine he'll need any more than that.

He has to check the buzzers in the entryway for the one labeled Walczyk to find the right apartment number, but it's the only one he doesn't press. Some random person is dumb enough to buzz him into the building, and he lets himself up to the third floor, knocks on the door of apartment thirty-two.

Dave Walczyk opens the door and blinks at him. "Campbell?"

Declan punches him. Dave goes down easy, eyes wide and one hand clamped over his nose to stem the flow of blood from it. He pulls his hand away just once to stare at the blood, then peers up at Declan in utter disbelief. "What the fuck was that—"

Declan drives the steel toe of his boot into Dave's balls as hard as he can, and Dave hunches in on himself, rolling onto his side and retching. It takes several minutes for him to stop gasping and whining

and crying; Declan crosses his arms, leans against the door frame, and enjoys every second of it. When Dave is finally capable of looking up at him with pleading eyes, Declan cocks his head to the side and says, "I'm sorry, were you going to ask me something?"

"What—" Dave pauses to gag, and Declan wrinkles his nose. (Yes, he meant to kick Dave in the balls hard enough to make him puke, but that doesn't mean he wants to see it. Or smell it.) Dave eventually gets himself under control and asks, "What the f-fuck did I do to deserve that?"

Declan hooks his thumb over the top of his own jeans and drags them down a few inches to expose Garen's name on his hip. He has to wait a while for Dave to look up, but it's worth it for the chance to see that expression of mingled horror and regret.

"Do I really need to answer that?" he asks. Dave shakes his head. Declan smiles and means it. "Now that we've cleared that up, I've only got one more thing I want to say to you. But I want to be sure you're really listening to me." He wedges his boot under Dave's ribs and rolls him onto his back. "Are you listening to me, Dave?"

"I-I'm listening," Dave says.

Declan reaches down the side of his boot and pulls his hunting knife out of its sheath. Dave's eyes go wide, and he claws at the floor like he's planning to drag himself away. Declan plants his boot on Dave's chest to keep him still, then turns the knife to the side to show off how sharp and well-kept the blade is. He does not want Dave to think for even one second that he is fucking around.

"If you ever go near him... if you ever put your hands on him, if you ever talk to him, if you ever talk *about* him. If you ever even think his name again, I will come back here and remove your cock, your balls, your tongue, and every single one of your fingers, just so that I can be completely certain that you will never hurt him again, you disgusting, soulless rapist. Nod if you understand me."

Dave's answering action looks more like a seizure than a nod, but that probably counts.

"Excellent," he says. He tucks the knife back into its sheath and steps back out into the hall. Before he closes the door, he pauses to survey the mess that Dave has made of himself and the floor. "You should probably clean that up now." He closes the door and makes it back down to the truck with a minute still left on the meter.



It doesn't occur to Declan that he may have gone overboard until later that night, when Charlie gets a text halfway through dinner and promptly upends his water glass.

"Declan, are you fucking *kidding* me?" he all but howls. "Tell me you didn't really do this."

"I can't deny it if you don't accuse me of it first," Declan says patiently.

"My *brother*," Charlie says, and at the seat exactly halfway around the circle between him and Declan, Garen goes very still. "Tell me you didn't really do that to him."

Declan shrugs. (He won't apologize, not for that. It's one of the only times he's ever done the right thing.) Garen looks to Charlie and asks, very quietly, "What did he do?" Charlie shoves the cell phone at him. Garen picks it up, and Declan watches his eyes dart back and forth across the screen as he reads. After a long moment, he looks up and says, "Did you really do all that?"

“Again, I don’t know what I’m being accused of,” Declan says. Garen could easily toss him the phone, but instead, he stands up and grabs Declan by the elbow, hauls him out of his seat and drags him a few feet away from everyone else before handing it over.

The (unnecessarily wordy) message from Dave reads, *ur psycho ginger friend came 2 my apt 2day & attacked me. punched me in the face & kicked me in the balls til i was sick just bc he found out i used 2 fuck his soulmate. then he pulled out a knife & threatened to cut my dick off if i ever went near g again. DO NOT HANG OUT W/ THIS GUY ANYMORE. im serious, charlie. hes dangerous. hes lucky i havent called the cops.*

Declan hands the phone back and says, “It wasn’t just his dick.” At Garen’s curious look, he admits, “I also told him I’d get rid of his tongue and all his fingers. You didn’t tell me the details, and I don’t expect you to. But that means I wasn’t sure how many parts of him I’d have to threaten in order to do it.”

“To do what?” Garen asks.

“To protect you,” Declan says. Garen stares at him, and once again, Declan has the sneaking suspicion that he has done the wrong thing. He shoves his hands in his pockets and ducks his head. “I still don’t want to be with you. But if I’m wrong, and these stupid fucking marks actually do mean something, then I guess I should start making up for all the shitty things that have happened to you for the last three years because I hid this from you.”

(This is exactly why Declan prefers keeping his mouth shut to trying to explain what he’s really thinking. He doesn’t know how to find the words for the way he felt last night, when he was lying awake in his dorm room, remembering what Garen had told him. He doesn’t know the name for the sudden surge of vindictive, possessive *fury* he felt when he let himself think about fifteen-year-old Garen going through something like that. Declan isn’t good with words; he’s good with his hands, his body, his actions.)

“I really want to kiss you right now,” Garen finally says.

(The mark on Declan’s hip feels hot. All of him feels so, so hot.)

Declan grimaces and says, “Don’t.”

So Garen doesn’t. They return to the dinner table in silence.



Things go back to normal after that, except for three very noticeable differences.

One: Garen gets his shit together. He stops coming to class too wasted to remain conscious for an entire class period. He stops playing depressing breakup songs in his room every night. He still parties with everyone on the weekends, but now when he drinks or uses with the rest of them, he doesn’t try to bemoan the tragic loss of Travis, his true and eternal love.

Two: Declan and Garen become friends. Or, at least, they come as close to becoming friends as Declan gets with anyone. They pair up for PT drills, they hang out in the common room tonight, they practice running the end-of-year obstacle course (to Garen’s constant, vocal displeasure). Declan is both pleased and annoyed to discover that Garen is actually fun to be around—he has a good sense of humor, and he’s willing to go out and do bad things with Declan. He says he likes to *play*, and he seems pretty intent upon getting Declan to come out and play with him as often as possible. (Sometimes, when Declan is busy fucking one of his Ward girls, Garen will start texting him over and over, stupid little messages that

largely amount to, *come out and play with me, I'm bored and lonely*. He'll send so many in a row that it's sometimes easier for Declan to just kick the girl out, get dressed, and go meet up with his friend. It doesn't help keep the dreams away, not at all.)

But there is one change that Declan wants very much to ignore, which of course means that it's the hardest one to get out of his head.

Three: Garen develops an obvious and entirely unrepentant crush on Declan. The guys in the squad think it's hilarious. Declan isn't sure which they think is the best part: the fact that he's got a soulmate in the first place, the fact that said soulmate is another boy, or the fact that his soulmate is a boy who has become so enthusiastic about the mark. Garen flirts with him constantly and shamelessly. During PT every morning, he sneaks out of position to come talk to Declan when he should be running drills. When he comes into the common room, his first move is often to throw himself down on Declan's lap and whine when he's dumped off onto the couch a moment later. Half of the texts he sends to Declan are mildly suggestive, and the other half border on pornographic.

And it isn't that Declan encourages him, per se. (It's that he's starting to worry that he might want to.) Sometimes, usually in the middle of the night, Garen goes for broke and talks about the bond. Declan wakes up, sweating and half-hard, to find that his phone is lighting up with texts from Garen.

had another dream about you, he says. (Declan always wonders if it's the same dream he has just woken up from. He wonders if it's even *possible* for the connection to do that.) *my mark feels so hot right now, i couldn't even stay asleep. does that always happen?* (Most of the time, yes.) *this situation fucking sucks sometimes & it's all your fault.* (Declan knows.) *it doesn't have to be like this, you know. we wouldn't have to put up w/ nights like this if you would just give me a chance.* (He can't. It's not an option. He can't, and he won't.) *i want you so badly, dec. i know you say you don't want me back but sometimes you look at me like you do.* (This is why Declan avoided eye contact for three fucking years.) *what if this never goes away? what if i spend the rest of my life craving you and never getting to have you?* (Declan hopes that's not what happens. He doesn't know if he'll be able to hold out, if he keeps feeling this way for the rest of his life. He can barely manage it now.)



When Garen comes to Declan's dorm room during study hour one night and announces that he's kidnapping him, Declan takes it in stride. Garen doesn't exactly have the mischievous smile he usually gets when he's planning an adventure, but he doesn't have the gritty, determined scowl of a man about to commit murder either. Altogether, Declan is pretty confident that this kidnapping won't end with someone finding his mutilated corpse in a swamp four months from now.

It ends in a parking garage in the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

"Where are we?" Declan asks as Garen leads him out of the Ferrari and into the main part of the building. It appears to be a luxury apartment complex, but Garen has a key to the door and a definite sense of purpose, and it makes no sense for him to have either.

"You'll see," he swears. "Just give me like, two more seconds, and then we'll be there."

"But where is *there*?" Declan asks.

Garen ignores him until they reach an apartment on one of the upper levels of the building. He knocks twice. A minute later, the door swings open, and James Goldwyn appears in front of him. "G, the entire point of giving you a key was so that I wouldn't have to get up to let you in."

“You always yell at me when I come in without knocking, though,” Garen says.

“That’s because you have a suspicious habit of only coming in without knocking when I’m having sex,” James says. He finally lets his attention drift over to Declan. “And you must be the soulm—”

“Declan,” Garen interrupts, planting a hand between Declan’s shoulder blades and giving him a shove into the apartment. “He gets mad when people call him that. Just call him Declan.”

James chuckles. “Oh, I already know his name. Aside from the fact that you haven’t shut up about him for months now, I went to school with him for three years. We have several mutual acquaintances.”

“Is that a polite way of telling me you’ve fucked a couple of the same chicks?” Garen asks. He follows Declan into the apartment and shoves him into a chair at the dining table.

James makes a face. “Well, it’s certainly a more polite way of saying it than the one you just used.” He shuts the door and joins them in the kitchen. “You know, I meant to give him to you as a present once. Invited him to your going-away party right before you moved last year—saw him in the common room one night and thought you might want to have some fun with him. But he didn’t come to the party.”

“Yes, I did,” Declan says absently. (He’s too busy looking around the apartment to really care much about what’s being said. The kitchen, dining area, and living area all make up one large room, with a single hallway branching off, presumably to the bathroom and bedroom. Parts of the apartments don’t really match; it looks like it was meant to be sleek and modern, with most of the furniture made out of black leather, glass, and chrome, but there are random bursts of something entirely different—a wingback chair next to a floor lamp with a too-bright bulb. An entire wall of bookcases, packed tight with paperbacks. A walnut upright piano. A towering cat tree covered in dark gray carpet. It’s strange, like someone decorated the apartment halfway, then turned the job over to one of his alternate personalities.) He looks over at Garen and asks, “Why did you bring me here?”

“You’ll see,” Garen promises. “Just give me... what, Jamie, two minutes? Tops?”

James checks his watch. “He’s usually back by now, actually. His class gets out around six fifteen. He’ll be here soon.”

“Who?” Declan asks, but the answer arrives in the form of a skinny, bearded, punk kid who bangs his way through the apartment door and says, “Hey, fuckface. Next time you try to sext me during my Diatonic Harmony lecture, I’m going to come back here and stab you in the eye with a—” He freezes, staring at the collection of people in his kitchen, presumably two larger than he’d expected. “Oh. There... are people here. Hi.”

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” James says dryly. “I missed you, too.”

“Declan, Ben. Ben, Declan,” Garen announces, waving a hand between the two of them.

Ben drops his backpack on the floor by the door (James huffs in annoyance and goes over to move it to the back of one of the kitchen chairs) and steps closer to extend a hand for Declan to shake. “Right. Declan. You’re the reason Travis dumped G.”

Garen kicks him in the shin. Declan smiles blandly and says, “Yes, I guess I am. And you’re the reason my best friend spent half of last spring bitching about how he couldn’t get any sleep on the weekends because Goldwyn was constantly getting pounded into the mattress in the room above him.”

"Mm, yes, he is," James says, in the low, slow voice of someone who has been *deeply* satisfied.

Declan grimaces; Garen catches the reaction and quickly says, "I didn't bring him here so you guys could creep him out."

"Why did you bring me here?" Declan asks, turning to look at him. "Are you hoping they'll be able to... what, talk me into wanting you back?"

Garen sits down in the chair across from him and folds his arms on the table, resting his chin on them and blinking his wide green eyes. "I think you already *do* want me back. I'm just hoping that if you see what the bond can be like for people who are different—who aren't some cute, perfect couple like Javi and Vanessa—maybe you'll be willing to actually give me a chance."

"Not going to happen," Declan says shortly.

"Well, I think we're off to a splendid start," James declares. Declan wants to walk right over and hit him, but he doesn't have to; James makes the mistake of taking one step too many towards the living room, and a gray paw darts out of a cubby hole in the cat tree and takes a vicious swipe at his hand. He jumps back, cursing, then grabs the top of the cat tree, gives it a shake and warns, "Don't be an asshole to me. I swear to god, I will turn you into a pair of fur-lined mittens."

The creature inside of the tree hisses.

"Shut up, James, you're not going to do anything to her," Ben says disapprovingly. Despite James' protests that he's going to get maimed, he sticks both hands right into the hole and scoops out a tiny kitten with thick, gray fur. Instead of digging her claws into him, she curls up against his chest and purrs loudly enough to be audible from all the way across the apartment.

Declan snorts. James glowers at him, then the cat. "Her name's Zooey. My mama gave her to us as a housewarming present when we moved here in August. She's supposed to be mine, but she really only loves Ben."

"The cat, or your mom?" Garen asks slyly, and receives a kick to the ankle for his trouble.

"Both," Ben says, smirking at them over the top of the cat's head. He presses a quick kiss to the fur between her ears and sets her back down on the tower. "Zooey tries to claw Jamie's face open if I don't let her sleep between us on the bed at night, and Melissa likes to call at least twice a week just to tell me how happy she is to have me as *part of the family*."

(Declan can't imagine having his *own* family refer to him as "part of the family," let alone hearing someone else's parents say it. He wonders if Garen would still want so badly to make this soulmate thing work, if he realized how little Declan had to offer him.) He clears his throat and asks, "What about you?" He hitches his chin towards James. "Do you get along with uh, Ben's parents?"

Garen twists away, like he's trying to hide his grin. James shoots Declan a wry smile and says, "There is a possibility that I was a bit overzealous in my initial courtship of Ben. His parents didn't take too kindly to the speed with which our relationship progressed."

"They adore you, and you know it," Ben says, rolling his eyes. "They just think you should've, you know—" He raises his left hand and wiggles his fingers, "—put a ring on it before we moved in together. They fear for my virtue."

"I'm fairly certain I already voided the warrantee on your virtue months ago," James says. He loops an arm around Ben's shoulders and draws him in until Ben tucks his face against the front of his Oxford and hugs him back. After a moment, he frowns down at the top of Ben's head. "And don't be an idiot. Of course I'm going to put a ring on it. I just don't want to be stuck planning a big wedding while we're still undergrads."

Ben's small enough that he has to tilt his head all the way back and rest his chin against James' sternum to look up at him. "Maybe I don't want a big wedding."

"Maybe that's too damn bad for you," James says, combing Ben's hair back with his fingers. "Big wedding. *Huge* wedding, with all of Savannah society in attendance. We might even have to stick you in a flouncy, white, lace dress so you look like a proper Southern belle instead of a filthy Yankee."

Ben rocks up onto his toes so that he can bite James' neck, just above the unbuttoned collar of his shirt. "I have this theory," he says, "that God only marks the people who are so fucking awful, they'd never be able to trick somebody into liking them without it."

"It's a solid theory," James agrees. "Lord knows I would've chosen someone taller and less irritating, if I'd had any say in the matter. I'd bring you back to the store now, but I lost the receipt."

"Guess you're stuck with me," Ben says.

Declan looks at James, and he's never seen anyone so happy to be stuck.

"Is that balcony open?" Declan asks, gesturing across the apartment to the door that appears to lead out. (He doesn't even care where, he just wants to get *out*.) "I think I'd like some air."

The moment he gets a nod, he strides across the room and lets himself out onto the balcony. There are two wrought iron patio chairs with a small table between them. (He assumes James and Ben come out here and do horribly domestic things, like sit in those chairs and read the morning paper together, trading sections back and forth. Or go out to dinner at five-star restaurants, then come back here and drink expensive wine, and one of them will sit in one of these stupid fucking chairs, and the other will get on his knees and suck his lover off even though the people who live in the building across the street can probably see.) Declan ignores both the chairs and braces his palms on the brick of the balcony wall. His eyes are closed and his head is hanging low, face aimed at the ground.

Only a minute passes before he hears the door open again. He looks over; Ben gives him a small, awkward wave, steps onto the balcony, and shuts the door again. "Hi. Sorry about that. I know you and I only just met, and I guess you don't know Jamie too well. So, that was probably kind of awkward for you."

(Obviously.) Declan shrugs and looks back out onto Third Avenue. "Your apartment. You can do whatever you want in it." He hears Ben sit down on one of the iron chairs, but neither of them speaks for a while. (Declan gets the feeling it's a test, but he doesn't know if speaking will mean he passes or fails.) When the silence becomes unbearable, when Declan realizes this might actually be the only chance he ever gets to talk to someone who's marked by doesn't seem overly invested in the idea of him getting together with Garen, he clears his throat, turns around, and admits, "I don't want that."

"What, that?" Ben says, pointing through the window at James. "Good. I'd kind of have to fight you for him." Declan glares at him, and he shrugs. "You're going to have to be more specific than—"

"I don't want Garen's fucking mother to call me up and tell me I'm part of his family," Declan interrupts. "I don't want my grandparents to think about me getting fucked in the ass. I don't want have partial ownership of a cat that hates me."

Ben shrugs. "Garen's more of a dog person, anyway."

"I don't fucking care whether he's a dog person or not," Declan snaps. (He thinks he might be losing it a little bit.) "I don't *want* that, okay? I can't fucking do this, and he doesn't *get* that. I'm straight. I'm not—I don't sleep with guys. I've never even kissed another guy, never *wanted* to kiss another guy."

Another shrug. "So? I was a virgin when I met James. Trust me, you figure it out pretty quickly."

Declan wants to keep arguing, but honestly, he's a little distracted by that. He shoots Ben a baffled look and says, "Weren't you seventeen when you met him?"

"Eighteen," Ben says, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile. "I wanted to wait."

Declan lets out a derisive laugh. "For what, marriage? Sounds like you're still a couple years shy of that, aren't you?"

"No, not for marriage. I wanted to wait for *him*," Ben says, gesturing over his shoulder to the window again. "I wasn't born marked, but... one afternoon, when I was nine years old, I came down with this unbelievable migraine right in the middle of a piano lesson. It was so bad, my parents panicked and took me to the hospital. The doctors couldn't find anything that would help me, until one of them thought to try giving me the medication that prevents pain transference between bonded partners. I didn't find out what had happened to him until years later—he'd fallen off his horse and broken his arm." Ben rolls his eyes. "Figures that the one time I got wrecked because of the bond, it would be over a fucking preppy kid problem like falling off a show pony, but whatever. I was nine years old when I found out I had a soulmate, and... I don't know. I knew I only ever wanted to be with him. So I decided to wait until I found him."

"Christ. You know some people never even *meet* the person they're marked for, right?" Declan says. He digs a pack of cigarettes from an inner pocket of his jacket and lights one up without bothering to ask if it's okay. He sucks a long drag off of it and tips his head back to give the Manhattan sky a long, considering look. He exhales. "You could've ended up staying a virgin until you died, just because of some childhood dream of only ever being with your soulmate. I can't imagine caring about a complete stranger that much."

(That's a lie. He remembers being eleven years old and still clueless, remembers covering the mark on his hip with his palm like he'd be able to protect it that way. He remembers saying Garen's name a hundred times in a row, remembers saying *I love you, Garen*, just to see how it felt. He remembers being so excited to meet *Garen Anderson* someday, and he remembers thinking about how he'd grow up to be a man who would probably do anything for *Garen Anderson*, and he remembers thinking he might be halfway in love with *Garen Anderson* already, right up until he realized that *Garen Anderson* was a boy.)

"May I ask you something?" Ben asks. Declan taps the ash off the end of his cigarette. He doesn't say yes, but he doesn't say no, either. Ben must view that as agreement, because he asks, "Why does the mark matter so much to you?"

Declan laughs and takes another drag of smoke. "Somebody's been giving you the wrong information. Garen's the one who cares about the mark, not me."

Ben slouches down in his chair and kicks his feet up onto the balcony ledge next to Declan's elbow. "Really? The way I see it, Garen wants to be with you because he likes you. He doesn't fucking shut up about you. He thinks you're fascinating, attractive, strong—he'd probably think those things even if he'd never found out about the mark. The mark doesn't make you a different person."

"Maybe I'm the same, but the mark makes him see me differently," Declan says. He swallows. "Maybe the mark makes you want someone you might not want under other circumstances." (Maybe it's the reason why he wants Garen. It *has* to be the reason why he wants Garen.)

"Bullshit," Ben says, and for the third time, he points through the window. "I didn't fall in love with James because of a name on his arm. I fell in love with him because of his intellect, and his loyalty, and his hard-shelled but fucking *beautiful* heart. Those things aren't the product of a soul bond, and neither is my attraction to them. Even if we lived in a world where *nobody* had a mark, I still would have found him. I still would have fallen for him." Ben's hand drops back to the arm of the patio chair. (Declan's hands are shaking.) "Every single thing you like about Garen? That's *Garen*. That's not his mark, and it's not your mark. It has fuck-all to do with this soulmate thing. If you think he's funny, it's because he's fucking funny. If you think he's sweet, it's because—in his own obnoxious, Garen way—he's sweet. If you think he's sexy, it's because he's sexy. You don't need to blame everything you're feeling on the mark, because in case you haven't noticed, you're the only one who cares about it. Garen just cares about *you*."

Declan doesn't know what to say. Fortunately, he doesn't have to struggle to come up with anything, because the balcony door opens, and Garen slumps against the door frame. Whatever he and James have been talking about inside has left him with downcast eyes and a sad smile.

"Guess we should probably head back to school," he says. "Are you ready?"

(Not just yet.)



Another month goes by, and Garen stops trying. Declan still hangs out with him every day; they still study together, run the obstacle course together, go to parties together, but through all of it, Garen is on his best behavior. The touches stop. The late-night texts stop. (The dreams don't.)

It's the last blowout party at the Ward house before winter break—a Thursday night, but most people are leaving campus after Friday's MLEP. This is the last night they have to get fucked up enough to hate themselves in the morning, and Declan has spent most of the night in the kitchen with Garen, taking shot after shot of Jack Daniel's.

Garen is drunk enough to forget his determination to behave; he's standing right behind Declan, practically pressing him into the counter as he chants, (smiling mouth brushing against Declan's ear with every word) "Pour faster, pour faster, pour faster."

"Calm down, it's not like the whiskey's going anywhere," Declan chides.

"That's the *problem*," Garen groans. "It needs to be going in my mouth."

(Declan can think of something else he'd rather put in Garen's mouth, but he nearly swallows his own tongue for thinking that.) He finishes pouring the shots and sets the bottle down. Garen sneaks a hand in to grab his glass, but Declan just looks over his shoulder and watches him swallow the shot. He licks his lips afterward. (They both do.)

“Do you want to head back to campus?” Declan asks, before he can think better of it.

Garen snorts. “There’s like, two more shots for each of us in that bottle, so, nooooo, I don’t want to head back to campus yet.”

“We can bring the bottle with us,” Declan says. “Come on. I want to.”

They finish off the rest of the bottle on the long, snowy walk back to Patton. Garen drinks more than his fair share and sings the whole way back, but Declan is just drunk enough that he’s sort of charmed by it. He’s drunk enough to admit that he wants. They make it all the way up to the third floor of Whitman, and Garen unlocks his door and slumps against the frame of it, grinning crookedly at Declan.

“Look at you, walkin’ me to my door like a gentleman,” he says. He’s got a laugh in his voice now, and Declan wants to taste it. “You hoping to score a goodnight kiss?”

Yes, Declan thinks. Only, he doesn’t just think it, he does it—leans in and presses his lips to Garen’s, presses Garen’s back to the door. Garen’s breathing hitches, and he goes still for a moment, like he’s trying to figure out if he’s drunk enough to be imagining this. Declan kind of suspects that *he* might be imagining this. (He’s kissed hundreds of women, and he never knew it could feel like this.) Very slowly, he leans back, but doesn’t open his eyes. For a long while, neither of them moves.

And then Garen slips an arm around his neck and drags him back into the dorm room. Their mouths come crashing together once more, and they’re both scrambling to remove the other’s clothing. Declan gets tangled in his shirt, and when he eventually manages to free himself, he finds that Garen is yanking at the button of his jeans and murmuring, “Can I? Dec, please, I want you, I want to see.”

“The mark?” Declan says, and Garen’s eyes go wide in the dark.

“Y—I was kind of talking about your dick, actually, but fuck, yes,” he says. He stops to kiss him hard on the mouth, then pulls back just enough to say, “Show me. I wanna see it.”

Hundreds of people have seen Declan’s dick, but no one has ever looked at the mark the way Garen does when Declan strips out of the rest of his clothes. No one has ever touched it before and made his whole body feel like it’s on fire. He isn’t sure he’ll ever be able to give this up, now that he’s had it.

(And really, the ass thing: it’s not nearly as bad as Declan had been assuming it would be. Christ, *fuck*, it’s not bad at all. He thinks that might be at least partially due to the whiskey making him relaxed, pliant, easy. It doesn’t matter. It’s still good, still so fucking good, and they can do it again later, sober.)

Afterward, when they’re tucked up in Garen’s tiny dorm room bed, Garen uses Declan’s shoulder as a pillow and whispers, “Stay the night. Wanna wake up with you here.”

“Okay,” Declan whispers back, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Garen presses a palm to his waist and says, “Promise?”

“I’m not good with promises,” Declan admits, but Garen is so complacent and trusting, he’s nearly asleep already. The shitty, XL-twin beds the school provides are nowhere near big enough for two fully grown men, but that doesn’t seem to bother him in the slightest. Declan listens to his breathing even out and slow down.

The bed really is too small. The whole room feels too small.

The moment Garen rolls over in his sleep and lets his arm slip off to the side, Declan slides out from under the covers, gets dressed, and walks out.



The next morning is *awkward*. Declan isn't sure why he thought it wouldn't be. He's hungover—everyone is hungover, really, but as always, he can only really bring himself to care about his own problems. And Garen's, because Garen looks... pissed. Again, Declan isn't sure why he expected otherwise. Even as he crawled out of bed in the middle of the night, he knew he should have stayed. Failing that, he knew he should have woken Garen up to tell him he was leaving. But either of those options would have involved having a conversation, and he doesn't think he can handle that today.

Maybe they'll talk after winter break, when they get back. Maybe he'll be ready then.

Declan isn't surprised that Garen is pissed the next morning at PT, and he isn't surprised that Garen is taking that anger out by spewing insults at anyone who gets too close to him. After three and a half years on the squad together, he isn't even surprised that Eric Barrington is stupid enough to rise to the bait and get himself drawn into a battle of snide comments.

And the truth is: it's a stupid fight, and it's Garen's fault. Even from twenty feet away, Declan can see the moment when Garen says something over the line and Eric's face goes dark with rage. Declan isn't surprised when Eric takes a swing.

But that swing connects, and for the first time, Declan sees what Garen looks like when he's recovering from a punch. (Dave Walczyk has seen him look like that... how many times?) Suddenly, he is just... sure. He looks at Garen, and he knows right then that he is going to do everything he can to ensure that Garen never looks like this again, because Garen was right, all those weeks ago.

(I am your responsibility. We're marked, Campbell, we're *soulmates*. And whether you want it to or not, that means something. It means we're supposed to be there for each other, to protect each other, to fall in love with each other. It means you were supposed to *save me*.)

So he does.

(Declan was never any good about sharing his toys as a kid, even worse when they were toys that had his name written on them, and he guesses there must still be part of him that's like that, because he sees Eric put his hands on Garen, and)

Declan loses it.

It takes five seconds for him to get Eric on the ground, under his fists, struggling and writhing (and crying like a little bitch, tears and snot and blood smeared in a mess all over his reddened face) and three full minutes for someone to pull him off. Only, it's not just someone; it's Garen, chest pressed flush against Declan's back and arms wrapped tight around his ribs to keep him there.

Sergeant Smith is howling out his shock and rage, but Declan can't make out any of the words he's saying. All he can hear is Garen's quiet murmur in his ear, "It's fine, Dec, you're okay," and then, when that doesn't do anything to calm him, the words change to, "I'm okay, he didn't hurt me, I'm fine." That works. Calms Declan down enough that Garen can get a hand free and down to his hip, gives him a chance to push his waistband down an inch so he can rub his thumb over his own name until Declan goes still and pliant in his arms. It isn't sexual this time; it doesn't turn Declan on. It just lets him... settle.

He reaches back and grips Garen's waist through his t-shirt. "You're okay?" he tries to say, but his mouth is too dry, and his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. He swallows twice and still only manages a whisper. "Are you okay?"

"I told you, I'm fine. I've taken worse hits from stronger guys," Garen says, even though that doesn't make anything better. "I'm, uh... people are staring right now, so I'm going to let go of you. Don't go apeshit again, okay?"

"I'm not good with promises," Declan grumbles, not for the first time. Garen laughs, and Declan feels the vibration against his back. He feels it everywhere.

Sergeant Smith keeps right on screaming at them all, long after Garen lets go. Eric gets sent to the infirmary, and Declan and Garen get sent to the headmaster's office. They take their walk in silence, and they are glared at by the receptionist in silence, and they are instructed to sit on the bench and wait in silence. All this wordlessness looks like it's killing Garen, but Declan is okay with it. He isn't sure he would know what to say anyway.

Garen does. He manages maybe two minutes without speaking before he leans almost imperceptibly closer and whispers, "If we don't get a chance to talk after this, I just want you to know... I thought that was unbelievably sexy, the way you tried to defend my honor out there."

"Anderson," Declan warns, but he can feel the edge of his mouth sort of... twitching. It takes him a minute to realize it's the start of a smile.

"That tone of voice lost its desired effect after you used it to get me naked," Garen says, then adds, "Seriously, though, it was hot. I felt very powerful by association. Like we were in *300*, and you were Leonidas, and I was, uh... fuck, what's her name? That chick who plays the bitchy queen who fucks her own brother on *Game of Thrones* now." He pauses, then frowns, mostly to himself. "Wow, that might have been way more on-point than I intended it to be."

"Anderson," Declan repeats, then bites down on his tongue to keep that smile at bay.

"My man, the brutal warrior king," Garen says, sounding incredibly satisfied by the idea. Declan looks over at him, and Garen's lopsided grin vanishes. "Not that—sorry, I know you're not. Um. My man. Sorry."

I could be, Declan thinks, but he doesn't know how to say that, after all the times he's said otherwise. Garen is staring at the floor now, shoulders hunched and brow furrowed. His hand is resting on the bench between them, palm down. Declan looks at it; he wishes he had an excuse to move. He's strong enough to beat Eric into the ground, but he's not strong enough to admit that he wants this.

Truth be told, Declan has never actually held anyone's hand before. He doesn't think he would even know how to initiate that. There's never been a point, because he doesn't date. He doesn't take girls out, doesn't do anything other than meet up, fuck, and leave. Now, though, he isn't thinking about how far it is from here to his bed, or what he can say to get Garen naked tonight, or how many times he can get off before dinner. All he's thinking about is the five inch gap between his hand and Garen's, and how he'd give anything to be brave enough to close it.

"You're going to hurt yourself, thinking that hard," Garen says, and Declan looks up. He hadn't realized he was being watched. Garen smirks and reaches up to presses his thumb between Declan's eyes, like he can smooth out the pinch in his brow that way. "Quit making that face."

When his hand drops back down to the bench, it falls a little closer to Declan's, maybe only three inches now. Declan can almost feel the heat of his skin, and he doesn't think he'll ever be stronger than he is right now, with Garen smiling at him like that. He turns so that he's facing forward again, eyes boring holes into the wall across from them. He takes a deep breath. He reaches over that three inch gap and turns Garen's hand onto its side so that he can lace their fingers and press their palms firmly together.

Garen doesn't move. Declan's heart feels like it's going to beat out of his chest, fall to the administrative building floor, and pulse weakly against the linoleum, pumping out any blood left inside it. This is either the stupidest thing he's ever done, or the greatest, and he has no idea how long he'll have to wait to find out which.

Only a minute, it turns out: Garen squeezes his hand.

Declan closes his eyes and squeezes back.